



## **CASA AMIGA: ADDRESSING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN ON THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER**

### **“LOCAL GROUPS PROFIT OFF OF THE MURDERED WOMEN OF JUAREZ”**

The headline across the front page of the local newspaper *El Diario* aroused anger and disbelief in Esther Chávez Cano, Executive Director of Casa Amiga (See Exhibit 1: Headlines of Three Articles Published in *El Diario*).

Since 1993, more than one hundred women had been murdered in some of the most gruesome crimes the city of Juárez had ever seen. Their tortured, raped, stabbed, and strangled bodies were frequently found in the vast and unforgiving deserts surrounding the city. Reports and speculations of hundreds of other missing women still circulated. Most of the victims were young and poor, having come in search of a better life along the more prosperous northern border of Mexico. It was the tragedy and urgency of this slaughter that had prompted Esther to create Casa Amiga five years earlier, as a crisis center for victims of sexual and domestic violence.

While these atrocities had been afflicting women in Juárez for over a decade, the situation was finally beginning to attract national and international attention, and donor funds were becoming increasingly available. Disparate organizations in the city, already in conflict among themselves, were beginning to question who should have access to these resources and for what purposes. Despite the rage that Esther felt as she read the front-page article in *El Diario*, it cemented her belief that something had to be done to bridge these growing chasms before the work that she and many others had done to build Casa Amiga was jeopardized. Esther felt that she had to find a way to build alliances and redirect focus onto the actual problem, the unprecedented violence against women and the lack of services available to them.

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## **The New “Maquila Woman”**

The city of Juárez, in the state of Chihuahua, sits directly across the international border from El Paso, Texas. Following passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, the pace of change in Juárez accelerated dramatically.<sup>1</sup> About 2,500 factories, or “maquiladoras,” spread out along the U.S.-Mexico border, and in Juárez alone, over 300 factories employed nearly a quarter-million workers. The economic boom attracted migrants from all over Mexico, and Juárez became the country’s fourth largest city, with 1.5 million people. An estimated 500,000 more were arriving each year in search of employment in the prosperous north, with hopes of eventually crossing into the United States. This overwhelming migration from the interior strained city services, and thousands of people lived in slums on the outskirts of the city without access to such basics as water, electricity, roads, housing, and education.

One of the most notable changes in Juárez during the preceding decade had been the incorporation of women into the labor force. In fact, women made up the majority of new employees in the maquiladoras. The factories traditionally employed young girls, as young as eleven, ostensibly because they have more patience for the tedious work, but factory managers were actually more likely to hire young women, often with children and families to support, because they would work for lower wages and be less likely to unionize, strike, or quit, and less likely to fight back against sexual harassment, the norm rather than the exception in many of the factories.

Yet, for many women who came to work in Juárez, these jobs provided new-found economic freedom. Before the maquilas, there were few opportunities for women to earn a wage. Those working in the factories usually came from very poor households, or they were migrants from poverty-stricken rural areas in the interior of Mexico. Most of these women would have found themselves married with children at a very young age, with virtually no economic resources of their own. Migration to the northern border area afforded them the opportunity to work in large multinational corporate factories. Work in the factories contrasted starkly to the arduous agrarian lifestyle that was quickly eroding in the face of global competition. For the first time, these women were able to work to support themselves and their families.

## **Growing Violence Against Women**

The working woman’s new-found economic freedom threatened the culture of the city, challenging traditional perceptions about gender roles, particularly for migrant women who came from poor, rural households where the “machismo” culture was much more ingrained. Men

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1. NAFTA formed the world’s second largest free trade block, and its aim was to gradually remove tariffs and other trade barriers on goods produced and sold in North America. It was believed that the jobs produced by NAFTA would be located in the interior of Mexico. In fact, it was the northern states of Mexico that experienced a rapid growth of factories and employment.

were used to being the family providers—the heads of their households—and now women were becoming economically self-sufficient and gaining a new level of independence in their decision making. The preferential hiring of women in the factories left many men frustrated at the lack of job opportunities in the city. As a result, working women in Juárez encountered a backlash, and domestic violence was a growing problem.

The backlash that women experienced at home was something they had to contend with on their own, but when numerous murders of young women came to light, the city found itself embroiled in a much larger problem. Reports of women murdered in the most horrific ways began to emerge on a daily basis. Theories and speculations surrounding the crimes were abundant. Investigators from the United States attributed the murders to a serial killer. Many Juárez citizens, however, speculated the murders were related to the ever-growing trade in drugs and rumors of sex trafficking, and often linked both to allegations of corruption among local officials. An example from a report conducted by Amnesty International highlights the ineptitude of local police:

It is 10:15 on the night of 19 February 2001. People living near waste ground close to a maquila (an assembly plant) in Ciudad Juárez dial 060, the number of the municipal police emergency services, to inform them that an apparently naked young woman is being beaten and raped by two men in a car.

No patrol car is dispatched in response to the first call. Following a second call, a police unit is sent out but does not arrive until 11:25pm, too late to intervene. The car has already left.

Four days earlier, the mother of Lilia Alejandra García reported her 17-year-old daughter missing . . . Lilia Alejandra, the mother of a baby and a three-year old boy, was working at a maquila . . . At 7:30pm on the previous night, her colleagues saw her walking towards an unlit area of waste ground near the factory. Lilia Alejandra used to cross it every day to catch the bus home. But that night she never reached her destination.

On 21 February the body of a young woman was found on the waste ground near to where the emergency call had been made . . . The body of the young woman was identified by the parents as being that of Lilia Alejandra.<sup>2</sup>

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2. Excerpted from Amnesty International, "Intolerable Killings: 10 years of abductions and murder in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua," August, 2003, <http://www.amnestyusa.org/countries/mexico/document.do?id=1829EE5E27AF155F80256D75005CCB07> (accessed September 10, 2005).

### *Voces Sin Eco*

Early on, when families struggled to get justice for their daughters' murders, they realized that no one was listening. Much of the investigative police work was sloppy, if it was even done at all. As one mother told a reporter, "We families are having to do our own investigation. We can't count on the authorities, who have treated us with contempt whenever we try to find out what happened and who might have killed my daughter."<sup>3</sup>

Guillermina González and her family had migrated to the north in search of the many jobs in the maquiladoras they had heard about. González's sister, seventeen-year-old Sagrario, quickly found a job in one of these factories. Making three dollars a day, she helped support her two sisters and parents. Just two years after they moved to Juárez, Sagrario's family reported her missing, and her body was found two weeks later. In July of 1998, after witnessing the ineptitude and callousness of the police and city officials investigating her sister's death, González and several other relatives of missing and murdered women banded together to form the first family rights advocacy group, *Voces Sin Eco* (VSE), "Voices Without Echo."

