

Local Actors' Ability to Reform the International Human Rights Regime: Analyzing How Local Women's Groups in Argentina and Mexico Were Able to Reform the International Human Rights Regime to Protect Against Femicide and Disappearances

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to understand how local actors, forming part of the human rights movement, expand the protections of the international human rights regime to newly identified patterns of violations? By looking at how local women's groups in Argentina were able to expand protections against disappearances and how local women's groups in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico did the same for femicide, this paper will explore three strategies that, in combination, can do just that. The first strategy refers to the identification and documentation by local groups of a violation pattern previously not protected by the human rights regime. The goal of the second strategy is to call international attention to the pattern and, concomitantly, form international connections within the human rights regime and movement. Through the third strategy, local groups strengthen or create human rights mechanisms to protect newly identified rights. These actions can expand the regime's protections by developing or reinterpreting existing law, creating or strengthening monitoring mechanisms to oversee compliance, and adding the violation to the human rights movement's agenda.

INTRODUCTION

During the second half of the last century, a plethora of international human rights treaties began the process of creating international human rights law.¹ This development made the individual subject to international law, established human rights standards, and began to erode some of the jealously guarded state sovereignty that had previously structured international relations.² Additionally, in order to oversee compliance with the treaties, international human rights law created monitoring mechanisms. This provided state and non-state actors with the opportunity to take cases regarding the status of human rights in a particular country before the international community. In this way, international human rights law has become a powerful tool to pressure

¹ Hafner-Burton, Emilie M. (2012). "International Regimes for Human Rights." *Annual Review of Political Science*. Vol. 15. Pp. 265-286
<http://www.annualreviews.org.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/doi/abs/10.1146/annurev-polisci-031710-114414>

² Foot, Rosemary. (2000). *Rights Beyond Borders: The Global Community and the Struggle Over Human Rights in China*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press

governments to improve their human rights behavior.³ The creation of human rights law, and the actors who try to enforce it through various strategies, have led to the development of a complex international human rights regime made up of various evolving parts.⁴ With law at the center of this regime, a human rights movement monitors compliance and, in the process, strengthens human rights norms. The human rights movement is made up of local, national, international, state and non-state actors and focuses largely on compliance.⁵ However, it also works to promote and strengthen human rights standards, improve compliance through the regime's numerous monitoring mechanisms, and expand the protections granted through the human rights regime.⁶

This paper seeks to understand this last point. How do local actors, forming part of the human rights movement, expand the protections of the international human rights regime to newly identified patterns of violations? By looking at two cases, this paper will explore three strategies that, in combination, do just that. The first strategy refers to the identification and documentation by local groups of a violation pattern previously not protected by the human rights regime. The goal of the second strategy is to call international attention to the pattern and, concomitantly, form international connections within the human rights regime and movement. Through the third strategy, local groups strengthen or create human rights mechanisms to protect newly identified rights. These actions can expand the regime's protections by developing or reinterpreting existing law, creating or strengthening monitoring mechanisms to oversee compliance, and adding the violation to the human rights movement's agenda. The first case study explores how local women's groups in Argentina, specifically the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, were able to expand protections against disappearances. The second case study will analyze how local women's groups in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico did the same for femicide.

I will present an overview of disappearances and femicide, describe how they challenged the protections provided by the human rights regime, provide a short history of the

³ Hafner-Burton, Emilie. M. (2013). *Making Human Rights a Reality*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press

⁴ Donnelly, Jack. (1986). "International Human Rights: A Regime Analysis." *International Organizations*. Vol. 40. No. 3. Pp. 599-642 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2706821>

⁵ Neier, Aryeh. (2009). *The International Human Rights Movement: A History*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press

⁶ Medina, Cecilia. (1994). "A More Effective Guarantee of the Enjoyment of Human Rights by Women in the Inter-American System." In Rebecca Cook (Ed.), *Human Rights of Women: National and International Perspectives*. P. 257. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press

violations, and a cursory synopsis of the level and nature of the violations in the cases at hand. The local actors studied in this paper will also be identified. This section seeks to place these women's groups and the violations in question within their historical and local context. In the next section I will look at how these actors played an incredibly active role in identifying disappearances and femicide by gathering evidence and documentation of the pattern. Then the ways this documentation was used to call international attention to the violations and to form international connections, is examined. Through these connections, local groups advanced various strategies to end the violations and, in the process, reformed the human rights regime, as discussed.

Finally, this paper highlights how local actors can play important roles in expanding the protections granted under the human rights regime. The impact of these roles can be intentional or unintentional. In other words, while it is important to study the actual goals behind local mobilizations, and if they are able to succeed in meeting them, it is just as important to analyze the inadvertent effects of their actions. I make this caveat because neither of these local groups initially mobilized to expand the human rights regime. They mobilized as a result of a violation that affected them directly and asked the authorities for truth, justice, and protection. When they failed to receive it, they began to interact with the human rights movement and regime. In so doing, these groups identified and addressed a weakness within the human rights regime. The original goal of these mobilizations may not have been to reform the regime, but they did, and it is important to understand how.

I VIOLATIONS AND GROUPS IN QUESTION

This section will explore the patterns of violations in question, and the women's groups that mobilized in order to call attention to them. It will begin with an overview of disappearances and femicide, and then describe what makes them different from other human rights violations protected by the human rights regime at the time. Within this overview, a short history of the violations will be provided, as well as a cursory synopsis of the level and nature of the violations in the cases at hand. Subsequently, the women's groups studied in this paper will be identified, and the decision to analyze these groups over other relevant actors will be explained. This section will be used to situate the women's groups and the violations within their historical and local

context. It will also be used in subsequent sections to analyze the ability of local groups to reform the human rights regime.

Disappearances

The pattern encapsulated by this term refers to the kidnapping of a suspected subversive person, usually by a plain-clothed government official, and the transfer of the victim to a secret detention center. The individual is usually tortured, murdered, and his/her body is disposed of in remote places or clandestine graves. The additional level of callousness is inflicted on the families of the victims because the state generally denies having the missing person in their custody, which leaves them with no answers as to the whereabouts of their family members.⁷

Disappearances are made up of human rights violations that are protected under international human rights law, like the right to life or the right to be free from torture.⁸ However, the pattern of being kidnaped, tortured, and murdered, all with a veil of secrecy and denial by the responsible government officials, was not explicitly protected as a human right at the time.⁹ Nonetheless, it was important to identify and document the pattern because the direct link to the government was not as clear as in other violations and because the onus fell on the families to prove that their loved ones were missing.¹⁰ This would push the human rights regime to expand the responsibility of the state in cases where the connection was not strong. Additionally, the lack of a direct connection meant that gathering information and calling attention to the pattern was essential.¹¹ In this way, working to end disappearances occurred on two levels: first, denouncing cases of disappearance; and second, raising awareness of what disappearance meant as a human rights violation and pressuring the human rights regime to expand its protection to include provisions against disappearances. Defining disappearances was an important task because the

⁷ Fisher, Jo. (1989). *Mothers of the Disappeared*. Boston, Massachusetts: South End Press

⁸ Flood, Patrick J. (1998). *The Effectiveness of United Nations Human Rights Institutions*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press

⁹ Clark, Ann Marie. (2001). *Diplomacy of Conscience: Amnesty International and Changing Human Rights Norms*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press

¹⁰ Navarro, Marysa. (2001). "The Personal is Political: Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo." In Susan Eckstein (Ed.), *Power and Popular Protests: Latin American Social Movements*. P. 241. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press

¹¹ Malin, Andrea. (1994). "Mothers Who Won't Disappear." *Human Rights Quarterly*. Vol. 16. No. 1 Pp. 187-213 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/762416>

way a problem is defined affects how it is addressed.¹²

Argentina was neither the first nor, unfortunately, the last to use disappearances in an effort to quash political opposition. Many states continue to disappear, people, today, and although the level and systemic nature of disappearances in Argentina were extreme compared to its neighbors, other countries have met the brutality of the Argentine military junta.¹³ In the region, disappearances in mass-scale were seen in Guatemala as early as 1966. Yet, these cases did not cause any mass protest by relevant human rights actors. Additionally, disappearances were reported to have occurred after Chile's military coup d'état in 1973. Nonetheless, it was not until they began in Argentina that systemic efforts to call attention to them and reform the human rights regime really took place.¹⁴ From a global perspective, the pattern itself has a long history. It can be traced back to Nazi-occupied Europe, where opposition to Nazi rule was quashed by disappearing resistance actors, rather than trying them in open court. Devised by Adolf Hitler in 1941, the "*Nacht Und Nebel Erlass*" (Night and Fog Decree) was used in order to avoid creating "martyrs" of publically tried and killed resistance leaders.¹⁵

