For all the praise about Mexico’s “transition to democracy,” civic activists still have great difficulty obtaining political accountability, professional response from the criminal justice system, or even respectful acknowledgement of public problems, particularly those affecting women and families from poverty backgrounds. In fact, some activists face threats, harassment, and intimidation for their efforts to make public problems visible and criticize government non-responsiveness. This chapter focuses on anti-violence organizing in the Ciudad Juarez-El Paso region of two million people. The border is a violent place for men and women, but this chapter’s focus is on the organizing efforts around the murders of girls and women over the last decade, numbering over 300 deaths, a third of which involve rape and mutilation (Washington Valdez 2002; Gonzales 2002; Benitez et.al 1999; Staudt and Coronado 2002: Ch 6; Ortiz 2002).

This chapter analyzes the civic actions of non-government organizations (NGOs)/Organizaciones No-Gubermentales (ONGs) that press governments for accountability. The first section will briefly outline the facts and chronology of the Juarez murders and official responses. Following that, the second section examines the challenges of accountability at borderlands, which complicate public action. In the third section, cross-border civic action is
analyzed, followed with closing considerations of strategies for successful action. The chapter
draws on multiple sources: interviews, observations, and participant observation in anti-violence
organizations, including the cross-border Coalition Against Violence toward Women and
Families at the U.S.-Mexico Border (hereinafter shortened to Coalition Against Violence)
involving activists and organizations from both Cd. Juarez and El Paso. The underlying
argument in this chapter calls for “institutional shrouds” that provide leverage and resources for
successful systemic action, such as a human rights treaty, coupled with oversight from civil
society. While Mexico and the United States have signed numerous agreements on topics that
range from free trade and the environment to air traffic control and plant viruses, no human
rights agreement exists to address public safety, sexual serial killers, and the overall lawless
climate in cities like Ciudad Juarez.

The Juarez Murders and Official Response

Borderlands are often characterized as wild frontiers. Ciudad Juarez, Mexico’s fifth
largest city, is no exception. Historically, Juarez has long been considered a “boom town”
(Martinez 1977). The Border Industrial Program of the 1960s and the growth of assembly-line
production in the maquiladora industry served as a magnet to attract migrants from the interior
and consequent dramatic population increases. Moreover, illegal drug trafficking is perhaps the
city’s major business, for it is home base to the Carrillo-Fuentes cartel. Once the U.S. War on
Drugs made trafficking from Colombia through Florida more difficult, El Paso-Juarez became a
major trafficking corridor (Bowden 2002; USDOJ 2004). However ‘wild and lawless’ the
characterization, borders coexist with heavy law enforcement and what has been called the
“militarization of the border” (Dunn 1998; selections in Spener and Staudt 1998; Williams and
Coronado 1994). Law enforcement aims to regulate and control immigration, commerce and trade, firearms (the special concern of Mexico) and drug traffic (the special concern of the U.S.). At the federal level, the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) and the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), among others, all work in Mexico (Paterson 2001). Likewise, the Procuraduría General de la Republica (PGR) has offices in the United States. Binational cooperation in law enforcement exists at the higher echelons of government, setting precedents for them to exist at all levels of government, including state and municipal/local levels.

In the early to mid-1990s, Juarenses began to notice patterns in media reports about female homicide. The bodies of women (the majority of them teenagers) were found, either in the desert or in fields inside the city, raped and mutilated before death. They fit a certain profile: slender, poor, young, with dark hair. Public officials, when questioned, discounted the value of the victims and appeared to blame them for “leading a double life” or “dressing provocatively” and “being out at night.” Of course, victims dressed in a variety of ways, killed day and night. Partial information can be found in police files, all too many of them shoddy and incomplete (Howard and Mendez 1998): most women (the majority) are young (11-21), dying after particular perpetrator practices prior to death, such as ‘set on fire,’ ‘breasts cut off,’ and other grisly details.

The first to be charged was a foreigner, Abdel Latif Sharif Sharif, and the sentiment in the city was that “Mexicans don’t do these things.” (See Pablo Picacco’s chapter on serial killing in early 20th century Mexico City, however, documenting home-grown versions.) When the killings continued, the authorities charged gang members, Los Rebeldes, claiming they took
direction from Sharif. After that, bus drivers contracted to second and third-shift maquiladoras were charged. Mexico has a long tradition of forcing confessions (HRW 1999), and many suspects were mistreated (one died) with some later released without real evidence. Yet the killings continued, leading people to wonder whether multiple serial killers were responsible. This early history is covered well in Lourdes Portillo’s film, *Seniorita Extraviada* (2001). Portillo focused on the victims’ families, the indifference of police and judicial authorities, and on those who also denounced police as active participants in the rape and torture killings.