A majority of the family members simply wanted to know what had happened to their loved ones. They took to organizing weekly, and sometimes daily, protests in the offices of the police and state authorities, demanding that the investigations of the murders be taken more seriously. They also began to go out into the deserts looking for evidence that might tell them who had killed or taken their daughters. The families were desperate for answers and they were not finding them from the police.

Some family members had to sacrifice their jobs in order to carry out the group's work, making their lives even more difficult. VSE suffered early on because of this. The organization had virtually no resources to help support the families, and the local police were using scare tactics to pressure the group into quitting its protests. It was not uncommon for many of the families to receive anonymous death threats or to be threatened with jail time for their advocacy work.

As 1998 came to an end, the pressures of organizing a grassroots campaign were becoming unduly burdensome. Many of the families could no longer deal with the continual emotional and financial drain. Around this same time, a U.S. organization, *Amigos de las Mujeres de Juárez*, "Friends of the Women of Juárez," approached the families to offer assistance. *Amigos*, based in Las Cruces, New Mexico, was headed by Cynthia Bejarano. According to Bejarano, "*Amigos* started as an organization because we felt we had a moral responsibility to speak out and to pressure the Mexican government to do something about the investigations into these murders so that the families could have justice. We approached VSE to ask what we could do to help. We started to assist them with the searches they were doing. We would get students and other volunteers to go out into the desert and search with the relatives to find any clue we

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3. As quoted in Diana Washington Valdez, "Death Stalks the Border: Latest discovery of bodies fuels fears anew in Juárez," *El Paso Times*, June 24, 2002.

could and show the local government that we were here.” While VSE was successful in attracting more attention to the murders by bringing in volunteers from the United States to assist with protests and investigations, there was little meaningful action that followed.

### **Prominent Women Take Action**

Esther had originally focused her career as an accountant and had a prestigious position in a large U.S. corporation before moving to Juárez. After spending several years in Juárez, she, too, began to take notice of the growing violence against women in the city. Every day she read newspaper reports that cited yet another woman missing or another body found. After watching the list of victims grow, she decided to take action. In 1994, Esther formed an activist group called *Grupo 8 de Marzo*, “March 8 Group.”

By 1998, there was a strong coalition in place and *Grupo 8* was working closely with VSE and other family rights advocacy groups. The coalition was successful in getting state officials to appoint a special prosecutor dedicated to the investigation of crimes against women. They were also able to convince Juárez city officials to ask the United States FBI for assistance with the investigations. Reports from these investigations stated, in general, that the living conditions of women living on the border were very unsafe. Many of the women who lived in the slums on the outskirts of town traveled home late after completing night shifts at the factories. The buses would only go so far and women would have to walk alone for miles on unlit dirt roads.

After the release of the FBI report, the attorney general of Chihuahua, Arturo González Rascón, stated that his office would only partially accept the findings and that it would not recognize several of the report’s allegations. In news reports, the assistant attorney general, Jorge Molinar, was quick to state that, “It is unfair to say that the state authorities have not been efficient, when there are several cases that have been solved.” The Attorney General made the further point that reports of missing women and children did not constitute crimes, which is why these reports were not investigated, and said that in 85 percent of the cases people have left their homes voluntarily.<sup>4</sup>

Not only did city and state officials fight the allegations of ineptitude, but they also began to draw a line between criminal violence and domestic violence in an effort to quickly silence the negative press the city was beginning to receive. When Micaela Alvarado was found in the street beaten to death by her husband, police were eager to dismiss the case. By quickly identifying the case as a “family matter” they were hoping to squelch the rumors about the growing number of murder victims in Juárez. “They said her drunk, drug addicted husband did it, and case closed with no action afterwards,” Esther said. She felt the authorities did not understand this was a matter of finding justice for all women who were victims of violence—that meant investigating the crime, prosecuting the criminals, and sentencing those who are guilty.

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4. As quoted in, Anne Marie Mackler, “167 Women Murdered Since 1993: NGOs Unhappy with Government Action,” *Frontera NorteSur*, December 1998, [http://www.nmsu.edu/~frontera/old\\_1998/dec98/feat2.html](http://www.nmsu.edu/~frontera/old_1998/dec98/feat2.html) (accessed 9/10/05).

## **Casa Amiga**

Early in 1999, visitors and journalists reporting on the murders in Juárez began asking about the availability of resources to help the families of victims. There were none, apart from the family rights advocacy groups that had primarily formed to put pressure on the police and city authorities. At this point, Esther felt it was necessary to broaden her focus from doing advocacy work to offering direct services to the relatives of the murdered women.

With funds from several U.S.-based organizations, including the Texas Attorney General's Office, and the Mexican Federation of Private Health and Community Development Association, Esther opened Casa Amiga in February of 1999. There were only two paid staff members—a psychologist and a social worker. In order to keep Casa Amiga operating, volunteers assisted in all areas, including social workers, lawyers, psychologists, doctors, and administrative personnel.

While Esther initially had created Casa Amiga as a resource for surviving family members, she quickly found that in a city with a population over 1.5 million, there was an absolute dearth of services available to victims of domestic or sexual violence. The city did not have one crisis center or domestic violence shelter that could assist poor, working-class women.

“Finding assistance for the poor women of Juárez is crucial,” Esther stated. “In Juárez we have a higher number of women working in the maquiladoras who are very poor, many of these women migrate here from the interior of Mexico for these jobs. But, to me, this is very classist because women who have money and a passport or a visa can go across the bridge every day and work in the United States where there are safe places to work, whereas the poor woman has to work in the maquilas because she can't afford to cross over into the United States. In Juárez there is also a very high number of single mothers, women who are the heads of their households, because their husbands left to find work in the U.S. and never came back. Now these single mothers have to find work here and they can quickly find themselves being exploited—in bad relationships, poor work environments, and with little family support.”

Soon, victims of domestic and sexual violence were filling the clinic on a daily basis in search of counseling, medical attention, and legal assistance. As Esther explained, Casa Amiga was a resource available to anyone, and “all of Casa Amiga's services are free. We work 365 days out of the year with the help and support of volunteers.”