In Argentina, disappearances began before the military coup d'état that took place in March 1976. The 1960s had seen a rise in guerrilla mobilization around the world and Argentina was no exception. Despite the return to democratic rule in 1973, paramilitary groups working in conjunction with the military began to kidnap suspected revolutionaries. Nevertheless, while disappearances were used under President Isabel Peron, they became much more vicious and systemic upon the re-installation of the military junta in 1976. The military sought to end the perceived communist threat from several revolutionary groups from the left.¹⁶ The threat these groups posed as a result of their use of urban terrorism was used by the military to justify its highly organized system of human rights violations.¹⁷ According to an Americas Watch investigation, however, the number of these groups' adherents and supporters would have never

¹² Ann Marie Clark

¹³ Human Rights Watch. (2013). "Mexico's Disappeared: The enduring cost of a crisis ignored." <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2013/02/20/mexicos-disappeared>

¹⁴ Ann Marie Clark

¹⁵ Andrea Malin

¹⁶ Jo Fisher

¹⁷ Guzman Bouvard, Marguerite. (1994). *Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers of the Plaza De Mayo*. Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources Inc.

reached levels that could have posed a serious threat to the government.¹⁸ The breadth of those who were disappeared also changed after 1976. While it is believed that most subversives were killed before the coup, the government continued to disappear people.¹⁹ Anyone perceived to have an unwelcome social conscience was at risk of being disappeared.²⁰

Somewhere between 9,000-30,000 people are believed to have been disappeared according to the Truth Commission report “*Nunca Más: Informe de la Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas*” (“Never Again: Report by the National Commission on the Disappeared”). Most were between the ages of 16-35 and more than 300 clandestine detention centers were established around the country. The worst period of repression occurred during the first year of military rule and decreased until the military left power in 1983.²¹ The monopoly of information relating to the whereabouts, fate, and the number of disappeared was in the hands of the military, and it did not easily relinquish its control.²²

Within this context, women’s groups mobilized and called attention to the disappearances of their children and other relatives. The battle they would face in unearthing the dark and clandestine world of disappearances was filled with repression and harassment. However, as we will see in this paper, they were successful in their ability to reform the human rights regime to address this pattern of violations.

Femicide

Violence against women, or gender violence, can take innumerable forms.²³ Thus, in order to understand the violation that mobilized the women’s groups, we will be analyzing, this paper will focus on a type of gender violence referred to as femicide. Femicide is the most extreme

¹⁸ Méndez, Juan E. (1991). “Truth and Partial Justice in Argentina: An Update.” New York, New York: Americas Watch

¹⁹ Roniger, Luis and Sznajder, Mario. (1999). *The Legacy of Human-Rights Violations in the Southern-Cone: Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay*. New York, New York: Oxford University Press

²⁰ Marguerite Guzman Bouvard

²¹ Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas (1984). *Nunca Más: Informe De La Comisión Nacional Sobre La Desaparición De Personas*. Argentina: Eudeba

²² Cleary, Edward L. (1997). *The Struggle for Human Rights in Latin America*. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers

²³ Tiroch, Katrin. (2010). “Violence against Women by Private Actors: The Inter-American Court’s Judgment in the Case of Gonzalez et al. (‘Cotton Field’) v. Mexico.” *Max Planck Yearbook of United Nations Law*. Vol. 14. Pp. 371-408 http://www.mpil.de/files/pdf3/mpunyb_09_tiroch_14.pdf

form of gender violence. It describes the violence inflicted on a victim before and leading up to her death. Femicide is committed by men and shows the victims' vulnerability to violence as a result of social and political conditions that create unequal gender power structures.²⁴ The state is responsible for femicidal violence, either because it was committed by a state official or because the state did not try to prevent, investigate, or prosecute the crime.²⁵ Thus, femicide implicates both the perpetrators and the state.²⁶

According to femicide scholars Julia Estela Monárrez Fragoso, Pedro Diaz de la Vega Garcia and Patricia Morales Castro, there are various types of femicide. "Femicide of stigmatized occupations," for example, occurs when women are targeted for working in professions that are considered to invite violence or to be inappropriate for women. Various types of femicide occur in Ciudad Juárez, and they are usually expressive of more than one type. However, this paper will focus on "systemic sexual femicide" which describes the kidnapping, torture, rape, and murder of the victim. Her body, usually naked, is left in public places by the perpetrator as a symbol of the impunity he will receive or is hidden in order to inflict similar effects on the victim's relatives and community as state-orchestrated disappearances.²⁷

In many ways, femicide has similar components to disappearances: kidnappings, missing bodies, corpses found tortured and mutilated, denial by officials of any knowledge, impunity, and families searching for loved ones. The difference lies in that, in most cases, private individuals commit femicidal violence and victims are exclusively women.²⁸ Nonetheless, the

²⁴ Badilla, Ana Elena. (2008). *Femicidio: más allá de la violación del derecho a la vida. Análisis de los derechos violados y las responsabilidades estatales en los casos del femicidio de Ciudad Juárez*. San José, Costa Rica: Instituto Interamericano de Derechos Humanos

²⁵ Lagarde y de los Rios, Marcela. (2010). "Feminist Keys for Understanding Femicide: Theoretical, Political, and Legal Construction." In Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano (Eds.), *Terrorizing Women: Femicide in the Americas*. P. xi. (Sara Koopman, Trans.) Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press

²⁶ Fregoso, Rosa-Linda and Cynthia Bejarano. (2010). "A Cartography of Femicide in the Americas." In Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano (Eds.), *Terrorizing Women: Femicide in the Americas*. P. 1. (Sara Koopman, Trans.) Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press

²⁷ Carmona Lopez, Adriana, Alma Gomez Caballero, and Lucha Castro Rodriguez. (2010). "Femicide in Latin America and the Movement for Women's Human Rights." In Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano (Eds.), *Terrorizing Women: Femicide in the Americas*. P. 157. (Sara Koopman, Trans.) Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press

²⁸ Ensalaco, Mark (2006). "Murder in Ciudad Juarez: A Parable of Women's Struggle for Human Rights." *Violence Against Women*. 12.5. Pp. 417-40
<http://vaw.sagepub.com/content/12/5/417.full.pdf+html>

state's responsibility is central to femicide's definition and, as a result, challenges several aspects of the human rights regime. First, femicide pushes the regime to protect rights, regardless of who commits the violation. Like disappearances, the direct link between the state and femicide is not as easily apparent. Nevertheless, it is there, because the state has the obligation under international human rights law to protect women from violence and investigate and prosecute those who subject her to violence.²⁹ Second, like disappearances, femicide involves a pattern of violence that encompasses various types of human rights violations: right to life, personal integrity, right to non-discrimination before the law, and others.³⁰ This also creates a need for identification and documentation of the pattern.

Femicide existed before Ciudad Juárez, and sadly, continues around the world. Similar patterns of violence have appeared throughout Mexico.³¹ Latin America, in general, has also witnessed a growth in femicide. Guatemala has reported an incredibly high number, but other states like Argentina, Bolivia, Columbia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, and Honduras have all reported femicide cases. However, Ciudad Juárez was instrumental in capturing international attention and has been extremely influential in the identification of femicide as a type of human rights violation.³²

Beginning in 1993, women's bodies began to appear throughout Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. Victims showed signs of torture, mutilation, and rape.³³ Much was initially said about common traits among the victims. However, these patterns were quickly proven wrong as more bodies were found. Some were local women, others were immigrants; some worked at *maquiladoras* (factories); others were students or were employed in various types of occupations;³⁴ some shared physical characteristics and age similarities; no trait was universal. Most, however, were Mexican

²⁹ Cynthia Bejarano. (2013). "Memory of Struggle in Ciudad Juárez: Mothers' Resistance and Transborder Activism in the Case of the Campo Algodonero." *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* Vol. 38. No.1. Pp.189-204 <http://www.metapress.com/content/05873wg4n76v22v1/fulltext.pdf>

³⁰ Ana Elena Badilla

³¹ Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano

³² Adriana Carmona Lopez, Alma Gomez Caballero, and Lucha Castro Rodriguez

³³ Quintana, Victor M. (2011). "La Sociedad Civil Organizada de Chihuahua Ante la Inseguridad y la Violencia (1988-2010)." In Victor Orozco (Ed.), *Chihuahua HOY 2011: Visiones De Su Historia, Economía, Política y Cultura*, Vol. 9. P. 149. Ciudad Juárez, Mexico: Lazer Quality Print