Widespread consciousness began to spread through newspapers and symbols in public spaces. People painted pink, crucifix-style crosses on black backgrounds in public spaces. A large wooden crucifix with nails for victims sits just in front of the downtown international crossing bridge. Media coverage on both sides of the border has been extensive each time new bodies were found. During the entire decade, the numbers of victims have been in dispute, even between the PRI and PAN state governments. By the year 2002, the divergent figures totaled 254 (86 of them serial killings) from Casa Amiga, the anti-violence counseling center in Juarez; 258 from the Chihuahua State Attorney General’s Office, and 320 (90 of them sex-related serial killings) from the *El Paso Times* (figures in Gaspar de Alba 2003; also see [www.casa-amiga.org/Statistics.htm](http://www.casa-amiga.org/Statistics.htm); [www.elpasotimes.com/borderdeath](http://www.elpasotimes.com/borderdeath)). By this time, media coverage was extensive beyond the border, from Mexico City, to U.S. dailies like the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times* and the largest U.S. Spanish-language newspaper, the Los Angeles-based *La Opinion*. International coverage was extensive as well, with European newspapers and magazines sending journalists and photographers to the border.
At the state level, victims’ families have been treated with disdain and disrespect (Staudt and Coronado 2002: Ch6). Most families earn poverty wages (the minimum wage amounts to about US$5 per day). The police have been careless about retaining the victims’ clothing and remains. Participants from two cross-border coalitions assisted in desert searches to locate pieces of evidence, and they found underwear and other objects that the police left behind. Activists levy many charges against the police besides indifferences and intimidation: fabricated evidence; incomplete and lost investigation files; bone misidentification, causing victims’ families to re-live the murders over and over. Police do not provide straight and consistent stories to victims’ families, undermining any trust that an already skeptical population has of their police (see also the Paras chapter on crime, trust, and social capital in Mexico City). A threatening message was left on the phone of a victim’s family about dropping the issue: the caller identification showed that the state judicial police number was the source (FN 2003).

During the course of the research, family members have reported in some instances they do not know even where to start to report their missing daughters. Poor and disenfranchised people have limited knowledge and experience with government institutions, and coupled with anguish over their missing daughters, they report high levels of frustration with law enforcement agencies at all levels. One mother indicated (FN 2002) that they went to

[O]ne office, where we told them that our daughter had not come home. They made us wait, then sent us to an office where a man asked us all kinds of questions: name, age, address, where we worked, on and on. Then we finally got to our daughter, her name, how old, what she was wearing, etc. The man stated that we should not worry because many young women, like our daughter, usually
go and spend the night in a hotel with their boyfriend and oversleep, and they usually return the next day. [The mother reported feeling shocked, like a] pail of cold water was thrown at me.

The official went on to tell them that if their daughter did not return later in the day to go to another office whose address he provided. “This is not where we deal with missing people,” he told them, she said.

Family members have also reported that public officials mistreated them. They also indicated that they have to take whole days off from work to go to the police when they want to follow up on their cases. Families who do not have telephones have a hard time getting through to the person who is in charge of their case, so they just present themselves in person with the hope that they will get information.

Despite the public attention to the cases, things have not changed much over the years and corruption is routine. As one mother reported (FN/WOLA, 2/25/04),

We were told by one police officer that they would look into my daughter’s case a little more closely if we could provide an incentive to him. Our family and friends gathered all the money that we could and gave it to him hoping that they would be able to tell us where our daughter was. At the time, one is in so much pain and anguish that one is not thinking clearly, and I felt that it was the right thing to do because I really wanted them to find my daughter.
Public officials received visits from victims’ families, with pleas to ‘do something,’ following the supplication style of clientelist politics, to little avail. By the late 1990s, NGOs emerged among victims’ families, women’s and human rights activities acting in solidarity with the families. One of the first (later disbanded) was Voces Sin Eco, a group of family members. The first cross-border, binational group to emerge was Las Amigos de las Mujeres de Ciudad Juarez, based in Las Cruces, New Mexico. Feminist groups articulated concerns, such as 8 de Marzo. Other NGOs organized, such as Mujeres por Juarez, Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa, and Mujeres de Negro, the latter of whom dress in mourning at large public events. Mujeres de Negro solidarity actions have occurred in different U.S. cities and all over the world, often at Mexican Consulate and Embassy offices. The binational Coalition Against Violence, discussed below, was born at a labor-solidarity event in Juarez, November 2001. Finally, in 2003 Amnesty International released a lengthy report on the murders, totaling 370 and 137 of them “sexual homicide” based on their research (www.amnesty.org).