Casa Amiga soon began offering a wider variety of services that focused on prevention and intervention. Esther explained, “We wanted the mission of the organization to respond to the dire needs that we were finding in the community. We wanted to transform the culture in the city to help women recognize that a woman isn't just an object for violence. We wanted women to be able to recognize their rights and we wanted both women and men to understand

that relationships should be based in respect, tolerance, and love. We wanted to change the way women viewed themselves and help them to realize their capacity.”

### **Expansion and New Resources**

In its first year of operation, Casa Amiga served over 1,000 clients. By its third year in 2001, that number had climbed to 4,000 clients. In a typical month the staff and volunteers would see anywhere from 80 to 150 new cases. A majority of these clients would continue receiving some type of assistance at Casa Amiga, and in any given month the staff conducted close to 400 appointments.

Esther knew the growing staff and numerous volunteers were overworked, exhausted, and barely making ends meet with what little pay they received. Esther said, “All of our staff work with a very low salary, but they work with a lot of commitment toward the survivors of violence.” The work became increasingly difficult, and the emotional toll grew very high on the few paid staff members. Consequently, Casa Amiga was experiencing a tremendous amount of turnover.

Esther was surprised and excited, then, when she learned that the Juárez city council had approved six months of funding for Casa Amiga. The \$3,000 per month that the center would receive was just enough to cover its operating expenses, including the salaries of the three staff members.

It was clear that Casa Amiga was becoming a valuable resource for many women in the city. The center was expanding its services and increasing its capacity on a daily basis. Casa Amiga was successfully implementing outreach programs in the community and a variety of counseling services at the center. The staff also hoped to start building a domestic violence shelter over the next five years, which would serve as the only domestic violence shelter in the entire city.

Esther continued her advocacy work around the murders because she felt that this was crucial to the mission of Casa Amiga. She also hoped to use the increased capacity of Casa Amiga to bring more resources to the overall campaign of finding justice for the murder victims. Esther, who was very charismatic and well-educated, began taking a prominent leadership role in this campaign. She quickly became the “point person” when anyone wanted information about the string of murders that were taking place in Juárez.

### **Tensions Within the Coalition**

By 2001, Casa Amiga’s growing success was beginning to drive a wedge between the family advocacy groups, particularly VSE, and Esther’s center. VSE founder Guillermina González and other family members were upset at the scant amount of financial support that VSE was receiving in comparison to Casa Amiga. They could not help but feel their stories were being

used to promote the agendas of other organizations, while VSE was losing attention and resources.

VSE, particularly, was feeling enormous financial pressure and exhaustion. Family members were contributing most of their time to the organization, leaving them little time to work, even at the minimum wage jobs that paid about forty cents an hour, and financial hardships were forcing many members to quit. On top of this, it was becoming emotionally too stressful to continue. Reporters and journalists visiting the city often asked VSE members to talk about what had happened to their daughters and sisters in graphic detail. The pain of recapitulating these highly emotional stories was taking its toll, and many family members opted out in order to move on with their lives.

VSE was also trying to provide some direct services to the family members of the victims, which often meant providing money for everyday expenses. VSE had decided to use any money it raised to help families with direct financial support, for example helping them pay for groceries or phone service, since they had lost a daughter or a sister who, more than likely, had been working to help support their family. This was contrary to Casa Amiga, which could not offer direct financial support for everyday expenses, but could only offer its services.

Committed to helping VSE, Cynthia Bejarano of *Amigos* commented, “Members of VSE were receiving threats and being harassed. It was very hard on them, they didn’t have much community support and there was hardly any financial support. It was different for Esther, she had experience working with corporations before and she was very charismatic, she was very comfortable talking with the press or government officials.” Esther had some English proficiency and she would often attend press events. This accessibility paid off for Esther in ways that it had not for the family groups.

As outsiders offered financial support, most opted to give to Casa Amiga rather than to the family advocacy groups. Donors wanted to give to something that was more sustainable and far reaching and felt that Casa Amiga was more trustworthy, because it was a well-known nongovernmental organization (NGO).

In the face of these pressures, VSE disbanded towards the end of 2001, and many of the families who were involved with the organization discontinued the advocacy work they had been doing.

“VSE members said they no longer wanted to participate as an organization,” stated Cynthia Bejarano. “*Amigos* tried to provide assistance to the families so they could formalize themselves into whatever they wanted to do, but we wanted it to come from the family members themselves. They chose to just support each other emotionally in an informal way rather than try to sustain the organization.” With VSE gone, there was concern that there would be no representation of the family members, those who had been deeply affected by the tragedies occurring in Juárez.



## **Juárez Gets Worldwide Attention**

As 2001 came to an end, the situation was becoming recognized around the world, thanks to the activism of coalitions that had formed in the area. Such major media outlets as ABC News, the *Chicago Tribune*, Mother Jones Magazine, National Public Radio, and the BBC were covering the violence in Juárez. Headlines? “Death in the Desert,” “Mexico’s Murder Town,” “Murder Spree in Juárez,” and “Deadly Frontier”? were popping up in the United States and elsewhere (See Exhibit 2: Media Coverage of Juárez Murders).

Almost every one of these pieces highlighted Casa Amiga and Esther. Confounded by what was going on in the city, most journalists wanted to assist Casa Amiga, knowing that it was the only organization actively offering direct services to women, families, and children. Furthermore, they knew that Casa Amiga was one of the only NGOs that had the potential to impact the political will of local and federal officials around this issue. “The international press coverage has been a great help to the organization, without it we wouldn’t have been able to talk about all the problems affecting women in Juárez,” said Esther. “We used to yell all the time and no one would listen to us and we couldn’t do anything. We couldn’t do what we do if we didn’t have the international press helping us. This is why the local politicians don’t like us, because they say we are tarnishing the name of the city.”

## **Another Backlash**

By the next year, debates were stirring about whether the city of Juárez was in economic trouble from the attention given to the murders. A combination of factors had forced the closure of many factories. An economic downturn in the U.S. meant that corporations were in search of even cheaper labor, which they could readily find in other places, like China. Unemployment began to increase—it was not uncommon for 3,000 jobs to be lost in one week. With the daily influx of people coming to the city in search of work from the interior of Mexico, city and state officials found themselves scrambling to revive some of these jobs.