³⁴ Araluce, Olga Aikin. (2011). *Activismo social transnacional: un análisis en torno a los femicidios en Ciudad Juárez*. Ciudad Juárez, México: Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez

and poor. In the end, the one thing they all had in common was that they were women who died unimaginably heinous deaths.³⁵ Unlike disappearances, femicide implies, by its very nature, that there are no survivors.³⁶ Similar to what relatives of disappeared victims went through in Argentina, family members of femicide victims in Ciudad Juárez have been met with a lack of due diligence and violence in their search for truth and justice. Police have been criticized for giving conflicting versions of events, asking for bribes in order to investigate, fabricating and losing evidence, not testing rape kits, blaming the victims, and coercing confessions from alleged perpetrators.³⁷ This has led to a lack of trust in the veracity of the few guilty verdicts that have been given out.³⁸ On occasion, families have been given human remains that turned out not to be those of their daughters. This happened to two of the eight families of women in the “Cotton Field” case, which we will see later in this paper.³⁹ Additionally, families have been victims of threats and violence for pressuring police and government officials to conduct investigations.⁴⁰ Frustratingly, public officials’ initial response was to blame the victims, a tone repeated by patriarchal groups like the Catholic Church and local businesses that feared the protests and attention would hurt the city’s economy.⁴¹

The Mexican state has engaged in an unfortunate and time-consuming war over the number of women killed or disappeared as a result of femicidal violence. Some sources report that hundreds of bodies have been found and thousands more have been reported missing.⁴² According to an Amnesty International investigation published in 2003, the number of femicide

³⁵ Gaspar de Alba, Alicia and Georgina Guzman. (2010). “Femicidio: The ‘Black Legend’ of the Border.” In Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Georgina Guzman (Eds.), *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade, and La Frontera*. P. 1. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press

³⁶ Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano

³⁷ Staudt, Kathleen and Irasema Coronado. (2010). “Binational Civic Action for Accountability: Antiviolence Organizing in Ciudad Juarez/El Paso.” In Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Georgina Guzman (Eds.), *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade, and La Frontera*. P. 157. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press

³⁸ Adriana Carmona Lopez, Alma Gomez Caballero, and Lucha Castro Rodriguez

³⁹ Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Georgina Guzman

⁴⁰ Cynthia Bejarano (2013)

⁴¹ Monárrez-Fargoso, Julia E. (2010). “The Suffering of the Other.” In Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Georgina Guzman (Eds.), *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade, and La Frontera*. P. 183. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press

⁴² Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Georgina Guzman

deaths between 1993-2003 was 370.⁴³ However, in a more recent report, Amnesty International cited 320 deaths in 2010 alone, showing a steep increase since 2003.⁴⁴ Adriana Carmona Lopez, Alma Gomez Caballero, and Lucha Castro Rodriguez have deduced that systemic sexual femicide accounts for 33.9% of all female homicides in Ciudad Juárez between 1993-2005.⁴⁵ This is also similar to the figure presented by Kathleen Staudt, showing that femicide deaths account for 1/3 of murdered women in Ciudad Juárez.⁴⁶ In its judgment on the “Cotton Field” case, the Inter-American Court for Human Rights acknowledged at least 264 victims up to 2001 and 379 up to 2005.⁴⁷ In the end, while the number of dead bodies found is high, the number of women who have been reported missing is astronomical.⁴⁸

It took almost a decade for the news of femicide deaths to reach international audiences and for human rights actors to frame them as femicide.⁴⁹ Like disappearances, the first to uncover the pattern and similarities among the various cases were the victim’s relatives and local human rights actors. Thus, in the next two sections, we will explore who these groups were, and which ones will be the focus of this paper.

Women’s Groups- Argentina

This paper will focus on the role the Madres de Plaza de Mayo (Madres) played in challenging and changing the human rights regime to protect against disappearances. The Madres are one of the most recognizable human rights groups in Argentina. However, before the disappearances of their children, they were mostly housewives and were largely apolitical.⁵⁰ As Iain Guest explains,

⁴³ Amnesty International. (2003). “Mexico Intolerable Killings: Ten Years of Abductions and Murders in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua.” <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AMR41/027/2003>

⁴⁴ Amnesty International. (2012). “Mexico’ Briefing to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women.” http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/docs/ngos/AmnestyInternationalForTheSessionMexico_CEDAW52.pdf

⁴⁵ Adriana Carmona Lopez, Alma Gomez Caballero, and Lucha Castro Rodriguez

⁴⁶ Staudt, Kathleen. (2008). *Violence and Activism at the Border: Gender, Fear and Everyday Life in Ciudad Juárez*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press

⁴⁷ Katrin Tiroch

⁴⁸ Muller, Carol, Michelle Hansen, and Karen Qualtire. (2009). “Femicide on the Border & New Forms of Protest: the International Caravan for Justice.” In Kathleen Staudt, Tony Payan, & Z. Anthony Kruszewski (Eds.), *Human Rights Along the U.S.-Mexico Border: Gendered Violence and Insecurity*. P. 125. Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press

⁴⁹ Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Georgina Guzman

⁵⁰ Marguerite Guzman Bouvard and Jo Fisher

the disappearance of their children was “an invasion of the women’s domain.”⁵¹ It brought women into the public sphere in search of their missing children and helped create one of the most renowned human rights movements of its time.⁵²

The apolitical origin of the Madres helped them stand out in more ways than one. For example, it made them inadvertently brave in openly challenging the state’s use of disappearances during the most repressive years of the military rule.⁵³ Additionally, it was a strong factor in garnering international support from the emerging human rights network that did not want to be limited by the political polarity permeating international relations during the Cold War. On another note, their identity as the mothers of the missing children gave them first-hand legitimacy to speak for the disappeared.⁵⁴ As mothers of disappeared victims, they too became victims of the disappearance.⁵⁵ Furthermore, while other groups existed, the Madres were able to serve as a powerful symbol of the families torn apart by the government’s use of disappearances.⁵⁶ Finally, it is important to note that many have recognized the brave efforts of the Madres, especially during the return to democracy. It was noted, for example, in the report “Never Again: Report by the National Commission on the Disappeared”:

“We cannot omit reference here to the dreadful treatment and persistent persecution of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. They suffered all kinds of threats, aggression and even abduction of some of their members, for the sole crime of asking to see their children come back alive. In the blackest moments of the dictatorship, they became the civic conscience of the nation.”⁵⁷

The perception, therefore, of the Madres as key human rights actors in Argentina permits

⁵¹ P. 54. Guest, Iain. (1990). *Behind the Disappearances: Argentina's Dirty War Against the Human Rights and the United Nations*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press

⁵² Marysa Navarro

⁵³ Marguerite Guzman Bouvard

⁵⁴ Agosin, Marjorie. (1990). “Background to a Holocaust: 1976-1983.” *The Mothers of the Plaza De Mayo (Línea Fundadora): The Story of Renée Epelbaum 1976-1985*. (Janice Molloy, Trans.). Trenton, New Jersey: The Red Sea Press, Inc.

⁵⁵ Brysk, Alison. (1993). “From Above and Below: Social Movements, the International System, and Human Rights in Argentina.” *Comparative Political Studies*. Vol. 26. Num. 3. Pp. 259-285.

<http://cps.sagepub.com/content/26/3/259>

⁵⁶ Marjorie Agosin

⁵⁷ Part III Section D, Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas

the selective highlighting of their efforts in reforming the human rights regime.

Women's Groups- Mexico

Unlike the Madres in Argentina, victims' relatives in Ciudad Juárez differed among themselves and experienced various conflicts over strategies, activities, and goals. Mothers and other female relatives formed various organizations to demand justice and call awareness to femicidal violence, and feminist and women's organizations pursued their fight against femicide through different tactics. Therefore, it is not useful to single out one group, like it was with the Madres. For this reason, this paper will focus on the efforts of local women and family groups. This includes organizations comprised of mothers and other largely female relatives of the victims, as well as the feminist and women's organizations that predate them. I will refer to them as the anti-femicide groups. In this section, we will survey some of these organizations and the general focus of their work. Then, we will briefly mention some of the internal conflicts that resulted in various actors pursuing different strategies in their work.