By the turn of the 21st century, government officials no longer blamed the victims, at least in public. Similar serial killings spread to other border locations and to the state capital in Chihuahua City (Guillermoprieto 2003). But the municipal and state police acted with indifference, incompetence, or, to express the vox populi, in complicity with the killers, theorized as the ‘juniors,’ sons of rich families, including cartels, who have money and influence for protection. Near Day of the Dead commemorations, La Jornada published a front-page, lengthy article that named prominent Juarez families corroborated in investigations (Washington Valdez 2003; Burnett 2004).
In Mexico, residents distrust the police and experience or expect corruption, and these concerns are aggravated in Juarez and the State of Chihuahua generally, among several states with the highest rates of criminal incidence and organized crime (including drug trafficking), according to the federal Attorney General’s Office (summarized in Moloeznik 2003). In the multi-nation World Values Survey (Inglehart 2000), approximately 3 of 10 Mexicans trust the police, and 5 of 10 trust the army (see Giugale et.al 2001 for reviews of other research in Mexico). Although dated, an Autonomous National University (UNAM) study calculated that “cocaine traffickers spent as much as $460 million on bribery in 1993—far more than the annual budget of the Mexican Attorney General’s Office in 1993” (Andreas 2000: 62). After a decade more, the amounts have likely skyrocketed. International Transparency, an international NGO that reports an annual Corruption Perceptions Index for most countries, scores Mexico at 3.3 (higher than the lowest rated, Nigeria, at 1.4 and Bangladesh, at 1.3), but far from the top five Scandinavian countries, Canada and New Zealand (between 9-10) (www.transparency.org).

Mexican police at the municipal, state, and federal levels are regularly fired or suspended for corruption and drug charges, (Andreas reports 10% of the Federal Judicial Police from 1992-5; 2000: 64).

Threats, intimidation, and death have been the risks associated with criticisms of government impunity. In February 2002, state police offers shot Attorney Mario Escobedo Anaya to death in Ciudad Juarez. Escobedo Anaya was defending one of two bus drivers accused of raping and murdering eight women found in an empty lot, November 2001. The young attorney and his father, Sergio Dante Almaraz (who was defending the other accused bus driver) had been interviewed along with the wives of the bus drivers earlier by 20/20, an ABC news show. Before the interview, both father and son had received death threats. As local police
chased Escobedo through the streets of Ciudad Juarez, he managed to call his father on his cell phone. Conflicting details emerged regarding what happened that night: the attorney crashed and died; the police shot at him in self-defense; and after the car wreck, police walked over and shot him. When his father arrived at the scene of the accident, state police were everywhere and the young attorney was dead (http://www.nodo50.org/pchiapas/documentos/juarez2.htm). (See also Fix-Fierro’s chapter on lawyers in Mexico’s justice system.)

Mexico’s move to a multi-party system, pioneered at the northern frontier, undermined cooperation between levels of its federal system. When National Action Party (PAN) President Vicente Fox won the elections in 2000, Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) Governor Patricio Martinez controlled the State of Chihuahua, and PANista Jesus Delgado controlled the Municipal Presidency in Juarez. President Fox responded to the national and international pressure to act on the murders and official impunity. In the summer of 2003, he authorized that hundreds of federal preventive police be stationed in Juarez, and in 2004 Fox appointed a special commission to investigate, with Guadalupe Morfin as its head, and Maria Lopez Urbina, a special prosecutor. Officially their titles are Human Rights Commissioner to Prevent and Eradicate Violence Women (Morfin) and Special Prosecutor for the Attention of Crimes Related to the Homicides of Women (Lopez Urbina). After more than 10 years, only Sharif Sharif was convicted, but it is under appeal.

**Borderline Accountability**

The problem of violence against women is ancient and deep-seated, tolerated as a private matter for many centuries (Weldon 2002). But since the 1970s in both Mexico and the United
States (and globally), activists from the grassroots to national and international levels have called attention to violence against women as a public problem, involving domestic assault/abuse, rape, and murder (see Rodriguez 2003 on national-level activism and response in Mexico: 170).

At borderlines, problem-solving is compounded by national sovereignties, although many precedents have been set for cross-border, binational cooperation, from official organizations like the International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC)/Comision Internacional de Limites y Aguas (CILA) to non-government organizations, whether registered tax-exempt nonprofit organizations/associaciones civiles or informal networks and coalitions (Staudt and Coronado 2002). Despite national sovereignty, both governments have cooperated over water, toxic waste, air quality, trade and commerce.

The border runs through the combined metropolitan area of Juarez-El Paso, complicating accountability relationships between people, victims and victims’ families, and government. The border regional context involves two sets of political institutions that on the surface appear similar (presidential forms of government, with separate executive, legislative, and judicial branches; federalism), but operate quite differently. Periodically, binational cooperation transcended borderlines. Binational cooperation occurred in the late 1990s, with inconclusive reports after data was run through the FBI Data Base at Quantico, Virginia.