Not only were maquiladora jobs leaving, but the tourism industry was suffering as well. Juárez relies heavily on tourists visiting from El Paso and other nearby cities in Texas and New Mexico, but tourists were not as willing to venture into a town that was rapidly becoming known for a multitude of murders. Casa Amiga and a number of other organizations had banded together to construct a wooden cross memorializing the slain women. To have broader impact, they decided to place the symbol directly at the border crossing (See Exhibit 3: Juárez Cross Remembering Victims).

The cross became a point of contention between business owners and NGOs. The Juárez Avenue Business Owners and Professionals Association complained to the city that the cross was a “horrible image in terms of tourism,” and that it was affecting their businesses. Almost all of these small businesses—pharmacies, restaurants, wholesalers, clubs—catered solely to

visitors from the U.S., and with tourism plummeting, they found themselves in jeopardy. Carlos Lopez, president of Coparmex—Mexico’s largest business owner’s association—had gone so far as to suggest that legal action should be taken against the NGOs: “There should be the ability to identify and sanction groups that are purposefully tarnishing the image of Juárez and the state of Chihuahua,” he stated.

### **Political Tides Shift**

A reason for much of the success achieved by the coalition was that the Juárez mayor at the time, Gustavo Elizondo of the ruling National Action Party (PAN), had been willing to tolerate the advocacy by Esther and the family groups, even though he did not support the allegations that Juárez was unsafe for women. Elizondo would often meet with the family groups and with Casa Amiga. This offered an important entree into the administration, however small it might be.

When Elizondo came up for re-election in 2002, though, the mayoral race turned into political chaos. Charges of electoral fraud soon surfaced, and for the next two years, the city battled to elect a mayor. During this interim period, political officials cited a lack of available funds and cut all city funding to Casa Amiga. Esther knew that without the monthly stipend from the city, Casa Amiga would be in a severe financial bind. The funds had helped cover vital expenses, such as rent, utilities, and a portion of the staff’s salaries.

When the mayoral seat was finally filled, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) overturned the PAN party and elected Mayor Jesus Delgado. The new PRI administration took the business community’s growing concerns seriously, and the administration’s frustration over the economic situation soon turned on Casa Amiga. The State Attorney General, Jesus Silva, began complaining publicly that NGOs and activists were portraying him and his office unjustly as criminals and human rights violators, saying there was no reliable or factual evidence proving these claims.

According to Esther, “They shut us out completely. With this new administration we haven’t been able to make one advance, and in the meantime, corruption with the police has gone up. If we arrest a man who raped a fourteen-year-old girl, he is processed right through the system and he’s back out on the street seventy-two hours later.” Esther struggled to bring to the forefront the larger issue that Casa Amiga and the coalition had always focused on—the fact that there was no justice for women who are victims of violence. The families, and other advocates, felt there had been no attempt by the police or political officials to treat their cases as serious matters, despite the fact that some of the murders had been the most horrific crimes Juárez had ever seen.

## **Increasing Pressure**

By late 2002 unemployment rates were continuing to rise. Financial stresses were increasing on families in the city, and Casa Amiga was seeing close to fifty percent more cases of domestic violence than in the previous year. “There’s definitely a connection between the layoffs and the increased cases of abuse we’re seeing. A woman asks for money for food, for school supplies for the children, the husband has no money to give her, so he responds with blows. He’s frustrated that he doesn’t have work,” explained Esther, “We see the results here every day.”

Another, even more disturbing, side effect of the lack of investigations into the murders was the now common threat that many husbands were using against their wives: “If you don’t do what I say, I’ll kill you, dump your body in the desert, and nobody will care.” The immunity afforded to those perpetrating these crimes made this a valid threat, and most women knew it. “It’s very difficult getting a woman to speak out,” Esther said, “Maybe ten percent of the women that come to our shelter will do so. They don’t want to do it because they are afraid and there’s little assurance of justice if they do.” Esther argued that, “These are not ‘serial’ murders, men rape and kill women because they can and nobody does anything about it.”

In addition, Esther found herself battling a new onslaught of criticism against Casa Amiga. Marisela Ortiz, one of the key leaders of the newly formed family rights advocacy group *Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa* (NHRC), “May Our Daughters Come Home,” had emerged as a harsh critic of Esther and Casa Amiga. Ortiz, who herself had lost a niece, felt representatives from the families had been absent for too long, and their absence was undermining their ability to get the help they deserved. NHRC represented a re-emerging family presence, and this new group felt that the services Casa Amiga offered were not targeted to surviving family members. Understanding the frustration that VSE had felt, tensions between NHRC and Casa Amiga soon developed. Now, NHRC wanted to establish itself as a presence and bring their stories back to the forefront. The first step in doing this was to redirect some of the resources that were flowing to Casa Amiga to NHRC.

## **Seeking A Broader Base**

To circumvent a financial crisis, Esther had to focus on how Casa Amiga was going to replace the lost city funds and maintain its expanded programming. She and the staff felt that it was critical to continue offering education on violence prevention in addition to providing access to legal, psychological, and medical counseling. Furthermore, the staff still had high hopes of eventually having the resources to construct the city’s first domestic violence shelter.

Esther felt she had to create a broader base of support that would help Casa Amiga publicize its mission, services, and the resources it was providing. She felt that more support from organizations in the United States could be valuable, because they would be unfettered in soliciting help and they would not be under scrutiny from political officials in Juárez.

The El Paso Coalition on Violence Against Women and Families (CVAWF) was originally founded by a group of students, university professors, and labor activists. Founders of CVAWF expressed, “We think this is a bi-national problem, we feel that anyone who interacts with Mexico needs to raise awareness of this issue at every opportunity they have, and because this is happening on an international border there needs to be international involvement. U.S. officials need to meet with Mexican officials and create a bi-national task force that will bring justice to the women of Juárez.”

Esther and the co-director of CVAWF were good friends, so seeking out the help of this organization was an easy task. Esther was reticent, however, to approach *Amigos*, and she preferred to stay separate from NHRC, because she was afraid that her efforts would only become fodder for more attacks.