Feminist groups began to form in the 1980s throughout the state of Chihuahua and were among the first to keep records of the femicide deaths. Of these groups, *Grupo 8 de Marzo* (Group 8th of March) and its leader Esther Chavez played a huge role in compiling news clippings and reports of dead or missing women.⁵⁸ The first group of mothers and relatives, *Voces Sin Eco* (Voices Without Echo), formed in 1998. It disbanded in 2001 due to internal conflicts and divisions fomented by government authorities, but were the first sign of unity among the victims' families and helped connect relatives to local human rights groups and union leaders.⁵⁹ The early 2000s saw a steady increase in more organized family groups including: *Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa* (May Our Daughters Return Home) and *Justicia para Nuestras Hijas* (Justice for Our Daughters).⁶⁰ *Mujeres de Negro* (Women in Black), an umbrella organization for multiple groups working on the issue of femicide and violence against women, has also played an important role in the anti-femicide efforts. Finally, Esther Chavez from *Grupo 8 de Marzo* founded *Casa Amiga* (My Friend's House) in 1998 to address the emotional and legal needs of

⁵⁸ Victor M. Quintana

⁵⁹ Olga Aikin Araluce (2011)

⁶⁰ Ravelo Blancas, Patricia. (2004). "Entre las Protestas Callejeras y las Acciones Internacionales. Diez Años de Activismo por la Justicia Social en Ciudad Juárez." *El Cotidiano* Vol. 19, Num. 125 Pp. 21-32 <http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=32512503>

women who have experienced violence and families of femicide victims.⁶¹

Internal divisions amongst local actors were the result of a combination of frustration amongst the various anti-femicide groups.⁶² There was frustration by some groups that felt pressured by others to reframe the problem of femicide as a symptom of the greater problem of violence in Ciudad Juárez.⁶³ Most groups were harassed and divided by authorities and unknown groups.⁶⁴ Additionally, feminists were criticized by family groups for framing femicide as one of many forms of violence against women that should be fought.⁶⁵ Nonetheless, these have resulted in a combination of strategies that together have pushed the human rights regime to protect women against femicide.⁶⁶ Furthermore, in some of their most visible efforts, differences have been put aside and groups have worked together.

SUMMARY

In this section, we defined the pattern of violations identified by women's groups. Both disappearances and femicide reflected a combination of human rights violations that pushed the boundaries of what the human rights regime was established to protect. Additionally, by providing a brief history of each case, this section sought to place these women's groups within their historical and local context. This will be useful in the next sections, where we will analyze the ability of such groups to reform the human rights regime. The next section will focus on how these groups identified disappearances and femicide, which is essential to begin to reform the human rights regime.

⁶¹ Victor M. Quintana

⁶² Martín, Alberto, Ana Fernández, and Karla Villarreal. (2008). "Activismo Transnacional y Calidad de la Democracia en México- Reflexiones en Torno al Caso de Ciudad Juárez." *Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe*. 84. April. Pp. 21-36 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25676305>

⁶³ Rojas, Clara Eugenia. (2005). "The 'V-Day' March in Mexico: Appropriation and Misuse of Local Women's Activism." *NWSA Journal*. Vol. 17. No. 2. Pp. 217-227. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4317142>

⁶⁴ Araluce, Olga Aikin. (2012). "La Agenda Del 'Femicidio' Durante La Administración De Vicente Fox: Un Estudio De Caso En Torno a La Presión Transnacional." *Relaciones Internacionales* 19. Pp. 27-55 <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1330860615/fulltextPDF?accountid=10226>

⁶⁵ Wright, Melissa W. (2006). "Field Note: Ciudad Juárez, Mexico." *The Feminist Press at the City University of New York* 34.1/2. Pp. 94-97 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40004738>

⁶⁶ Patricia Ravelo Blancas

II IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM

An important strategy for local actors to cause an impact, intentionally or unintentionally, is the collection of information used to identify a violation not protected by the human rights regime. In both of the cases we are examining, the groups in question played an incredibly active role in identifying the pattern of violations and gathering evidence and documentation. Thus, in this section, I will describe the ways in which these groups began to document the violations and push officials to do the same. This description will help to establish why these groups eventually adopted a new strategy of publically protesting the inaction by officials to end disappearances and femicide.

Argentina

As previously mentioned, disappearances were plagued with uncertainty. Little was known about the identity of the responsible parties, the reason someone was kidnapped, or where they were being held. Kidnappers, in most cases, wore civilian clothing and drove away in unofficial vehicles. There were no arrest warrants, and even if witnesses were available, the fear that disappearances created kept most onlookers silent.⁶⁷ The government held a monopoly on information regarding the disappeared and was willing to silence anyone who challenged this control.⁶⁸ Thus, the search for information and the burden of proof fell to the relatives of the disappeared and the human rights groups brave enough to help them.⁶⁹

In their search for information, relatives of the disappeared went to police stations, military garrisons, hospitals, jails, morgues, and anywhere else they thought their children could be.⁷⁰ The Madres met while waiting in lines at these places. There, they exchanged information and helped each other fill out *writs of habeas corpus*.⁷¹ It was soon clear; however, they would not receive information from the authorities.⁷² The Madres quickly realized that the government offices they were visiting were actually used by officials to gather intelligence from them. By asking the Madres who their children's friends were, what activities they participated in, and

⁶⁷ Arditti, Rita. (1999). *Searching for Life: the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Disappeared Children of Argentina*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press

⁶⁸ Marguerite Guzman Bouvard

⁶⁹ Andrea Malin

⁷⁰ Marguerite Guzman Bouvard

⁷¹ Iain Guest

⁷² Marjorie Agosin

other seemingly harmless questions, they were unwillingly providing them with information that would be used to identify potential targets for disappearances. This pushed them to create a division of labor among the Madres and an organized intelligence gathering system.⁷³

While few survived disappearances, those that did were quickly interviewed by the Madres to obtain knowledge of whom they had seen in detention, which of their children they knew to be dead, and what sort of systematic torture took place in the netherworld of the secret detention centers.⁷⁴ This access to first-hand information was helpful in leveraging support from international human rights organizations, like Amnesty International, whose legitimacy was based on their ability to obtain “factual” reports of human rights violations.⁷⁵ It was essential in identifying the mechanisms and extent of the pattern of disappearances and, as we will see in the next section, proved crucial in their efforts to call international attention to a seemingly invisible pattern of violations. The Madres that were not gathering evidence from survivors and witnesses were filling out *writs of habeas corpus* and spending their time in courts trying to get information. However, little was obtained from the court system or other government channels. In the first three years of the military junta’s rule, for example, human rights groups filed over 5,000 *writs of habeas corpus* with none resulting in any serious investigation.⁷⁶

The systemic mechanisms causing disappearances were starting to become clear as a result of these early efforts. Its magnitude and danger were all the more evident as harassment of the Madres increased and as all potential local channels of information and support began to close. During this early phase, which coincided with the worst period of repression, four of the Madres and some of their sympathizers were disappeared⁷⁷ and their organization was infiltrated.⁷⁸ The Madres, thus, realized they would need to capture international attention if they were going to be able to tackle the heinous pattern of disappearances. We will see that the Madres

⁷³ Marguerite Guzman Bouvard

⁷⁴ Marguerite Guzman Bouvard

⁷⁵ Hopgood, Stephen. (2006). *Keepers of the Flame: Understanding Amnesty International*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press

⁷⁶ Iain Guest

⁷⁷ Four Madres were disappeared, along with some of their sympathizers in 1977 (Mary Ponce, Esther Balestrina de Creaga, Sister Alicia Doman, Azucena de De Vincente, Sister Leonie-Duquet, and an artist that had worked with them). (See Bibliography: Marysa Navarro)

⁷⁸ Marguerite Guzman Bouvard

were able to disseminate this information very strategically and effectively to important actors, helping them reform the human rights regime.

Mexico

Like the Madres, mothers in Ciudad Juárez initially came together through the search for their missing or murdered children.⁷⁹ These mothers, together with feminist and women's organizations, have, thus, played an important role in identifying and documenting femicide. This was increasingly vital, as it became clear these cases were connected and the Mexican authorities had no interest in addressing them.

Initially, Mexican government officials accused the victims of being morally loose women who died or disappeared because they did not behave like good girls. Accusing victims of being out at bars, dressing provocatively, or associating with men,⁸⁰ Mexican authorities, at all levels, treating the deaths as random incidents, denying any pattern existed. This was detrimental to justice and protection for additional victims because how you define a pattern affects how you seek to address it. In other words, this response by the state was extremely damaging to women, as it did not seek to address any of the root causes of femicide. This attitude by government officials has also been evident in how police have dealt with femicide. When a woman has been declared missing by her family, authorities have generally refused to look for her, claiming the victim must have left by her own volition and was probably off doing drugs or with a boyfriend somewhere. This has left the family to prove the victim was actually kidnapped and in serious danger.⁸¹ Additionally, victims' families have been told by police to stop bothering them with questions and start buying the newspaper to find out if there is any news on their daughters' cases.⁸² Worse still, victims' families have been harassed and threatened by

⁷⁹ Bejarano, Cynthia. (2002). "Las Super Madres de Latino America: Transforming Motherhood by Challenging Violence in Mexico, Argentina, and El Salvador." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*. Vol. 23. Num. 1. Pp. 126-150

<http://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/frontiers/v023/23.1bejarano.html>

⁸⁰ Olga Aikin Araluce (2011)