Article 33 of the 1917 Mexican Constitution states that foreigners should in no way get involved in the political affairs of the county. *Los extranjeros no podran de ninguna manera inmiscuirse en los asuntos politicos del pais (Articulo 33 de la Constitucion Mexicana)*
why is the killing a binational issue? cross-border activists point to several factors. first, at least four of the victims are u.s. (from el paso, and others are from the netherlands, honduras, and guatemala (washington valdez 2002). furthermore, there are many more desaparecidos, disappeared people, from both sides of the border as well as a cross-border organization called the asociacion de familiares y amigos de personas “desaparecidas” (staudt & coronado 2002: 150-1). it is impossible to know how many of these people have been murdered, their bodies yet to be found in the vast stretches of the chihuahuan desert surrounding the periphery of cd. juarez. the el paso mother of a u.s.-desaparecida testified to members of a u.s. congressional delegation in october, 2003 (discussed later) (fn 2003). second, the serial killers may be border crossers and their nationality uncertain, for the borderlands are porous. as the murders spread to chihuahua city, the authorities forced a confession from a u.s. woman married to a mexican, involving confession for a blow to a part of the body untouched on the victim (guillermoprieto 2003). third, the economies are linked, especially the mostly u.s.-owned maquiladoras (assembly factories) where some of the victims worked, earning little more than the mexican minimum wage of under us$5, daily. some border
theorists conceptualize that the notion of a cheap, “disposable” labor force contributes to the lawless climate in the city (Biemann 2002). Ciudad Juarez has become a magnet for migrants since the inception of maquiladoras in 1965, growing the maquiladora workforce to its high point in 2000: 250,000 workers (approximately 200,000 in 2003).

Chihuahua’s legislature has passed a variety of laws on domestic assault, rape, and murder. The language is often vague, and the data of (underreported) crimes is not disaggregated by gender (unlike other states with seemingly better crime data and reports, like Sonora). The lack of disaggregated data allows Governor Martinez to say casually that murder rates in Juarez are not so bad compared to other big cities like New York. The female homicide rate per 100,000 population is glaringly high, however, compared to other big cities in Mexico and elsewhere (Monarrez Fragoso 2002). Thirty deputies serve in the legislature, and two years ago, activists fought an effort to reduce the penalty for rape to a penalty that was less than hurting a cow (as headlines testified) (Martinez Marquez 2002). Committees do not appear to exercise significant oversight on particular bureaucratic agencies, such as judicial investigation agencies. In the current session, three women sit in a congress of thirty, each from one of the three major parties. They prioritize solutions for violence against women, despite partisan differences. Of course, public safety is not simply a “women’s issue,” and 10% never constituted a majority.

At the national level, Mexico created the Comision Nacional de los Derechos Humanos in 1990s, but it lacks enforcement powers. Numerous reports about the violence against women have made to the National Human Rights Commission. As for its judicial branch, in 1994,
Mexico reformed the Supreme Court to increase its autonomy from executive branch (and political) domination. But national reforms have not spilled over to the state levels. According to UNAM professor Jose Luis Soberanes, the “delivery of justice in Mexico depends on a structure that is complicated, slippery, and often corrupt” (HRW 1999:46). In a damning indictment, judicial experts conclude that Mexico does not extend rights and protections based on “rule of law” (Domingo 1999; 2000; Taylor 1997). The *amparo* does not appear to be utilizable in ways that would require judicial investigators to act with professionalism and competence.

How can accountability be increased? The next section analyzes cross-border civic actions, along with the gains they have made. Although public awareness of the crimes has increased, the responses have thus far been meager and modest. The Coalition Against Violence brings together disparate groups that share the common goal of ending the violence and locating the killers. However, other organized interests, such as the chambers of commerce, the downtown merchants, and the maquila industries, have not pressed government even though the image of Juarez could deter economic investments in the region. Instead, business voices, articulated in the media, say that the protestors make Juarez look bad.

**Cross-Border Civic Actions**

This section focuses on the cross-border Coalition Against Violence toward Women and Families at the U.S.-Mexico border, hereinafter called the Coalition Against Violence or Coalition for short. It is a loose, binational alliance of organizations and individuals representing
human and women’s rights; labor; health, counseling and shelter organizations; and students.
The chronological analysis below outlines its movement from regional, cross-border networking among activists with strong personal ties at its birth to one that gained leverage with what Granovetter called “the strength of weak ties” (1974) with impersonal ties to other networks at the national and international levels in 2004. However, the personal and impersonal ties lack an “institutional shroud” of human rights laws, policies and resources that include violence against women as a public safety issue worthy of rights protection.

Cross-border organizational birth and growth

Amigos de las Mujeres de Ciudad Juarez was the pioneering cross-border network to emerge. Activists worked with victims’ families, raising funds for them and other NGOs in Juarez. Amigos is a tax-exempt U.S. organization, based in Las Cruces, New Mexico (www.amigosdemujeres.org). The Coalition Against Violence emerged to mobilize visibility for the murders and connect that visibility to systemic and policy change, particularly at the binational level.