This new partnership increased the momentum of Esther’s efforts. CVAWF helped organize several events on behalf of Casa Amiga illuminating the work it was doing. Additionally, CVAWF worked with Esther when members of the U.S. Congress took an interest. U.S. Representative Hilda Solis spearheaded a Congressional effort to raise awareness and propose a set of actions to deal with the investigations into the murders of young women in Juárez. CVAWF, in partnership with Casa Amiga, then facilitated a U.S. Congressional delegation’s visit to Juárez and Casa Amiga. The delegation hoped to pressure the Mexican government into taking action by increasing support within the U.S. Congress. The delegates were eventually successful in drafting several bills in reference to the murders, but there was little action afterwards.

Another turning point came for Esther when Eve Ensler, playwright and creator of the *Vagina Monologues*, took an interest in what was going on in Juárez. After visiting Esther and learning about the work she was doing at Casa Amiga, Ensler decided to host the 2004 “V-Day”<sup>5</sup> events in Juárez, bringing a week-long whirlwind of activities to the city. Mexican and U.S. celebrities, activists, and an onslaught of media attention from around the world surrounded the event. The results were not all positive, however, and it was not long before tensions in the city began to worsen (See Exhibit 4: V-Day Media Coverage).

### **Continuing Challenge**

Several weeks later, Esther sat at her desk reviewing a series of articles published in the local newspaper *El Diario*. The first of these, “*Local Groups Profit Off of the Murdered Women of Juárez*,” focused on donations that Casa Amiga had received over the past five years, an amount totaling approximately \$500,000 U.S. dollars. The article highlighted the dividing forces

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5. “V-Day” is a global movement to end violence against women and girls. V-Day is a catalyst for promoting creative events that increase awareness, raise money, and revitalize the spirit of existing anti-violence organizations. V-Day generates broader attention for the fight to stop worldwide violence against women and girls, including rape, battery, incest, female genital mutilation (FGM), and sexual slavery.

between the family rights advocacy groups and Casa Amiga. Not only did the article interview members of NHRC, but past partners such as González were also featured. Both expressed concerns that the lighthearted V-Day events made a mockery of the deep felt tragedy they experienced. Additionally, they felt that Casa Amiga continued to shut out family groups, yet the center was still attracting a strong donor base.

The second article in the series reflected the strategies undertaken by businesses and city officials to thwart the work of Casa Amiga. Several prominent business leaders voiced their frustration and desperation at the reputation Juárez was acquiring because of the murders. One stated, “It’s lamentable to go to other parts of the country or elsewhere and the first thing people ask is about the murders of Juárez, and if tourists come, they come to take pictures with us as if we were animals in the circus just so they can say that they were in this very dangerous place, and this simply is not true.” Similar sentiments were expressed throughout the piece: “The images of the murders have gone around the world and we are seen as a risky city, it inhibits tourism, investments, the proper development of the community. It harms the good name and the prestige of the city.” These business leaders further asserted that the city’s negative reputation was causing Juárez to lose jobs.

By portraying Casa Amiga as making money off of the violence and contributing to the high unemployment rate in the city, these articles dealt a serious blow to Esther and the center. Her disappointment and frustration deepened. She had not yet been able to get enough resources together to construct a shelter for victims of domestic violence, and with no hope of being able to expand anytime in the near future, she was even more worried about the growing backlash against Casa Amiga.

Meanwhile, the Casa Amiga staff was struggling to provide services to the overwhelming number of women filling the center on a daily basis. New clients had risen to roughly 200 a month, and coupled with returning clients, Casa Amiga was now conducting upwards of 900 individual sessions a month. The staff had also suffered a personal setback when the receptionist, Maria Luisa Berumen—who had escaped from an abusive husband and begun working at the center after receiving therapy there—was stabbed to death by her ex-husband on Casa Amiga’s doorstep.

Esther believed that Casa Amiga was the only organization in the city with the capacity to effectively deliver programs and services to the women and families who needed them. Casa Amiga had not only survived; it had grown over the last six years and was starting to become well known within the community as an important and vital resource. Esther explained, “I know that the work we do is important, and there is a lot of respect for the work we do, even though we are criticized so heavily. Sometimes I will find that the politicians who are always screaming, ‘Don’t give money to Casa Amiga!’ will tell me, ‘You’re doing great work.’ We have business owners who keep promising to help the center get a bigger building with more space, but they don’t actually do it because they are afraid of the administration. They are afraid if they help us they will lose their business.”

Furthermore, it was clear that the growing conflict between organizations in Juárez was making it difficult to create a unified alliance that could face the government and businesses. Esther did not want to further upset the family groups, but she knew that Casa Amiga was poised to run an effective campaign that would address the murders, the domestic violence, and finding justice for those victims. Esther now had to strategize how she was going to overcome the recent negative press and achieve the longer term goal of creating a unified agenda among the various groups in Juárez.

**Exhibit 1**

**Headlines of Three Articles Published in *El Diario***

*Lucran grupos con muertas de Juárez: No beneficia a familiares de víctimas dinero que recaban las agrupaciones*

“Local groups profit off of the murdered women of Juárez: The money obtained by groups does not benefit the families of the victims”

April 20, 2004

By Sandra Rodríguez Nieto

*Exigen regular grupos civiles: Critican sectores se lucre con el dolor; proponen crear ley para que den cuentas*

“A demand to regulate the civil groups: Criticisms that sectors profit off the pain; proposal to create a new law to make them accountable”

April 21, 2004

By R. Ramos/M. Orquiz/A. Mena

*Basta de denigrar a Juárez: Sectores*

*Urgen cambiar imagen; golpea magnificación de feminicidios a la economía*

“That’s enough denigration to Juárez: Sectors

Plead to change image; magnification of femicides strikes the economy”

April 22, 2004

By M. Orquiz/J.M. Cruz/A. Mena

## Exhibit 2

### Media Coverage of Juárez Murders

#### **Death Stalks the Border: Murder in Juárez**

By Diana Washington Valdez

El Paso Times

June 23, 2002

#### The background

More than 320 girls and women have been killed in Juárez in the past nine years. Mexican and U.S. criminologists speculate that as many as 90 of those were victims of one or more serial killers.

The serial victims bore similar traits. They were young and slender and had brown complexions and long hair. All came from poor families, and many were lured to Juárez by job prospects at maquiladoras. Their poverty, experts say, made them vulnerable.

Many of them were raped and mutilated, their bodies dumped in ditches or vacant lots.

Chihuahua state forensic official Dr. Irma Rodriguez said the causes of death for 42 of the 325 women might never be known. They are unidentified and any of them could be serial-killer victims. The women's slayings have occurred against a backdrop of violence in Juárez that also took the lives of 1,600 men.