⁸¹ Harrington, James C. (2010). "¡Alto a la Impunidad! Is There Legal Relief for the Murders of Women in Ciudad Juárez." In Hector Dominguez-Ruvalcaba and Ignacio Corona (Eds.), *Gender Violence at the U.S.-Mexico Border: Media Representation and Public Response*. P. 154. Tucson, Arizona: The University of Arizona Press

⁸² Ana Elena Badilla

the police.⁸³

When police have started investigations, critical evidence has been destroyed, lost, or ignored. Like the Madres, this has forced the anti-femicide groups to investigate what authorities refuse to.⁸⁴ Thus, documentation and lists of murdered or missing women began to be compiled, initially by feminist groups. Most important in this initial phase was Esther Chavez's organization, *Grupo 8 de Marzo*. Additionally, two of the most recognized and powerful family groups, *Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa* (NHRC) and *Justicia para Nuestras Hijas* (JPNH), continue to help families of the victims investigate their daughters' cases.⁸⁵ NHRC has provided legal workshops for families and JPNH has trained mothers of victims to be paralegals in order to investigate and document their daughters' cases. Thanks, in part, to the efforts of these organizations and other anti-femicide groups, families have been able to document and collect evidence on their daughters' cases, which have been used to call attention to the negligence and obstruction of the Mexican state.⁸⁶ Additionally, families of victims and other anti-femicide groups have routinely combed through deserts, empty lots, and other places in the city in a process known as *rastreos* to search for evidence and bodies of missing women. Through these *rastreos*, bodies and evidence have been found in places police claimed to have searched.⁸⁷ Most bodies found have been, largely, a result of the efforts of victims' families and anti-femicide groups or individuals who have accidentally stumbled across the bodies.⁸⁸

Through the experience of collecting evidence and searching for victims, it became clear the government and police would obstruct any search or efforts for justice. More so, families realized the authorities would not protect women from femicidal violence. As the evidence and numbers rose, anti-femicide groups tracking and documenting the cases became the first to see the pattern of femicide in Ciudad Juárez.⁸⁹ While this prompted more outrage and searches for

⁸³ Arce, Eva. (2010). "We'll See Who Wins." In Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Georgina Guzman (Eds.), *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade, and La Frontera*. P.255. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press

⁸⁴ Mark Ensalaco

⁸⁵ Victor M. Quintana

⁸⁶ Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano

⁸⁷ Cynthia Bejarano (2013)

⁸⁸ James C. Harrington

⁸⁹ Mark Ensalaco

victims and justice, it also endangered the lives of those who began to dedicate their lives to anti-femicide work.⁹⁰ We will see in the next section how the information gathered would be used in reports by Amnesty International, the United Nations, the Organization of American States and others to shame the Mexican government and reform the human rights regime.

SUMMARY

In many cases, international human rights actors will not get involved in a local case until local groups bring it to their attention. Local information is also essential for international organizations, like the United Nations and the Organization of American States, that have limited budgets and resources to conduct their own investigations.⁹¹ In both Argentina and Mexico, the groups in question have been instrumental in documenting and identifying patterns of violations. This documentation highlighted, among many things, the inefficacy of the human rights regime to respond effectively to these patterns.

III CAPTURING INTERNATIONAL ATTENTION

As we saw in the last section, the groups in question found that it was neither safe nor easy to obtain information or pressure local officials to investigate their children's cases. They also learned that they were, tragically, not the only individuals looking for information and seeking justice for similar types of violence. Thus, groups in both countries began to investigate and document the violations. This helped them identify the pattern of violations, create solidarity amongst themselves, and develop the necessary skills to navigate through the ineffective and complicit government offices. However, when it became clear this would not be enough, they mobilized to secure international help. As a result, they adopted a new strategy and began to publically protest and contact international actors for support. Consequently, women's groups in Argentina and Mexico both established a routine of highly symbolic and systemic public protests. They disseminated the information they had gathered and networked with foreigners in order to prompt a dialogue their governments sought to ignore or discredit. However, this aspect of their

⁹⁰ CNN Mexico. (2012). "El gobierno de Chihuahua detiene al presunto asesino de Marisela Escobedo." <http://mexico.cnn.com/nacional/2012/10/07/el-gobierno-de-chihuahua-detiene-al-presunto-asesino-de-marisela-escobedo> Proceso. (2013). "Fundadora de Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa denuncia amenazas." <http://www.proceso.com.mx/?p=355765>
Excelsior. (2013). "Matan al hermano de la activista Marisela Ortiz Rivera en Chihuahua." <http://www.excelsior.com.mx/nacional/2013/05/28/901341>

⁹¹ Mark Ensalaco

movements has been widely reviewed elsewhere, so instead, in this section, I will discuss how these groups shared information with and sought support from the following three groups:

1. The Organization of American States (OAS) through the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (the Commission) and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (the Court).
2. Amnesty International; and,
3. The United Nations (UN).

These organizations were essential human rights actors at the time both groups began to mobilize. Furthermore, they have been key players in shaping and enforcing compliance with the human rights regime. Finally, the three have shown a strong interest in supporting the groups in question.⁹² While limited by internal politics and red tape, these three actors proved themselves to be important allies to the local groups we are studying in the process of reforming the human rights regime.

Argentina

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights

Despite its challenges and limitations, the Inter-American Commission has been an important player in promoting human rights in North and South America. In many ways, it has paved the way for other regional human rights systems.⁹³ In the case of Argentina, the Commission's offices were inundated with individual communications alleging violations of human rights. The Madres were among the authors of these letters.⁹⁴ The Commission inquired about these communications and did not receive any meaningful information from the Argentine government.⁹⁵ Thus, in 1978, the Commission petitioned to conduct an *in loco* visit to assess for itself the merit of these allegations. The Argentine government initially resisted inviting the Commission, but after back door negotiations by the US Vice President, Walter Mondale, and the promise of a loan approval the American government had been blocking, the Argentine

⁹² Cardenas, Sonia. (2010). *Human Rights in Latin America: A Politics of Terror and Hope*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press

⁹³ Goldman, Robert K. (2009). "History and Action: The Inter-American Human Rights System and the Role of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights." *Human Rights Quarterly* 31. Pp. 856-887 http://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1027&context=facsch_lawrev

⁹⁴ Marguerite Guzman Bouvard

⁹⁵ Iain Guest

government invited the Commission.⁹⁶ The visit took place from September 6-20, 1979. However, before the visit, the offices of human rights groups were raided and detention centers were cleaned up.⁹⁷ Additionally, the Junta launched an aggressive public relations campaign to counter the testimonies of the various groups claiming human rights violations. For example, on the first day of the Commission's meetings with human rights groups, the government organized a concert in the Plaza de Mayo to divert attention from the crowds that stood in line for more than five city blocks to testify.⁹⁸

Nonetheless, during its visit, the Commission met with public authorities, former presidents of the Republic (some under house arrest), religious organizations, local human rights organizations, representatives from other political organizations, members from professional associations, labor unions, commercial and industrial entities, and the Madres.⁹⁹ The Commission also visited prisons and received 5,580 individual complaints during its trip, of which 4,153 were new. Its findings included the worrisome level of disappearances.¹⁰⁰ It concluded that these systematic violations were committed at the hands of state officials, or with their compliance, and recommended that the cases be investigated and those found guilty be tried and punished.¹⁰¹ However, as we have already seen, the pattern of disappearances was not itself protected by the human rights regime at the time. While the violations that made up the pattern were protected, they required a clear trail that led back to the state, which disappearances by nature sought to destroy.¹⁰² Nonetheless, the report dedicated an entire chapter to "The Problem of the Disappeared," in which it sought to define what a disappearance entailed and how it represented a combination of human rights violations. The title of this chapter is important to note because it gave legitimacy to the pattern the Madres claimed was taking place. It also highlighted the potential benefits that could result from using disappearances, like avoiding

⁹⁶ Rita Arditti

⁹⁷ Iain Guest

⁹⁸ Rita Arditti

⁹⁹ Marysa Navarro

¹⁰⁰ Ann Marie Clark

¹⁰¹ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. (1980). "Chapter 3: The Problem of the Disappeared." *Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Argentina*. Inter-American Commission on Human Rights

¹⁰² Iain Guest

international condemnation while instilling total fear and paralysis within the opposition.¹⁰³

Amnesty International

Founded in 1961, Amnesty International (Amnesty) quickly grew into one of the most respected international human rights organizations of its time. Amnesty has employed many tactics to pressure violating states to respect human rights, paving the way for future human rights organizations.¹⁰⁴ In Argentina and Mexico, for example, it conducted site visits where Amnesty delegations met with domestic human rights organizations, government officials, and the groups in question. It wrote special reports on both countries and has featured updates on the human rights situation in Argentina and Mexico in its Annual Reports. Amnesty transmits the information it receives from victims and other sources directly to the United Nations, the Organization of American States, and state governments.¹⁰⁵