At its birth, the Coalition Against Violence emerged in solidarity with independent unions in Mexico. Many of these unions take a critical stance toward globalization, NAFTA, and neoliberalism generally, yet activists work “within” capitalist economies and pursue reformist strategies. The Coalition organized events associated with International Women’s Day, connecting with organizations as far south as Chihuahua City. In 2002, hundreds of people on each side of the international border rallied together and then met at the border. Some protestors dressed with dramatic and symbolic colors, (mostly black colors, following mujeres de
Negro), and the quasi-religious symbolic signs of the deaths were found everywhere: black crosses on pink backgrounds.

Local governments like El Paso and Cd. Juarez have long cooperated over auto theft, but not the murders of girls and women until the anti-violence coalition of cross-border activists built visibility for and momentum around binational cooperation among local police authorities and an international tip line, with assistance from the U.S. FBI. Their challenge, repeated over and over to public decision makers was this: “you cooperate over auto theft; why not over the murders of girls and women?” (FN 2002, 2003).

The Coalition Against Violence called for a binational task force to foster cooperation over investigating the crimes, including greater FBI involvement. Besides the local police cooperation over auto theft, rampant at borders, both governments cooperate over a variety of other issues, from water and air quality to business and commerce. For “radicals” in the Coalition, however, it was unusual, even uncomfortable, to look to police or investigative agencies for solutions to problems. The Coalition also approached Crimestoppers, a non-profit organization that receives and pays tips for solving crimes, to no avail. Its board of directors expressed hesitation about actions that would imply criticism of counterparts and police in Mexico.

Another activity involved efforts to revise a document that frames and legitimizes health interventions over the next decade. The official U.S.-Mexico Border Health Commission, of mostly M.D. political appointees from both countries, issued a report, HEALTHY BORDERS
2010, which contained no language on violence against women as a health issue, or on other issues of concern, such as voluntary motherhood or gender-disaggregated data. Members of the Transborder Consortium on Gender and Health at the U.S.-Mexico Border supplied expertise and utilized contacts to draft a gentle critique that proposed new language and got it on the Commission agenda, a feat in bureaucratic organizations. This is working its way through commission agenda setting and consideration (and still unresolved at this writing).

The Coalition Against Violence met with Texas State Senator Eliot Shapleigh, key supporter of anti-violence actions, who has been willing to use his name and letterhead to push for binational cooperation. He is one of few politicians who are proactive on this issue and willing to work for social justice. Coalition archives contain numerous copies of letters sent to U.S. officials, from President Bush to the Departments of Justice and State and the FBI. Months pass before he received responses, and most of the responses defined the issue as a narrow judicial matter that Mexico must resolve on its own, unless it asks for U.S. assistance. Through the good graces of the Senator’s office, Coalition members met with FBI officials (and the FBI in turn gathered intelligence on activists’ perceptions). The FBI expressed its willingness to cooperate again in 2002 (the first was in 1998), later relegated to training rather than investigation.

Coalition Against Violence members dressed in mourning at luncheons hosted by the Twin Plant Wives Association and the Republican Women’s Club. Twin-plant wives, who reside in El Paso, are married to the managers and corporate executives of the largely U.S.-owned assembly plants in Cd. Juarez. The murders were discussed, and the wage inequalities,
critiqued. Keynote speaker, First Lady of Texas, Anita Perry, was willing to be “pinned” with the symbolic black cross on pink, share names of staff, and brainstorm over strategies, once even asking for a meeting (during the campaign) with Coalition members in her trip to El Paso, complete with body guards. In results or problem-solving terms, little came of these activities.

Only when Coalition members used dramatic public events, with full media coverage, did regional, national, and international networks mobilize to induce responsiveness from wider segments of the public. Media coverage in Mexico tended to be greater than in El Paso the U.S. generally, especially newspapers with more critical stances to the government and to the dominant political party (PRI), the one that controlled state government in Chihuahua. Governor Martinez appointed long-time activist Vicky Caraveo to head the Instituto de la Mujer in Chihuahua, with a sizeable budget. Little was known about budgetary priorities and spending, save the payment of stipends to some of the victims’ mothers. Mexico’s traditional ‘divide and rule’ strategies and misinformation campaigns, in the context of non-transparency in government, had the effect of polarizing human rights groups. “Who profits from our pain?” was the question that some mothers asked (FN 2002, 2003). For students of Mexican politics, manipulative cooptation has long been understood as a response to challenges from civil society.

