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“Invisible Wars”: Gendered Terrorism in the US Military and the Juárez *Feminicidio*

Alicia Arrizón

As thousands of burned-out soldiers prepare to return to Iraq to fill President Bush’s unwelcome call for at least 20,000 more troops, I can’t help wondering what the women among those troops will have to face. And I don’t mean only the hardships of war, the killing of civilians, the bombs and mortars, the heat and sleeplessness and fear. I mean from their own comrades—the men.

—Helen Benedict (2007) ‘The Private War of Women Soldiers,’ p. 1

With this, Helen Benedict unveils her exposé of sexual abuse and rape culture in the US military as well as the revictimization of those who report such violence. Her book, *The Lonely Soldier: The Private War of Women Serving in Iraq* (2009), is the inspiration to Kirby Dick’s Oscar-nominated documentary, *The Invisible War* (2012).¹ Like the investigative and testimonial style used in Benedict’s research, *The Invisible War* focuses on the victims’ narratives about the motivations behind their military enlistment, their experience in the military, the sexual assault, and the challenges they braved after reporting the rape. Both Dick’s documentary and Benedict’s writing give voice to women who have been sexually terrorized by their commanding officers and/or fellow soldiers. They also problematize the double standard applied by the US armed forces in its protection of men versus its lack of protection of women.

I start from Benedict's book and *The Invisible War* as primary sources for my analysis of the institutional gendered violence in the US military. By considering the military as an obvious site in which hypermasculinity, male hegemony, and the culture of violence pervade, my argument explicitly suggests that the gendered relations of power embedded in this particular institution produce and enable widespread and yet "invisible" terrorism aimed at its female soldiers.² I examine rape as an act of terror exercised "collaterally"—a symptomatic tool of the "gendered war" or "gendered terrorism" ingrained in the military culture. How has the military failed its female soldiers so miserably? What is behind its failure to combat sex crimes and rape within its confines? Whereas I intend mainly to respond to these issues, I will also look at another documentary, *Señorita extraviada (Missing Young Women)* (2001), which focuses on the ongoing *feminicidio* (femicide) in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, as another form of gendered terrorism—violence unleashed from within, against its own women.³ I will examine the conditions that have prevented the Mexican government from stopping the hundreds of rapes, mutilations, tortures, and killings of women in the border city of the Juárez-El Paso metropolitan area. Connections between the subjects of the two documentaries, *The Invisible War* and *Señorita extraviada*, will be explored as I join the call of victims and survivors globally to count rape and *feminicidio* as forms of terrorism that violate basic human rights and to hold the perpetrators accountable.⁴

<A>*The US Military post-9/11: Women at War*

The US waged a "War on Terror" in the Middle East after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, leading to the invasion and wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. A definite surge in patriotism followed 9/11. Enlistment of men and women in the US military soared to its highest levels since the Pearl Harbor attacks (Monahan and Neidel-Greenlee 2010). Since the beginning of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, military recruitment in low-income communities and/or in high schools

populated by poor or immigrant populations increased substantially.⁵ The military recruitment system was cleared by the ‘No Child Left Behind’ education law of 2002, which guarantees that any school allowing college or job recruiters on campus must make the same provision for the military. This policy also allowed recruiters to have access to students’ home addresses and phone numbers. In a 2008 study, ‘Who Joins the Military?: A Look at Race, Class, and Immigration Status,’ Amy Lutz found that those with lower family income are more likely to join the military than those with higher family income and that a large percentage of minorities who have served in the armed forces are children of immigrants. Lutz’s study looked at the history of participation of the three largest racial and ethnic groups in the military—whites, blacks, and Latinos—and examined ethnicity, immigration status, and socioeconomic status in relation to military service. It concludes that significant disparities exist only by socioeconomic status, finding ‘the all-volunteer force continues to see overrepresentation of the working and middle classes, with fewer incentives for upper class participation’ (Lutz 2008: 185). Although comparisons in the context of racial-ethnic composition across armed services are made, Lutz’s study ultimately suggests that military recruiters continue to be more active targeting black and Latino youth, the working class, and poor communities. In general, the implication of the “poverty draft” is in some way marked in her analysis. Obviously, the US military has a long history of being the only “out” for disfranchised communities, in particular during hard economic times and during war. As it was demonstrated during Operation Desert Storm, poor and racial minorities were being overly recruited, and thus died in war disproportionately.