The Madres quickly realized that Amnesty International could be a very strong ally. Thus, they constantly wrote to the organization and sent them the information they compiled. While disappearances did not explicitly fall under Amnesty's mission, they began to support the Madres and other local groups and slowly expanded the rights they would seek to protect.¹⁰⁶ Accordingly, in 1976, Amnesty sent a delegation to investigate first-hand the human rights situation in Argentina. The trip took place in November of that year and was followed up with a special report published and disseminated widely. The delegation's trip included meetings with public officials, individuals and human rights groups, including the Madres, and a visit to the Villa Devoto prison.¹⁰⁷ The report was published on the 23rd of March, 1977, one day before the anniversary of the coup d'état,¹⁰⁸ and noted the harassment received by those who tried to present information to the delegation and the presence of security officers at every meeting. The report rendered a detailed account of human rights violations during the first months following the taking over by military forces. It found that Argentines were suffering gross violations of their

¹⁰³ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (1980)

¹⁰⁴ Ann Marie Clark

¹⁰⁵ Stephen Hopgood

Additionally, the information in this paragraph was accumulated by looking through the Annual Reports published by Amnesty International which can be found at this link: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library>

¹⁰⁶ Ann Marie Clark

¹⁰⁷ Amnesty International. (1976). "Report of an Amnesty International Mission to Argentina: 6 to 15 November 1976." Wembley, Middlesex: Amnesty International Publications

¹⁰⁸ Iain Guest

human rights by state officials and that the military-ruled under a state of total impunity. They found evidence of systematic arrests, torture, and disappearances, most inflicted on victims who were not officially arrested and whom the state did not admit to having in their custody.¹⁰⁹

It is important to note once more that Amnesty International's mission did not explicitly call for the protection of the right not to be disappeared. It is also important to highlight that part of the legitimacy Amnesty had garnered was a result of its efforts to publish reliable information of violations, which disappearances themselves could not provide by nature.¹¹⁰ Thus, it is very telling that Amnesty would form such strong ties with the Madres and so heavily push to circulate their information to governments and international organizations. Disappearances forced Amnesty to expand its strategies and practices when a violation fell outside their traditional "prisoner of conscience" model.¹¹¹

United Nations Human Rights Commission

The shaping of the international human rights regime has been an effort led by various human rights actors as well as regional and global mechanisms. It was a battle constantly waged at this time, for example, at the United Nations. There, the emerging human rights NGOs and victims of violations sought to internationally pressure governments by publically "naming and shaming" them into changing their behavior. These efforts paid off and the United Nations has, thus, proven itself to be an important venue for the human rights actors to do just that.¹¹²

The Madres did not have consultative status at the UN, so there was no space for them to participate directly and, as such, were not able to present their information themselves. However, by 1978, they had developed into an extremely organized, persistent, and well-connected group. Thus, their presence at the UN did not go unnoticed, and did not seem out of place. They were recognized and welcomed by human rights advocates at the United Nations,¹¹³ and in response to the growing international interest in the human rights practices of the military junta in Argentina, the state expended a considerable amount of resources to prevent condemnation of its

¹⁰⁹ Amnesty International (1976)

¹¹⁰ Stephen Hopgood

¹¹¹ Ann Marie Clark

¹¹² Keck, Margaret E. and Kathryn Sikkink. (1998). *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press

¹¹³ Iain Guest

use of disappearances at the United Nations.¹¹⁴ Through the diligent work of its Ambassador in Geneva, Gabriel Martínez, Argentina was able to painstakingly postpone any public debate on disappearances for four years. However, and much to its dismay, human rights organizations countered Martínez's efforts and eventually won out in 1980.

The Madres and their ally, Amnesty International, played an important role in these efforts and complimented each other's work at the United Nations. The Madres attended the UN Human Rights Commission sessions from 1978-1980 and beyond. There, they conducted advocacy strategies, like donning their symbolic white headscarves and standing outside deliberation rooms to speak to delegates as they came in and out of the room.¹¹⁵ Additionally, its ally, Amnesty was the first to take the floor in the 1980 public debate in favor of establishing a Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, despite Martínez's interruption and objection, and held side events to educate members of the UN Human Rights Commission on the issue of disappearances.¹¹⁶ Outside the Commission, the Madres' supporters protested the use of disappearances. Inside, the Madres walked through the halls talking to anyone who would listen.¹¹⁷

Initially, the UN skirted around the issue of disappearances. Martinez's work was so effective they were not sure how to handle the alarming information human rights groups were presenting without starting a diplomatic firestorm.¹¹⁸ However, by December 1978, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution¹¹⁹ stating its concern over the use of disappearances by states, and defining the pattern of disappearances as a human rights violation. It did not, however, single out Argentina.¹²⁰ In the 1979 session of the Commission, a delegation worked on drafting an additional resolution whose goal was to give the Commission the power to investigate and

¹¹⁴ Ann Marie Clark

¹¹⁵ Iain Guest

¹¹⁶ Kramer, David and David Weissbrodt. (1981). "The 1980 U. N. Commission on Human Rights and the Disappeared." *Human Rights Quarterly* 3.1. Pp. 18-33

<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/stable/762064>

¹¹⁷ Iain Guest

¹¹⁸ Iain Guest

¹¹⁹ Resolution 33/173 was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1978. (*See Bibliography: Patrick J. Flood*)

¹²⁰ Patrick J. Flood

analyze information on disappearances.¹²¹ Relatives of the disappeared sent a letter to every member of the delegation that would be working on drafting this resolution. Throughout the negotiations that went on into the night, the Madres stood vigil outside the conference room.¹²² In the meanwhile, Martínez worked tirelessly to end the session with a postponement of the discussion for another year. In these ways, despite the enormous undertaking of reforming the human rights regime, the Madres' efforts were able to begin to expand its protection to victims of disappearances at the United Nations.

Mexico

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights

As we saw with the Madres, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights can be a strong ally for local human rights groups in the region. Its condemning visit and report on Argentina were very important in legitimizing the claims made by groups like the Madres. By acknowledging their identification of disappearances as a pattern of human rights violations, the Commission was also conceding that the human rights regime should protect against disappearances. The same can be said to have happened in Ciudad Juárez regarding femicide. Additionally, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights was also a strong ally for local groups in Ciudad Juárez.

Anti-femicide groups requested a visit from the Special Rapporteur for Women's Rights of the Commission. This request was fulfilled a few months later when, in February 2002, Marta Altolaguirre visited Ciudad Juárez.¹²³ Her report was as critical as those of other human rights actors that came before her. The report stressed the gross negligence and lack of political will on the part of the authorities.¹²⁴ It criticized the definition of "resolved" cases used by Chihuahuan officials that claimed a case "resolved" when prosecutors presented evidence before a judge, regardless of whether an indictment was filled or a case tried. The report further criticized

¹²¹ David Kramer and David Weissbrodt

¹²² Iain Guest

¹²³ Mark Ensalaco

¹²⁴ García, Monroy, María del Mar, Paulina García Morales, Alma Burciaga González, Humberto Guerrero Rosales, and Lucia del Rio Valdés (Eds.). (2007). *Compendio De Recomendaciones Sobre El Femicidio En Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua*. Mexico City, Mexico: Comisión Mexicana de Defensa y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos, A.C.

Chihuahuan officials, who claimed 27 out of 76 cases were “resolved,” believing the figure to be incredibly low. It is important to note that while the United Nations reports and efforts to address femicide may have provided anti-femicide groups with more universal visibility, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights can forward individual complaints to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. This is incredibly powerful, given that the judgments of the Court are legally binding and can set international human rights law precedent. Thus, by reaching out to the Commission, anti-femicide groups were able to establish a strong relationship with the human rights system at the Organization of American States. A judgment on violence against women could, and did in the “Cotton Field” case, expand the protection of women’s rights under human rights law.¹²⁵

In 2001, a horrific discovery was made in a cotton field in Ciudad Juárez when eight bodies of femicide victims were found showing signs of unimaginable torture and mutilation.¹²⁶ Seven of the bodies were identified; however, the identity of one is still unknown. Public outrage led to the arrest of two scapegoats that confessed under torture. One died in prison, the other was later released as a result of a lack of evidence. This drove families and anti-femicide groups to comb through the cotton field in search of evidence. According to reports of those present when the evidence found was handed over to the police, the police seemed surprised. Appallingly, the evidence was not used in any investigation.¹²⁷ As a result, in 2002, three of the victims’ mothers submitted their case to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.¹²⁸ The case, González et al. (“*Campo Algodonero*,” “Cotton Field”) v. México, was forwarded to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in 2007.¹²⁹ The Court’s judgment, delivered in 2009, found the Mexican state guilty of its obligation to prevent, investigate, and punish these crimes. Its ruling is considered to have expanded the scope of a state’s due diligence responsibilities with regards to

¹²⁵ Mark Ensalaco

¹²⁶ Katrin Tiroch

¹²⁷ Mark Ensalaco

¹²⁸ Inter-American Court of Human Rights. (2009). “Case of González et al. (“Cotton Field”) v. Mexico: Judgment of November 16, 2009.” Inter-American Court of Human Rights

¹²⁹ Katrin Tiroch

violence against women, irrespective of the perpetrator's identity.¹³⁰

Amnesty International

As we saw before, Amnesty International's mission had expanded to cover disappearances as a result of the interaction with the Madres and other groups that called attention to this pattern of violations. This was important because it pushed Amnesty to consider violations where the direct connection to the state and access to official information was limited. Despite this change, however, Amnesty did not consider violence against women, in general, and feminicide, in particular, to fall within its mandate for almost ten years.¹³¹ One of the reasons was that disappearances were committed by the state; thus, it still looked to the state as the violator of human rights.¹³² It was not until 2001 that Amnesty changed its mandate to cover women's rights and, thus, felt it could work with anti-feminicide groups.¹³³ Though this relationship was initially set back because of the organization's inability to react to feminicide, Amnesty became a very strong ally.