Public educational events, at which the Coalition Against Violence participated, have been striking and dramatic, filled with symbols, colors, and icons. In April 2002, students in the Feminist Majority Leadership Alliance of the University of Texas at El Paso sponsored a silent mourning, holding large black-cross on pink placards, in a well-traversed part of campus. Many newspapers snapped photos of the 150 mourners, including one dressed in full costume as the
“grim reaper.” In Cd. Juarez, short, shocking guerrilla theatre performances sparked awareness on streets, in solidarity at the international bridge, and in cross-border actions. In early November, Day of the Dead celebrations have been held in both Cd. Juarez and El Paso, displaying altars with candles, artifacts and memories of the deceased. At universities on both sides of the border, students prepared elaborate altars for the murdered girls and women. When students graduate, leadership vacuums existed unless new leaders were mentored and their participation sustained.

Political films and theatre performances offered extended public education opportunities with memorable visuals. The award-winning Seniorita Extraviada has been enormously important for expanding visibility to the murders and police indifference. Fund-raising complemented some of these activities. Eve Ensler’s play, Vagina Monologues, has been performed several times in El Paso and in Las Cruces, New Mexico. Organizing against violence, known as VDay, has offered a national and international link between the border region and the world. In 2003, Esther Chavez Cano, an anti-violence activist who runs Casa Amiga for violence victims in Cd. Juarez, was named as one of “21 Leaders for the 21st Century—2003” in VDay preparations. Eve Ensler visited Cd. Juarez for a full day of cultural events, including guerrilla theatre and marches, but also for meetings with state judiciary officials. At the final event of the day in front of the attorney general’s office for the state of Chihuahua, Eve Ensler spoke in English and her words were then translated.

Lourdes Portillo’s film, Senorita Extraviada, focuses on the murders and especially their families. The film is grim, but respectful of the victims. Portillo is from Cd. Juarez, not just a
video/photographer/journalist/academic tourist. The film has been shown many times in the region, both for public education and for fund-raising for anti-violence services. The English version was shown on national public television in the United States. Portillo was recognized in Mexico City in academy-award like honors in 2003. In Coalition interviews, El Paso’s City Councilmen cite specific horrific details from the film, empathizing and worrying about sisters, mothers, and daughters (FN 2003).

At the November 22, 2002, labor-antiviolence conference in Cd. Juarez, sequel to the meeting that birthed the Coalition, much time and energy was invested into inviting speakers and building audiences. The mayor of El Paso was invited, but neither attended nor sent a representative. (Ongoing negotiations about other matters deterred interest in the potentially awkward and embarrassing violence issue.) The Municipal President of Cd. Juarez was invited and he came, but he left immediately after his short speech and did not leave staff behind to hear and learn about other ideas and strategies that could have been useful for follow up. But solidarity was reinforced, with union leaders such as the telefonistas offering to support anti-violence actions with strikes.

**From local regional networks to transnational and global networks**

In February 2003, four more victims were found within a week, including several teenaged girls and a six-year old child, all raped and mutilated before death. The death tally kept rising. Disagreements about numbers muddled the issue, as did blanket statements about maquiladora victims or whether all or some victims are mutilated before. Coalition Against Violence members reacted to the February girls’ deaths with a press conference to which
Mexican and U.S. media were invited. Coverage was widespread in the border region and hemisphere (though Spanish-language coverage in the Americas, Univision). In early 2003, the Coalition spoke with city and county political representatives in order to get both a resolution passed on the violence and a proclamation for International Women’s Day. The resolution had a narrow focus, calling for a binational task force, cross-border police resources and information, and other specifics. The proclamation was broad and general, but offered the ever-present opportunity to “educate” still widening ripples of people about systemic gender inequalities and everyday life with official documentation and media coverage. Both the City Council and the County Commissioners Court passed the resolution and proclamation, and media coverage was extensive. Political representatives were concerned both about human rights and about the bad image of the border that would deter economic investments. Similar strategies were not available to NGOs focused completely on the Juarez side of the border, for the cabildo (municipal council) controls its agenda carefully, and its meetings are not open for public comment. Accountability tools and institutions vary in a binational setting.

At a press conference in March 2003, former Mayor Caballero of El Paso announced, with the Police Chief, that joint cooperation would take place between judicial authorities on both sides of the border. Mexican officials were present as well, somewhat discomforted with a press conference format wherein journalists and NGOs asked challenging questions.

Once again in 2003, rallies and marches were held on International Women’s Day. In the U.S., rallies require considerable time investments into gaining permits, paying fees, and seeking to waive official fees that would cost hundreds of dollars of El Paso police “protection” in case
marchers interrupt street traffic. In El Paso, at least one month of lead time was necessary for bureaucratic approval and council approval (in contrast to the opportunity to make more spontaneous rallies in Cd. Juarez in a country wherein street protest is tolerated and expected). Again, hundreds turned out on both sides of the border, with many reporters and television crews. An AP wire reporter and photographer were also present, with outlets picking up the story across the United States.