Critics say investigations have ground to a halt because of corruption, incompetence and witness intimidation. Activists say what is going on in Juárez is a national outrage. And when the FBI was brought in to help at times, Chihuahua state officials rejected its findings. Former FBI profiler Robert Ressler believes at least one of the killers has access to both sides of the border.

The serial slayings have continued despite numerous arrests and pronouncements that they have been solved. In November, the bodies of eight more women were found. State officials charged two bus drivers with the murders and said the two named the victims. But DNA tests failed to confirm the victims' identities.

#### Media coverage

The unsolved murders of hundreds of women in Juárez have attracted the notice of the media worldwide. Among those reporting on the cases are:

- Reforma, Mexico's leading newspaper, called the Juárez women's murders "the crime of the century."



## Exhibit 2

### Media Coverage of Juárez Murders (cont.)

- ABC TV's "20/20" investigative team, which came to Juárez twice, aired a report on the murders Jan. 30.
- CNN, the Arizona Republic, the Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times, the British Broadcasting Corp., National Public Radio, Vanity Fair, Jane magazine, Playboy of Germany, Channel 11/Fox TV in Los Angeles, the Canadian Broadcast Corp.
- The book "El Silencio que la Voz de Todas Quiebra" and U.S. film "Señorita Extraviada."

### **Death Stalks the Border: Families, officials claim cover-ups keep killings from being solved**

By Diana Washington Valdez

El Paso Times

June 23, 2002

JUAREZ - Josefina Gonzales clung to the white overalls and wept.

Found during a search of the area where her daughter's body had been discovered almost four months earlier, the overalls were solid evidence to her that officials don't care who killed 20-year-old Claudia Ivette.

Solid evidence that whoever killed her daughter and as many as 89 other women and girls in Juárez may never be brought to justice. Thought to be serial murders, these are the most notorious of the 325 cases of slain women in this border city during the past nine years.

"Someone rich and powerful has to be involved in my daughter's murder," she said.

"I'm not an investigator, but only someone like that can keep getting away with this," Gonzales said. She is among the many victims' relatives and human-rights advocates who have lashed out at a justice system they say has turned a blind eye to what experts say is a growing string of serial killings.

They are not alone in their beliefs. Critics say the investigations have been stymied by cover-ups, contaminated evidence, witness intimidation and a corrupt system of incompetent officials eager to charge someone and declare the cases solved.

They point to the discoveries of evidence at the scene months after the police said their search was over.

"It's incredible that the authorities would leave behind so many items at the site, like women's underwear, shoes and clumps of human hair," said El Pasoan Victor Munoz of

## Exhibit 2

### Media Coverage of Juárez Murders (cont.)

the Coalition on Violence Against Women and Families on the Border, one of the volunteers who took part in the Feb. 24 sweep. "They did not do a good job."

Chihuahua state authorities have denied that corruption and police intimidation have ground the investigation into the killings to a halt. Those in charge said the investigations have stopped because the cases are solved.

"The state police conducted a professional investigation. I have no doubt about that," said Arturo Gonzalez Rascon, who was Chihuahua state attorney general when the bodies of eight women, including that of Claudia Gonzales, were discovered.

Guillermina Gonzalez Flores, whose 17-year-old sister, Sagrario, was found dead April 1998, was not satisfied either. "Our family believes a true investigation needs to take place ... we are skeptical that my sister's death has been solved."

Her sister's body was found near Zaragoza almost two weeks after she was reported missing. She was raped, strangled and mutilated. Like about a third of the serial-killing victims, she was a maquiladora worker. One in five of all the murder victims was a maquiladora worker.

### **Death Stalks the Border: Latest discovery of bodies fuels fears anew in Juárez**

By Diana Washington Valdez

El Paso Times

June 24, 2002

The discovery of eight bodies dumped in a Juárez inner-city lot in November reignited the city's fears that the killer or killers who have preyed on young women since the early 1990s are on the prowl again.

Four days after the last body was recovered, Chihuahua state officials announced they had solved the killings and had the suspects in custody. But since then, lawyers, human-rights activists and victims' families have said police may have the wrong people in jail because DNA tests conducted by federal officials in Mexico City failed to confirm the identities of the victims.

"The authorities tried to hide the DNA results that could set free my client," said Sergio Dante Almaraz, lawyer for one of two bus drivers accused of killing the women. "From the beginning, this case has been fraught with irregularities and outright violations."

## Exhibit 2

### Media Coverage of Juárez Murders (cont.)

Ex-state Attorney General Arturo Gonzalez Rascon said the bus drivers, Victor J. Garcia Uribe and Gustavo Gonzalez Meza, confessed to the slayings and identified the victims.

The bus drivers have said they were tortured into confessing.

Elfego Bencomo, the new state deputy attorney general in Juárez, said it will take an additional two months to straighten out the DNA issue.

That's not soon enough for Vicky Caraveo Vallina, founder of the advocacy group Mujeres por Juárez.

"Everyone doubts these two men committed the murders. It's not the first time the authorities declared that these crimes have been solved, and what worries us is that the real killers continue to be loose in the city," she said.

All eight victims were raped and strangled, police said. Five had their hair cut off, two had their hands tied with shoelaces, and two had broken necks. A judge ruled later that police submitted no evidence of the rapes.

They were young, attractive and from poor families. According to police reports, they all disappeared during the day, and all but one were last seen on a weekday.

Their routine paths brought them to the same part of central Juárez, where they apparently were abducted before they were killed. The area includes downtown, the ProNaF nightclubs and the Pradera Dorada neighborhood. It is the heart of the city's "golden zone," known for its shopping centers, maquiladora industrial parks and upscale neighborhoods. It is also the focal point for frequent drug-related killings and abductions.

Mothers complain

State police said Esmeralda Herrera Monreal was among the latest eight victims.

She had just turned 15 and was making plans with her family to celebrate her quincea-era. Turning 15 is considered a rite of passage for young women in Mexico, and the teen was saving money from her job as a part-time housekeeper to help pay for a belated party.

The teen was last seen Oct. 29 leaving her job in the Misiones del Sur at 4:30 p.m., about a mile from the tract where the eight bodies were found.