Likewise, the Iraq and Afghanistan wars have redefined the role of women in the military. Benedict (2009: 3) points out in her book that more than ‘206,000 women have served in the Middle East since March 2003, most of them in Iraq, which is nearly five times more than in the 1991 Gulf War and twenty six times more than in the Vietnam.’⁶ US policy has previously

excluded women from ground combat units although the prohibition against women serving in combat units was lifted in 1994. However, in Afghanistan and Iraq, women have served as foot soldiers during door-to-door operations and have participated in convoy escort assignments. Female soldiers have faced direct fire in Iraq while serving in support roles, such as military police, helicopter pilots, and truck drivers (Benedict 2009; Holmstedt 2007; Oliver 2007; Solaro 2006). Consequently, they have fought and died in the Iraq war more than in any war since World War II.

Drawing on the experiences of Iraq war veterans, *The Lonely Soldier* focuses on five women who served from 2003 to 2006: Mickiela Montoya, Jennifer Spranger, Abbie Pickett, Terris Dewalt-Johnson, and Eli PaintedCrow. Their stories are chronicled in three parts—before, during, and after their military stints. Benedict integrates her voice with the voice of her interviewees to show ‘what is like to be a woman at war’ (Benedict 2009: 3).⁷ As the book’s title suggests, Benedict claims that women in the military are lonely because of their isolation—often serving in platoons with few other women or none at all. She points out that their physical solitude is intensified by a blatant hostility toward women inherent in the military. This resentment, she says, ‘can cause problems that many female soldiers find as hard to cope with as war itself: degradation and sexual persecution by their comrades, and loneliness instead of the camaraderie that every soldier depends on for comfort and survival’ (3).

Interested in women’s increased role in the military, Benedict started interviewing female soldiers who mainly served in Iraq.⁸ ‘From the very first woman soldier I met, I began to hear stories of abuse,’ she said (cited in Brown 2013). Her findings expose the challenges faced by women in the military, depicting not only the dangers of enemy battle, but also the perils of rape by their fellow soldiers. According to Benedict, women are not respected by their male

comrades: 'despite the equal risks women are taking, they are still being treated as inferior soldiers and sex toys by many of their male colleagues' (2007: 1). She points out that every woman she interviewed has said that the dangers of being raped by other soldiers had been so widely recognized in Iraq that their officers regularly told them not to go to the latrines or showers alone. As one of her interviewees told her, 'it's like sending three women to live in a frat house' (2007: 1). According to Benedict (2009: 4), the idea of 'women as sexual prey rather than responsible adults has always been part of the military, making it hard for female soldiers to win acceptance, let alone respect.'

<A>*Military Rape Culture*

Carole Sheffield's (1995) earlier work on sexual terrorism expands the notions of both gender violence and terrorism. As she puts it:

The word terrorism invokes images of furtive organizations of the far right or left, whose members blow up buildings and cars, hijack airplanes, and murder innocent people in some country other than ours. But there is a different kind of terrorism, one that so pervades our culture that we have learned to live with it as though it were the natural order of things. Its target is females—of all ages, races, and classes. (1995: 409)

Debates about what constitutes terrorism have significantly evolved in the Western and non-Western worlds: from the notion of "terror cimbricus," which was used by ancient Romans to describe the terror felt as they prepared for an attack by fierce enemies, to the "Reign of Terror" of Maximilien Robespierre during the French Revolution and the horrendous accounts of colonization suffered by the indigenous populations in the Americas to the attacks

on the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001. Whereas many understand terrorism as the intentional use of violence against civilians in order to attain political aims, others believe that its power 'lies precisely in its pervasive ambiguity, its invasion in our minds' (Kimmel and Stout 2006: ix). In the context of the US "War on Terror," "terrorism" had become a political construct skillfully, albeit deceptively, used on the American people to reelect President George W. Bush in 2004. By repeatedly connecting 9/11 and the Iraq war during his presidential campaign, regardless of the available evidence that has never confirmed any link between Saddam Hussein and the 9/11 terrorist attacks, President Bush exploited the concept of "terrorism" and the fear it evokes to justify the destruction of Hussein and his regime, while 'wag[ing] what he calls his godly "crusade" against terror in Iraq and around the world' (Oliver 2007: 102).