Senator Shapleigh and Representative Norma Chavez introduced a joint resolution for the Texas legislature on binational cooperation over investigations. In early April, both the House and Senate committees held hearings, audio-taped and video-taped and available on line. The Coalition Against Violence was invited to testify, and written remarks were prepared to enter the public record (Staudt 2003). Austin-based activists testified as well. Representatives and Senators listened to and read testimony, placing Coalition-supplied black-crossed pink pins on their lapels. HCR 59 passed in the 78th Legislative Session of Texas.

Meanwhile, protests were organized at Mexican Consulates around the world and in the region. Extensive cyber activism created a flurry of emails and pictures, documenting solidarity in Tokyo, Belgrave, Madrid, and many other places.

In March, the United Nations 47th Commission on the Status of Women invited Coalition participants to New York City. A university professor (Coronado, co-chair of the Coalition) and student participated. This provided another event to put pressure on Mexican authorities, and develop weak but committed network ties in distant locales. However, human rights
commissions generally report abuses rather than exercise authority to enforce solutions. NGOs in Cd. Juarez have worked extensively to communicate with international NGOs like Amnesty International and with international organizations, like the Organization of American States and its InterAmerican Commission on Human Rights, to get the Juarez murders on agendas (Ortiz 2002). The global NGO Amnesty International finally joined the bandwagon of organizations focused on this issue. In the summer of 2003, it released a monograph on the history of the murders, the Mexican criminal justice system, and the government’s failure to respond (www.amnesty.org).

The Coalition was networked with not only the international and inter-American connections as noted above, but also with the Mexico Solidarity Network and anti-violence coalitions in other cities in both the U.S. and Mexico. U.S. Congressional Representative Hilda Solis, responding to the many Juarenses in her Los Angeles constituency, took the lead in organizing the Hispanic Caucus to communicate with President Fox to push for Mexican federal involvement in the murders, with legal tools and precedents noted in the letter: Mexico’s 1996 Federal Law Against Organized Crime provides authority to transfer jurisdiction from the State of Chihuahua to the Federal Attorney General’s office (Archives 2003). The El Paso-based Coalition met with Congressman Reyes’ staff to encourage his signature on this letter and his support for hearings at the border. The Washington Office on Latin America worked helped to organize the visit and later follow up (www.wola.org). In October, 2003, Solis led a delegation to the border, visiting victims’ families, NGO activists, public officials, and gruesome sites where bodies were found. That visit spurred a great deal of media coverage in print and televised form. She introduced a bipartisan resolution in Congress that encouraged U.S.-
involvement in binational solutions, House Resolution 466, with three Republican and five Democratic co-sponsors (Solis 2004).

Other universities also organized events that made the murders visible and extended the pressure on governments to act. In April 2003, Arizona State University-West sponsored the conference, “Gender, Justice, and the Border.” Students and faculty members decorated 320 dresses, each for a victim, and hung them on 320 crosses, three-feet tall, in the central campus courtyard. (Several dresses moved to the month-long exhibit in the UTEP Library commemorating Day of the Dead, October 2003.) From late October through November 2, the University of California at Los Angeles hosted a conference, “Maquiladora Murders,” that drew over a thousand participants, with a range of speakers, from experts to victims’ families and activists from both sides of the border (http://chavez.ucla.edu/maqui_murders). Under the banner of Operacion Digna (named after Digna Ochoa, assassinated human rights lawyer), cyber activists, particularly Coco Fusco at Columbia University, organized a “floodnet” on Mexican government agencies, felt strongly enough for a lengthy fax to be sent to conference organizers and summarized at the event on promises for new coordinative bodies (FN 2003).

In Mexico, President Fox spoke out against the murders and appointed new federal officials and intergovernmental coordinated investigations. New attention focused on Juarez in early 2004 when buried bodies were found in Juarez backyards, prompting the removal of complicit state police and binational attention (including the Texas Governor Perry’s order to make the canine patrol available, heretofore unavailable for the murders of girls and women). Investigative reports from the Dallas Morning News publicized articles about victims “abducted,
raped, and killed to ‘celebrate’ successful drug runs” and once again, implicated police
complicity (Corchado and Sandoval 2004).

But the most visible attention to the murders of girls and women came during V-Week
and especially V-Day on February 14, 2004. Students at the University of Texas at El Paso
organized a day-long conference, men’s workshops, art exhibits, and film series during the week
prior to V-Day. On V-Day itself, an estimated 5,000-8,000 marchers crossed the border from El
Paso to Juarez in solidarity with victims of violence. This was the largest march across the
border in the region’s history. Many people came from outside the border region, as did
reporters from as far away as Europe. Celebrities from both Mexico and the U.S. performed
from the Vagina Monologues. Eve Ensler wrote an additional monologue, about the murders in
Juarez, and it was performed at the border and over 1,000 cities around the world. This
monologue will be a permanent feature in future dramatic productions (www.vday.org).