## Exhibit 2

### Media Coverage of Juárez Murders (cont.)

"She was my only daughter, my dream girl. ... They took that away from me," Irma Monreal said before she broke down and cried. "The police wouldn't even let me see her body. They told me it would be too much for me to handle. They only showed me her clothes."

State police said Monreal's face was destroyed beyond recognition, leading her mother to suspect that "some kind of acid was used on her face to hide her identity."

Chihuahua state authorities said three of the eight victims were positively identified by relatives and other non-DNA tests.

The first four victims found Nov. 6 and 7 were identified as Claudia I. Gonzales, Esmeralda Monreal, Maria Acosta Ramirez and Laura Berenice Ramos Monarrez. The families had funerals for them. The bodies of the other four alleged victims are still at the morgue.

According to autopsy reports, none of the eight victims had been dead for longer than eight months. However some victims had been reported missing in 2000. Authorities cannot account for that time difference. One of the victims was estimated to have died three weeks before her body was found. Medical examiners listed the official cause of death for all eight as "indeterminate."

#### Official gifts

Benita Monarrez, mother of Laura Ramos Monarrez, said different officials visited her house after her daughter was listed among the victims. Among the visitors was the secretary of the wife of Chihuahua Gov. Patricio Martinez.

"They promised a scholarship for my younger son and to help us get a house for our family," she said. "They gave me the car that's in my driveway, title and all, so I could get around more easily to my medical appointments. But, I (didn't) stop searching for Laura Berenice."

Monarrez said she finally signed for her daughter's body in late March "because I was weary of waiting on the DNA results."

Other victims' families also said they received similar assistance, ranging from a used car to roof repairs.

Patricia Aguirre de Martinez, the governor's wife and director of the Integrated Family Development program known as DIF, said, "We provided assistance to the families at the governor's request, but there were no strings attached."

## **Exhibit 2**

### **Media Coverage of Juárez Murders (cont.)**

#### Rushed investigation

The recent multiple-death investigation troubled many.

The site investigation was shut down so fast that investigators left behind rib bones, a long, thick strand of human hair, clothing and other items that were found by reporters and volunteers who conducted sweeps.

Monarrez said state investigators haven't tried to find out who has her daughter's cell phone, which someone is using between Anapra and downtown Juárez. Her daughter had her cell phone when she was last seen heading to meet friends in the ProNaF area. Calls from the phone have been paid with pre-paid telephone cards.

State prosecutor Jesus Ortega said there is no need to pursue whoever might have the cell phone "because the investigation is over."

**Exhibit 3**

**Juárez Cross Remembering Victims**



Located at the Ciudad Juárez base of the Santa Fe international bridge, this cross was erected in memory of the city's nearly 90 serial-killing victims that have died since 1993. Attached to each nail is the name of one of the victims.

Photo courtesy of Patty Lamson.

## Exhibit 4

### V-Day Media Coverage

#### **Celebs Join March Against Mexico Killings**

By Olga R Rodriguez

Associated Press Writer

February 15, 2004

CIUDAD JUAREZ, Mexico (AP) - Actresses Jane Fonda and Sally Field marched through this gritty Mexican border city Saturday urging authorities to investigate the brutal slayings of hundreds of young women and girls.

Mexican authorities say 258 women have been killed over the past decade in Ciudad Juarez, a city of some 1.3 million people. Many of the victims were sexually assaulted, strangled and dumped in the desert near Juarez, across the Rio Grande river from El Paso, Texas.

"I'm here because 300 young, vibrant women are not," Field said. "Now is the time on this planet when we have to stand up and shine the light on injustice."

The demonstration was sponsored by Amnesty International and the nonprofit V-Day Foundation, led by "Vagina Monologues" playwright Eve Ensler, which combats violence against women worldwide. Participants chanted, "Justice!" and "Not one more!" as they followed Ensler through Juarez.

Hundreds gathered at Juarez city plaza, where they recited a prayer and sang. Women in the crowd held enlarged black-and-white photos of some victims.

"There was a time when we could live in tranquility," said Guadeloupe Ruiz, 73, who walked from El Paso.

"But lately there have been too many crimes, and I'm here because I want to see an end to this."

Fonda, Field and Ensler participated in a panel discussion alongside mothers of slain victims, Mexican officials and U.S. Reps. Hilda Solis, D-Calif., and Janice Schakowsky, D-Ill.

President Vicente Fox's recent appointment of special prosecutor Maria Lopez Urbina has inspired some new hope that investigators will solve the killings. Fox also has appointed human rights lawyer Guadeloupe Morfin to head a commission coordinating the efforts of agencies investigating the slayings.

## Exhibit 4

### V-Day Media Coverage (cont.)

The panelists urged Mexico to dedicate enough funds to the investigation. Fonda met Friday night with mothers of the victims and said she heard how the authorities have ignored their cry for justice.

Many of the victims' relatives blame police corruption and incompetence for allowing the murders to continue. They say police tampered with evidence, tortured suspects and forced confessions from them.

"I have a daughter and a granddaughter and I know that if they were killed the authorities would do everything possible to solve the murder," Fonda said. "Mexico, Juarez, Chihuahua deserve better than the authorities that are now ruling. These mothers deserve better."

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### **Eve Ensler and Amnesty International March on Juarez to Stop the Murder of Young Women**

By Hillary Chute

villagevoice.com

February 17, 2004

February 14, Juarez, Mexico— "*Ni Una Mas*" — "not one more" — was the impassioned rallying cry this Valentine's Day as activist groups from the U.S. and Mexico converged on this gritty border city to protest the brutal killings of more than 370 women in Juarez and the nearby state capital, Chihuahua City, since 1993. Early Saturday, a rapt crowd of 500-plus men, women, and children, sharing seats and crammed against the walls, spontaneously chanted "not one more" and "you're not alone" at the local university as Mexican professor Marcela Lagarde addressed the "*feminicidio*" that has plagued Chihuahua State for the past decade.

Between 5,000 and 7,000 anti-violence protestors then gathered at the Lerdo Bridge separating Texas and Mexico and marched down Juarez's central Lerdo Avenue, lined with wedding-dress stores and small restaurants. Screaming "*justicia*," protestors carried black balloons, blurry black-and-white photocopies of missing and murdered women, and decorated dresses hanging on tall pink crosses. Even a group of fraternity brothers from University of Texas-El Paso— decked out in T-shirts reading "men of character"— marched with an enormous canvas of handprints and the declaration "These hands don't hurt."



