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Mexico Replies to Juarez with Anti-Violence Law

By Lorraine Orlandi, WeNews Correspondent

Mexico has implemented sweeping national legislation aimed at stamping out widespread violence against women. Advocates see the law as a response to the scores of unsolved Juarez slayings and hope it will end an era of impunity.



Patty Cervantes holds photo of murdered daughter Neyra.

Credit: Nadav Neuhaur / WPN.

MEXICO CITY (WOMENSENEWS) – Nineteen-year-old Lea Gomez was raped and knifed to death in February after moving with her young family to Ciudad Juarez on Mexico’s U.S. border from her hometown in southern Mexico.

She was the latest victim among some 400 women murdered in and around the city since 1993, in a grisly pattern seen as emblematic of gender-based violence across the country.

Her three daughters, between 4 months and 4 years old, were at home when a neighbor broke in, assaulted Gomez and slashed her throat while her husband worked at his factory job, Chihuahua state prosecutors say. The neighbor, facing rape and aggravated murder charges, confessed to killing her but denied the sexual assault and said they were lovers. Her 4-year-old walked out the front door afterward and was found hours later in the streets.

“She was cut up in front of her children. How can this happen?” Pilar Sanchez, a women’s activist working with victims’ families in Juarez, wondered aloud a few days later, her voice cracking.

Nearly 15 years after local rights workers began documenting the Juarez murders, the body count keeps rising and most of the crimes remain unsolved.

New Law Establishes Protective Tools

But a new national law confronts the brutality there and around Mexico, where attacks on women are multiplying. Passed in February, it calls for integrated federal, state and local programs involving Mexican police, the courts, media, schools and other sectors to identify and combat violence against women. It gives Mexico's Interior Ministry power to declare a state of alert on an outbreak of gender violence to coordinate an emergency response among federal and local police, the courts and other agencies.

It contains measures to protect women, such as removing an aggressor from the household in the case of domestic violence. Although such protections already exist in many states, the law seeks to unify the approach.

State and municipal governments must develop laws and programs within six months to reduce gender-based violence and punish abusers. The federal law also calls for a national education campaign, the creation of a central data bank on specific cases of violence against women, periodic nationwide diagnostic studies to measure the extent of such violence and a stronger network of women's shelters. It mandates gender training for police, prosecutors and other officials.

Even proponents admit the law has flaws, but they say it already is focusing unprecedented attention on a scourge of gender-based violence that has been downplayed in Mexico. Radio and TV stations are airing ads sponsored by the legislature and warning that domestic abuse will be punished and crediting federal lawmakers for that gain.

"I should no longer have to work to convince local prosecutors to do gender perspective training," said Alicia Elena Perez Duarte, the federal prosecutor overseeing the Juarez murder file. "Before, they could decide that a woman's complaint of psychological abuse by her husband was not important and send her home with this macho idea that she should work it out with him. With training, they see that the outcome could be more violence or even her death."

She says 75 percent of women murdered in Mexico die at the hands of their husbands.

Juarez Murders Still Unsolved

In Juarez, the influx of poor, young women to work in maquiladora assembly plants, the flow of migrant traffic toward the border, police corruption and pervasive sexism all are seen as factors in the attacks and the failure to solve them. Yet for years the killings were not investigated as mass, gender-based attacks, although many involved sexual abuse.

Proponents of the February law say it marks a watershed for Latin America in making violence against women an issue of national priority in a country where, on average, four women and girls are murdered daily, according to 2004 data from the National Institute of Statistics and Geographical Information.

“This victory is the fruit of an insistent struggle by so many women for years,” said Sanchez, who works at Casa Amiga in Ciudad Juarez, a crisis center for victims and their families. Sanchez was among the rights activists and legal experts from around the country who helped shape the legislation during more than two years. Federal lawmakers including Marcela Lagarde, a leading feminist whose legislative term ended last year, pushed the bill in the Congress, where it eventually won near unanimous, multi-party support.

After more than a decade of botched criminal investigations in Juarez, victims’ relatives are guarded about the law.

“It’s a start,” said Marisela Ortiz, who helped found Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa (Our Daughters Back Home) for victims’ families after her 17-year-old goddaughter was killed in 2001. “But in Ciudad Juarez, many cases are not even being investigated, so against whom will this law be applied? There is an enormous lack of interest.”

New President Backed Law

President Felipe Calderon, sworn into office in December, backed the law despite fears among women’s groups that he would not ratify it.

Some lawyers argue the law may bump up against constitutional guarantees in granting the Interior Ministry extra powers, for instance. And the definitions of gender-based violence are too broad, they say.

“To tell sexist jokes in a bar is misogynous conduct that often goes unpunished. Is that femicide?” said Luis de la Barreda, the former Mexico City rights ombudsman and now director of a citizen-based legal center.

Armando Rodriguez, a reporter for El Diario newspaper of Juarez who has covered the killings there since they began, says new, harsher state prison sentences for homicides against women may already be helping to reduce the murder rate, although the incidence of rape is rising in Juarez.

He is haunted by the idea that Lea Gomez’s children saw her die. Like others who come face to face with the ongoing bloodshed in Juarez, he blames a host of ills from family instability in the transient city to a lack of crime-fighting resources.

“Above all, impunity kept generating these crimes,” he said. “It was a lot easier for an attacker to kill a woman than let her live.”

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