This chronological analysis from the birth of cross-border organizing and its maturing
growth over time, outlines how cross-border activists helped moved the local, regional border
organizing into national and international organizing around the murders of girls and women in
Ciudad Juarez. By 2003, the cross-border groups continued to demonstrate grounded expertise,
but national and international networks overwhelmed those efforts and strengthened the process
of making the murders visible and pressing governments for binational solutions. But for all
moves forward, backlashes also emerged and resistance continued. The business community has
yet to respond visibly, save to blame organizing for fewer tourists in downtown Juarez and for
the movement of maquiladora jobs to China (a movement caused by many factors, the most
prominent being the lower costs of labor). Mainstream academic literature has been slim, save a sentence in Bailey and Chabat (2002: 45). And the murders continue.

**Conclusions and Strategies for Change**

Cross-border organizing is an expression of civil society organizing and struggling to deepen democracy in problematic spaces, such as the U.S.-Mexico border where accountability relationships are rendered complex with the existence of national sovereignties and multiple institutions. Additional complications include threats and intimidation to activists, lack of police professionalism, and low priorities for problems that women and poor people face. Although NAFTA and numerous bilateral agreements form institutional shrouds that provide policy leverage and resources/subsidies for activists and officials to address common North American problems at borders, such shrouds do not exist for human rights and public safety. Binational cooperation has begun with several tentative steps, but much remains to be done if rule of law will prevail and all people secure access to justice in the region.

Regional, national, and international strategies for change are recommended below, into several categories. They include short- and long-term actions for Mexico, the U.S., and the North American region generally.

In Mexico, activists should demand federal involvement in decade-old unsolved murders of girls and women. Such involvement is authorized under the 1996 Federal Law Against Organized Crime. Activists should also press to use federal revenue-sharing incentives to encourage reform at state and local levels, (a long-standing tradition in Mexico [Rodriguez
such as the 2003 freedom of information laws of 2003, now operating solely at the federal level; professionalism in state and local police operations; and domestic-violence training for police; and gender-disaggregated data on all sexual assaults and domestic violence for better reporting and oversight capabilities.

In Ciudad Juarez and Chihuahua, the government should fund battered women’s shelters. Until 2004, none existed in Ciudad Juarez. Oversight over and accountability from state agencies should emanate from state legislators, as well as from civil society. NGOs should have a voice not only in selecting the director of the Instituto de la Mujer, but also in deciding the Institute’s priorities and budgetary spending.

Rule of law does not exist in Mexico. To extend legal accountability, legal reformers should extend the ability of the *amparo* to provide collective justice in a class-action format that requires systemic policy and institutional change in cases of serious intransigence, such as hundreds of poorly investigated deaths. Citizens should be able to file civil lawsuits against intransigent police departments, for monetary damage, or reparations and damage payments should be provided to all victims’ families, not just those the government curries favor with, in the form of the long-standing ‘stipends’ in Mexico’s cooptation-based system. Sporadic anti-corruption measures need strengthening with independent agencies which have enforcement powers. Torture and forced confessions should stop. Legal literacy campaigns should clearly lay out the legal terrain of reports, complaints, charges, investigations and court procedures so that all citizens can understand and access the system. Beyond that, streamlining complex steps
may be in order, just as they emerged for businesses seeking ‘one-stop shops’ for licenses and regulations.

Binational strategies are also important mechanisms for accountability. Activists should maintain civic pressure in both Mexico and the U.S. on the justice system and its seriously flawed lack of professionalism over the murders of girls and women in Cd. Juarez through high-visibility events, media attention, and symbols. Both activists and policymakers should connect violence against women with public safety and public health policy actions and academic research. Civic coalitions should expand from not only human rights activists, but also to those interested in economic development, for the chaos and violence of the border region could deter stable investments.

Binational solutions should be funded with adequate resources to do pursue several strategies. Resources should be available to police departments and federal investigation agencies in training, laboratory and DNA testing facilities, and tip lines. Maquiladora managers should analyze workplace safety to include surrounding areas, security guards and drivers, including those subcontracted. This would involve background checks and routine drug tests for drivers of company buses on which potential female victims ride. Managers should examine rigid schedules that force employees to exit if late, rather than face time deductions that have sent young workers to their death (as in the Leer Company case). Maquiladora managers could also fund workshops and self-defense classes for employees.
Public school curricula should integrate anti-domestic violence and anti-sexual violence themes for male and female students. Criminal hyper-masculinity should be publicly criticized and no longer tolerated or celebrated as cultural.

Institutional shrouds, with resources and enforcement capabilities, are essential for public security at borders. A strong Human Rights Treaty for the North American region is essential.

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