In 2003, Amnesty published a seminal report instrumental in raising awareness of feminicide among international actors.¹³⁴ The report was followed up one year later, showing an increase in deaths, but also commending some government efforts to address the issue.¹³⁵ The report was not well received by the Fox administration that met with the organization in 2003 and who stated his belief that the deaths too were isolated events. Fox did not agree there were flaws in the judicial system that discriminated against women. Additionally, the government of Chihuahua refused to meet with Amnesty, citing that it felt the report was one-sided and that most of the cases had already been "resolved." Nevertheless, the report found that the deaths

¹³⁰ Celorio, Rosa M. (2011). "The Rights of Women in the Inter-American System of Human Rights: Current Opportunities and Challenges in Standard-Setting." *University of Miami Law Review*. Vol. 65 Issue 3, Pp. 819-866

¹³¹ Kathleen Staudt and Irasema Coronado

¹³² Dominguez-Ruvalcaba, Hector and Patricia Ravelo Blancas. (2010). "Obedience without Compliance: The Role of the Government, Organized Crime, and NGOs in the System of Impunity that Murders the Women of Ciudad Juárez." In Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano (Eds.), *Terrorizing Women: Feminicide in the Americas*. 182. (Sara Koopman, Trans.) Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press

¹³³ Olga Aikin Araluce (2011)

¹³⁴ Kathleen Staudt and Irasema Coronado

¹³⁵ Amnesty International. (2004). "Mexico: Ending the Brutal Cycle of Violence Against Women in Ciudad Juárez and the City of Chihuahua." <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AMR41/011/2004>

were a case of gender violence that indicated discrimination against women and that the Mexican authorities had launched a campaign to normalize the deaths and harassed those who denounced injustice and impunity.¹³⁶ Additionally, Amnesty connected local anti-femicide groups with international human rights actors around the world and has been a strong supporter of these local groups.¹³⁷

United Nations

Anti-femicide groups interacted heavily with the human rights protective mechanisms within the United Nations. In fact, the first international actor to raise its concern over femicide in Ciudad Juárez was the Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary and Arbitrary Executions who in 1999 was visiting Mexico on unrelated issues. However, after pleas from anti-femicide groups, the Special Rapporteur visited Ciudad Juárez on the last day of her trip.¹³⁸ The Special Rapporteur's definition of the problem was strong in describing the femicide deaths as "a typical example of a sexist crime aided by impunity."¹³⁹ It was the first real international effort to condemn the Mexican state for allowing the crimes to go unpunished.¹⁴⁰ The anti-femicide groups would receive visits and reports by a plethora of human rights actors in the United Nations, from the Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers in 2002 to the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women in 2005.¹⁴¹ Furthermore, in 2003, representatives from JPNH traveled to the United Nations Human Rights Commission to present their information on femicide.¹⁴² Finally, and perhaps the most notable interaction has been

¹³⁶ Olga Aikin Araluce (2011)

¹³⁷ Monroy García, María del Mar, Paulina García Morales, Alma Burciaga González, Humberto Guerrero Rosales, and Lucia del Rio Valdés

¹³⁸ Mark Ensalaco

¹³⁹ P. 154. Araluce, Olga Aikin. (2009). "Transnational Advocacy Networks, International Norms, and Political Change in Mexico: The Murdered Women of Ciudad Juarez." In Kathleen Staudt, Tony Payan and Z. Anthony Kruszewski (Eds.), *Human Rights Along the U.S.-Mexico Border: Gendered Violence and Insecurity*. P.150. (Carlos Melendez and Beatriz Vera, Trans.). Tucson, Arizona: The University of Arizona Press

¹⁴⁰ Mark Ensalaco

¹⁴¹ Monroy García, María del Mar, Paulina García Morales, Alma Burciaga González, Humberto Guerrero Rosales, and Lucia del Rio Valdés

¹⁴² Olga Aikin Araluce (2011)

with the CEDAW Committee that will be discussed in the next section.

SUMMARY

Both the Madres in Argentina and the women's groups in Ciudad Juárez realized they needed to disseminate their information and evidence to international human rights actors. Thus, they reached out to important human rights groups like Amnesty International, the United Nations, and the Organization of American States.¹⁴³ In this way, local actors were able to raise awareness of disappearances and femicide at international levels. Their investigations and detailed case files provided credible information for international human rights actors to use. Furthermore, the groups made up of relatives also had incredibly compelling stories of the suffering of their children and loved ones as well as those they faced before a government unwilling to investigate and prosecute the people who had kidnapped, tortured, and killed their children.¹⁴⁴

IV CREATING AND/OR STRENGTHENING MECHANISMS OF PROTECTION

In the previous two sections, we saw how the groups in question contributed to international human rights debates on disappearances and femicide. These debates were crucial in highlighting where the human rights regime could improve its protections. In the two cases at hand, the groups used the information they gathered and their systematic public protest to attract international attention and support. However, they also used their information and connections to reform, strengthen, or create monitoring mechanisms within the international human rights regime. In this section, I will first look at how the Madres contributed to the creation of a Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances at the United Nations and why this group was important. Then I will look at how the anti-femicide groups in Mexico used and, in the process, tested and strengthened the protections granted by CEDAW Committee under its Optional Protocol.

Argentina

The presence of the Madres at the United Nations, as previously noted, continued despite efforts

¹⁴³ Kathleen Staudt and Irasema Coronado

¹⁴⁴ Muñoz, Alejandro Anaya. (2011). "Explaining High Levels of Transnational Pressure over Mexico: The Case of the Disappearances and Killings of Women in Ciudad Juárez." *The International Journal of Human Rights* 15.3. Pp. 339-58 <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13642980903315323-.Uq4xuWRDt8c>

by Martínez to discredit them and other human rights groups. The Madres stood out as they roamed the halls of the Commission wearing their white headscarves.¹⁴⁵ Their protest had reached the United Nations and the Argentine government had lost its monopoly on information, yet, it was not willing to change its stance of disappearances. Regardless, on the 20th of February, 1980, the United Nations established a Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances.¹⁴⁶

While the general resolution on disappearances did not mention any country by name, it did establish the Working Group and, after tough negotiations, was allowed to accept information from people and organizations without consultative status.¹⁴⁷ This set a precedent in the UN of allowing individuals and victims to submit information on human rights violations.¹⁴⁸ The Madres had carved out a space for themselves and other family members of the disappeared to submit the information they gathered. The human rights regime now protected against disappearances and allowed victims and families to challenge their government at this international forum.¹⁴⁹

Within its first eight years, the Working Group had a higher success rate of case resolution than any other body within the United Nations human rights system. As Iain Guest points out: *“The group had intervened to save lives. It had named governments, bypassed confidentiality, and taken information from people because they had suffered and not because they had been given ‘consultative status.’”*¹⁵⁰ The mandate of the group is also important to note because it reflected the importance of the families’ contributions and information. Its main objective was to *“assist families in determining the fate and whereabouts of their missing relatives who, having disappeared, are placed outside the protective precinct of the law.”*¹⁵¹ Finally, this group was the first to have a “thematic” mandate as opposed to a country-specific mandate, which allowed the mechanism to assist victims of disappearances all over the world, and was the first