The discourse on terrorism in public media is generally devoid of any consideration and analysis of sexual violence or rape as terrorist acts. As counterdiscourse, the significance and urgency of treating rape and sexual abuse as forms of terrorism has been continually validated in feminist/gender theory. Since the early 1970s, radical feminist perspectives have differentiated sexual violence and rape as forms of terrorism pervading "our" culture.⁹ Radical feminism has exercised considerable influence in the development of a discourse that considers rape as a deeply ingrained social practice that confers and reinforces the oppression of women (Card 1991; Griffin 1977; MacKinnon 1989; Peterson 1977). These articulations have distinguished rape and other forms of sexual violence as terrorist acts, which we, unfortunately, have learned to live with as simply societal problems. It is the blanket exclusion of the terrorism of sexual politics in the public sphere that has 'maintain[ed] the invisibility of routine violence against women, underlying visible sexist stereotypes' (Card 1996: 98).

As shown in *The Invisible War*, there is an ongoing problem with sexual terrorism in the US military, which has resulted in a series of scandals. In the 1991 Tailhook scandal, more than a hundred navy and marine corps aviation officers were accused of having sexually assaulted at least eighty-three women and seven men at the Thirty-Fifth Annual Tailhook Association Symposium in Las Vegas. In the 1996 Aberdeen Proving Ground sexual abuse scandal, thirty women filed complaints of sexual assault and harassment against drill instructors. Additionally, the film refers to the 2003 US Air Force Academy sexual assault scandal, which involved not only claims of rape and sexual harassment, but also charges that the incidents had been ignored by the academy's leadership. As the film reveals, rape, sexual assault, and sexual harassment continue to occur in the military at alarming rates year after year. It shows that more than 20 percent of female veterans have been sexually assaulted during their service—meaning one in five women in military service has been the victim of sexual assault. Brigadier General Loree Sutton suggests 'witch hunting' as an allegory to women's abuse in the US armed forces, 'particularly for a savvy perpetrator to work within a relatively close system like the military, it becomes a prime target-rich environment for a predator' (*The Invisible War* 2012). This rampant sexual terrorism in the military clearly demonstrates that the enemy is not only "out there," but is also within us.

The film features moving stories of several soldiers—a majority of women and a couple of men—in the US armed forces who have been subjected to sexual harassment, torture, sexual assault, and revictimization by a dysfunctional system that fails to protect their basic human rights. In their narratives, the female soldiers express many reasons for serving their country: to be the best they could be, to be a part of something they find dignified, or just simply to see the world. Navy recruit Hannah Sewell wanted to continue a long family tradition of military. Her father, Sergeant Major Jerry Sewell, had to resign his position and give up his military career in order to speak freely in the film. He tearfully recalls telling his daughter that 'they

[the navy] will take care of her.’ Instead, she was raped and beaten by a fellow recruit in 2008, ‘taking her virginity’ and leaving her with a severe back injury. Sewell remembers that her rapist demonstrated a sense of ownership and entitlement over her: ‘once he was done, he rubbed his hand all over [her] entire body and told [her] I own all this’ (*The Invisible War* 2012). This terrorist act was to frighten her even more, as a means of control and domination. Then Sewell was victimized again when the military conducted three bogus investigations and “lost” Sewell’s rape kit, the nurse’s examining report, and the photos of her injuries.