## Exhibit 4

### V-Day Media Coverage (cont.)

At the front was *Vagina Monologues* author Eve Ensler, whose international non-profit V-Day co-sponsored the march with Amnesty International, which last year issued a detailed report damning the quality of the criminal investigations in Juarez and Chihuahua City. Accompanying Ensler was press-magnet Jane Fonda and other so-called "Very Important Vaginas": actors Sally Field and Christine Lahti, PBS president Pat Mitchell, Lifetime CEO and president Carole Black, and Congresswomen Jan Schakowsky (Illinois) and Hilda Solis (California). Solis wants to pass House Resolution 466, which supports the multilateral creation of a DNA database in Chihuahua state.

In the U.S., the right wing hopes to smear John Kerry for being within five feet of Fonda in 1970; for most in Juarez, the simple fact that Fonda, whoever she is, is a famous person agitating to draw attention to the murdered women is a hopeful sign. "I am rich, I am famous, I am white, and I have a daughter and a granddaughter," Fonda declared to a group of storming reporters. "If they were murdered or disappeared, I know the authorities would work very hard to find out who kidnapped them." Fonda concluded her comments by admonishing the press: "Why did it take international movie stars to turn up for you to be here?"

A little over ten years ago, according to an Amnesty Now article, the number of women murdered in Juarez—a city of roughly 1.3 million—averaged three a year. In 1993, the number skyrocketed to three a month. Many of these murders are classified by the police as "situational," as in domestic violence and drug- or gang-related violence, even though the similarities between the murders clearly point to a larger trend. The mutilated bodies of young, poor women are dumped in and at the outskirts of the city. The average age of the victims is 16. At least one-third of them work in the city's *maquiladoras*, or foreign assembly plants. More than one-third of the women are raped before they are killed, and most of their bodies show signs of captivity and torture. Once seen as a problem in the rough, crime-ridden Juarez alone, the murders have now spread to Chihuahua City.

Rumors about the killings identify its perpetrators variously as the state police, an international organ-trafficking ring, Satanists, organized-crime factions, serial killers from the U.S., a group of local serial killers, and the Mexican government.

So who is killing the women? At an emotional press conference in the crammed lobby of the Juarez's modest Monte Carlo hotel on Friday, one mother of a murdered girl answered, "We don't know. Why do they leave them like this [mutilated]? What are they trying to erase? . . . I am sure the state police of Chihuahua know what happened to these girls. I want to know. That's a mother's right." Amnesty's report declares that "the failure of the competent authorities to take action to investigate these crimes, whether through indifference, lack of will, or

## Exhibit 4

### V-Day Media Coverage (cont.)

inability, has been blatant." Alma Guillermoprieto, who wrote about the killings for *The New Yorker* this past fall, sees "active collusion" by the

Chihuahua police as a logical possibility, and "active indifference" as the least-incriminating explanation. The police deny all involvement.

The murder of women in Chihuahua state is certainly a socio-economic political issue. After NAFTA, workers from poor villages poured into Juarez, and the rise in violence in 1993 coincides with the boom of the *maquiladora* economy. On Saturday, the group La Mujer Obrera distributed leaflets avowing that the murders "are the consequences of a global economy that continues to promote the deterioration of the social fabric on the border." Multinational corporations take advantage of loose environmental regulations and cheap Mexican labor—*maquiladora* workers are paid less than \$5 a day. U.S.-run factories in Juarez—including Thomson/RCA, General Electric, Ford, and Dupont—have done little to ensure the safety of their female workers: girls have disappeared in the waste-grounds adjacent to factories, which are often unlit. Private companies have rejected the idea that they should pay for security for their workers. Claudia Ivette González disappeared after her assembly plant turned her away for arriving four minutes late; she was found in 2001 in a ditch with seven other young women. Her employer, the Lear Corporation, stated that the company did not need to provide its workers with extra security because her murder didn't happen on Lear property.

Saturday's protest ended with a free performance of the *Vagina Monologues* in Spanish and English, featuring the Mexican actors Lilia Aragon, Marinitia Escobedo, and Laura Flores—and Fonda, Field, and Lahti—at a packed local dance hall. Ensler made the important gesture of including monologues (in addition to standards like "Bob," about a vagina-friendly man) that spoke directly to international violence against women. There was a long, moving performance in Spanish about the rape and assassination of women in Kosovo. And Field, occasionally crying, did a piece that focused on spousal acid burning in Islamabad and female disfigurement from bombing in Iraq before she ended with the situation in Juarez. American folk singer Holly Near—leading a chant for "*ni una mas*"—performed a song for Juarez that also targeted violence in Chile and Guatemala.

Global in focus, V-Day and Amnesty assert that the Juarez crimes are a human-rights scandal. And so while groups like Women in White, a government-sponsored activist party—and even a selection of victim's mothers—were said to oppose the protest in part on the grounds that the vocal agitating lacked dignity, Ensler made savvy choices: pointing to the worldwide problem of gender violence, she didn't single out Juarez for blame.

## Exhibit 4

### V-Day Media Coverage (cont.)

*The Vagina Monologues* clearly inspired and often amused its audience. Fonda played a woman who regards her vagina distantly as a "red leather couch" or a "mink-lined muffler," and another piece ran the gamut of orgasm types: "mariachi," "diva," "triple," etc. But the divide between the monologues' occasionally playful content and the issue of unsolved murder at times felt awkward. While the crowd for the most part whooped and

roared enthusiastically throughout the show, a group of three mothers whom I recognized from the previous day's press conference—sitting in the front row, placards of their daughters' faces hanging over their chests—silently stood up and walked out mid-way through.

The mothers remain optimistic, but not overly so. In October, Vicente Fox appointed a special federal commissioner, Maria Guadalupe Morfín, to monitor the state's work, and last month, he appointed a special federal prosecutor, Maria Lopez Urbina, to run her own investigations. But for these appointments to be effective, they have to be well funded, and there's no promise yet that Fox won't be as effectively neglectful of the situation in Juarez as he has been since his election. Asked at the press conference if she had hope in Lopez, one mother replied, simply, "We hope to have hope in her." Ensler, for her part, declared Saturday V-day for "victory": the march was the largest in 10 years of anti-violence activism in the city. As one lawyer for several mothers stated, "This is the only thing that has pressured the government." Ensler vowed, "We will keep coming back to Juarez until women are free and safe."