¹⁴⁵ Iain Guest

¹⁴⁶ Patrick J. Flood

¹⁴⁷ David Kramer and David Weissbrodt

¹⁴⁸ Alison Brysk

¹⁴⁹ Iain Guest

¹⁵⁰ P. 234, Iain Guest

¹⁵¹ P. 63, Patrick J. Flood

international mechanism designed to address disappearances.¹⁵²

The Working Group promptly learned how useful individual communications would be in saving lives if they responded quickly. For example, one of the first cases that it came across was that of five human rights actors, including a Madre, kidnapped in Argentina and Peru and then taken and appeared murdered in Madrid. The Working Group then swiftly confronted the Argentine Mission for information. While the Argentine government refuted any claims that it was behind their disappearances and murders, it was later revealed by the Office of the UN. High Commissioner for Refugees that the Argentine government and its allies had intended to carry out an intensified murder campaign of Argentine human rights actors abroad. This campaign was canceled because of the attention the case of the murdered human rights actors found in Madrid had received. Similar campaigns in the past, like the disappearances conducted under Operation Condor, had not been as sensitive to international attention as they would be after this case. It was clear that this group would be able to help save lives if it continued to work rapidly.¹⁵³

In its first report, the Working Group included a chapter to each of these countries: Argentina, Cyprus, El Salvador, Ethiopia, and Guatemala. It also noted that it received communications from: Bolivia, Brazil, and Peru. The chapter on Argentina notes that most of the communications and information it received came from relatives of the disappeared. This is extremely important because it indicates how the Madres not only helped to create the Working Group, but that they also used it to address the disappearances of their children. It highlights that it received so many communications that it was only able to review 500 in depth.¹⁵⁴

Mexico

As the danger and cost of protesting increased, women's groups have turned their efforts to human rights monitoring mechanisms, like the CEDAW Committee.¹⁵⁵ This strategy has resulted in pushing the human rights regime to expand its protection of violence against women and,

¹⁵² Patrick J. Flood

¹⁵³ Patrick J. Flood

¹⁵⁴ United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances. (1981). "Question of Human Rights of All Persons Subjected to Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment, in Particular: Questions of Missing and Disappeared Persons." E/CN.4/1435

¹⁵⁵ Melissa W. Wright. (2010). "Femicide, Mother-Activism, and the Geography of Protest in Northern Mexico."

particularly, its most extreme form of feminicide. In this section, we will discuss how the inquiry conducted by the CEDAW Committee under the Optional Protocol is a strong example of this protective expansion within the human rights regime.

The *Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW) is a human rights treaty that focuses on women's rights. Compliance with the obligations enshrined in the treaty is conducted by the CEDAW Committee. Additionally, an Optional Protocol (OP) provides for a communication procedure through which individuals can submit complaints of violations and an inquiry procedure that allows the CEDAW Committee to investigate situations of "grave or systematic violations."¹⁵⁶ Before the OP, compliance with CEDAW was monitored through a state reporting procedure and inter-state disputes mechanism.¹⁵⁷ Now, individuals, groups, organizations, and states can submit information that can lead to an inquiry by the Committee at any time. The process begins with a general review of the information it receives, and if it considers violations to be "grave or systematic," it can ask the State Party to present information on the situation at hand. Upon receiving a response from the State Party, the Committee can appoint some of its members to investigate the matter. After the investigation is conducted, a report is drafted and follow up measures are established.¹⁵⁸

In 2002, the CEDAW Committee received information from Equality Now, an international organization working on eradicating violence against women around the world and *Casa Amiga*.¹⁵⁹ The Committee felt the information received was enough to meet the requirements to prompt an investigation.¹⁶⁰ It is important to note that this was the first time this

¹⁵⁶ CEDAW Committee. (2005). "Report on Mexico produced by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women under article 8 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention, and reply from the Government of Mexico." CEDAW/C/2005/OP.8/MEXICO

¹⁵⁷ Sokhi-Bulley, Bal. (2006). "The Optional Protocol to CEDAW: First Steps." *Human Rights Law Review*. 6.1 Pp. 143-159 <http://hrhr.oxfordjournals.org.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/content/6/1/143.short>

¹⁵⁸ Tavares Da Silva, Maria Regina and Yolanda Ferrer Gomez. (2007). "The Juárez Murders and the Inquiry Procedure." In Hanna Beate Schöpp-Schilling and Cees Flinterman (Eds.), *The Circle of Empowerment: Twenty-Five Years of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women*. P. 298. New York, New York: The Feminist Press

¹⁵⁹ Bal Sokhi-Bulley

¹⁶⁰ Fileborn, Bianca. (2010). "Addressing Sexual Assault Through Human Rights Instruments."

Australian Center for the Study of Sexual Assault. No. 25. Pp. 2-14

[http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A"library%2Fjmart%2F752611";rec=0](http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A)

inquiry procedure launched an investigation, and the only one time it has done so to date.¹⁶¹ The Committee appointed two of its members to travel to Mexico City, the City of Chihuahua and Ciudad Juárez to meet with officials, anti-femicide groups, and victims' families. Its report was made public in 2005.¹⁶²

The Committee found the deaths protested by women and family groups had been largely ignored by authorities, victims had been blamed, and families harassed. Impunity could be found everywhere.¹⁶³ The Committee found that the following factors contributed to the increase in femicidal violence: demographic changes that were not met with improved social services and that challenged traditional patriarchal values, a culture of impunity that was a result of a lack of effective investigations and punishment, and a failure to address the social and cultural nature of the violence or to treat the deaths as a pattern as opposed to isolated incidents. Furthermore, it found that policy and legislative efforts to address the violence were not enough to fulfill its obligations.¹⁶⁴ It cited how important its meetings with families and anti-femicide groups were to understanding the factors that allow femicide to occur, go unpunished, and continue to take place and in this way, the CEDAW Committee acknowledged the important role that the local anti-femicide groups had played in providing them with information and in the struggle for justice and protection.¹⁶⁵

The final report was important to the expansion of the human rights regime's protections in a few ways. First, the Committee recognized that femicide has a state responsibility component.¹⁶⁶ Second, the Committee report concluded that the deaths and disappearances of women in Ciudad Juárez were not random but, rather, were tied together by an extremely violent pattern of systematic violence based on culture and discrimination against women. In doing so, the Committee also stressed the link between gender stereotyping and violence against women, stating that the violence in Ciudad Juárez was protected by structural and cultural factors that promoted the subordination of women. In making this link, the Committee showed how gender

¹⁶¹ Bal Sokhi-Bulley

¹⁶² Maria Regina Tavares Da Silva and Yolanda Ferrer Gomez

¹⁶³ CEDAW Committee

¹⁶⁴ Bianca Fileborn

¹⁶⁵ CEDAW Committee

¹⁶⁶ Bal Sokhi-Bulley

stereotypes violate women's rights and then become obstacles in their reparation. Third, it concluded that the Mexican state's inability to provide effective protection against femicidal violence and failure to address negative gender stereotypes was itself a violation of its obligations under CEDAW.¹⁶⁷ This resulted in making the victims responsible for their own protection and redress.¹⁶⁸ The Committee argued that the government's response to femicide signaled a form of compliance.¹⁶⁹

SUMMARY

This section shows how the groups in question identified a weakness within the human rights regime as an opportunity that could be strengthened by their efforts. Both cases set precedents by expanding the human rights regime to protect against disappearance and femicide. The Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances continues to serve as a tool for relatives of disappeared victims around the world, and the precedent set by the first inquiry of the CEDAW Committee strengthens the obligations of states to address violence against women.

FINAL CONCLUSIONS

This paper sought to better understand how local actors can expand the protections of the international human rights regime to newly identified patterns of violations. It looked at two cases in which local women employed a combination of strategies in order to achieve a reform of the human rights regime. These strategies included identifying and documenting a violation; calling international attention to the violation; and using, creating, and reforming human rights mechanisms. In the end, the goal of this paper was to contribute to the understanding of how those who can benefit the most from increased human rights protection can expand the human rights regime. How can local actors establish better human rights protections for themselves? It is a question that is crucial in answering if the human rights regime is to be effective and relevant to those it claims to want to protect. While the women in both cases had little to no political or activist experience, they mobilized and effectively challenged their governments and society. Both did so under extremely dangerous conditions and facing complex systems and networks.

¹⁶⁷ Cusack, Simone Anne. (2007). "Addressing Gender Stereotyping under the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women: The Case of Ciudad Juárez." Graduate Department of Law-University of Toronto. Toronto, Canada.

¹⁶⁸ Bal Sokhi-Bulley

¹⁶⁹ Maria Regina Tavares Da Silva and Yolanda Ferrer Gomez

However, they managed to respond to a crisis, identify the pattern and propose solutions, document the violations, call international attention to the problem, and reform the international human rights regime. While this may not have been their intention, it was an inadvertent outcome of their efforts to end disappearances and femicide, and as such, is essential to understand, especially if it sheds light on how local actors can expand the protections granted by the international human rights regime.

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