That this gendered-rape-terrorism against female soldiers in the US military has continued unchecked for so long is underlined dramatically in *The Invisible War*. Also shown in the documentary is a military culture and judicial system that protect the perpetrators and punish the survivors by “blaming the victims.”¹⁰ Such a culture insists that a woman’s seduction leads a man on (i.e., by wearing sexy clothes or by not responding to sexual overtures), and when spurned, justifies his attack on her. Examples of behaviors commonly associated with rape culture include victim blaming, sexual objectification, and rape justifications. It routinely minimizes sexual violence, subjecting any woman willing to speak up about it to further violence and humiliation. Such were the experiences reported in *The Invisible War* of marine lieutenants Elle Helmer and Ariana Klay, who both served at the prestigious Marine Barracks Washington. In 2006, when Helmer reported to her commander that a superior officer had assaulted and raped her the night before, her colonel discouraged her from getting a rape kit. Against his objections, she sought and received a thorough medical examination, but her rapist’s supervisor still refused to press charges or punish her assailant. When she appealed this decision, Helmer became the subject of investigation and prosecution instead. She was ultimately forced to leave the marine corps, whereas her rapist remained in good standing. Likewise, Ariana Klay’s horrifying experience shows the military’s (over)protection of men and its lack of protection of women. Klay was assaulted by a senior officer and her civilian

boss. When she filed charges, the marine corps said she must have welcomed the attacks because she wore makeup and skirts. Her husband, US Marine Corps Captain Ben Klay, recounts his wife's ordeal, her junior marines calling her 'slut,' 'whore,' and 'walking mattress.'¹¹ According to Klay, a senior officer in her command told her, 'female Marines here are nothing but objects for marines to fuck' (*The Invisible War* 2012), thereby virtually relegating them as "comfort women." Klay and Helmer represent two of five cases (reported in the film) of sexual assault at Marine Corps Barracks; four of the victims were investigated or punished by the military, but none of their attackers were court-martialed. This victim-blaming system even charged a female soldier of adultery after she was raped by a married senior officer, despite the fact that she was single.

This victim blaming misses the point that rape is not about sex; it is about power. According to Catharine MacKinnon (2005: 248), sexual assault is enforced by gender/sex hierarchic inequalities that can only be reduced when legally recognized as such. She insists on a rape law that recognizes sexual assault as a result of social inequalities between dominants and subordinates and therefore provides a judicial system that punishes rapists. The statistics and survivors' stories shown in the film indicate that most military sex offenders and rapists can and do get away with their crimes. A big part of the problem is the military justice system, which mandates that charges such as rape and sexual harassment are heard not by an independent judiciary but by one's immediate commanding officer. In many situations, the perpetrator himself or a close friend would take on that role. Thus, the power inequality follows the survivor even as she attempts to find relief through the military "justice" system. As statistics reveal, 25 percent of the service women did not report their rape because the person to report to was the rapist (*The Invisible War* 2012).¹² The conflict of interests problem partially explains why 80 percent of sexual assaults in the military are never reported.

These coercive conditions, reinforced by systems of inequality, are inherent in the military. It begins in the basic training camp, which is 'designed to undermine all the past concepts and beliefs of the new recruit, to undermine his civilian values, to change his self concept—subjugating him entirely to the military system' (Shalit 1988: 317). Through the implementation of the "drill," the military culture reinforces a hierarchical system in which the relationship between the instructor and the trainee creates an abusive environment. With the increasing numbers of women joining the military, 'the great differential in power between trainers and trainees, and with the lack of mediation or effective oversight, abuse can assume a sexist form' (Burke 2004: 20). Among the most obvious gendered governmental institution, the military is an established entity where "boys will be boys." This system, according to Benedict (2009: 5), 'is still permeated with stereotypes of women as weak, passive sex objects who have no business fighting and cannot be relied upon in battle.' Men dominate the military, both numerically and practically. As an institution that permits training 'to operate as a male rite of passage' (Burke 2004: 20), the impact of the military on those outside this frame is catastrophic. It creates a hostile culture for women. Because women are categorically left out of masculinity, the effects of military culture seem structured indirectly to encourage sexual assault. Therefore, although in *The Invisible War* and the media in general, the notion of "rape epidemic" is commonly used, describing a system in which rape and sexual violence against women are common, I prefer to use "rape culture" or "culture of rape." In the words of Mickiela Montoya, a veteran interviewee in Benedict's book, 'there are only three things the guys let you be if you are girl in the military—a bitch, a ho, or a dyke' (Benedict 2009: 5).

The terrorist act perpetrated on Kori Cioca by her commanding officer in the US Coast Guard demonstrates such power inequality. Cioca testified that her commanding officer stalked and harassed her for weeks prior to the attack: 'I'd walk in from training and he'd be sleeping in

my bed.’ Although she tried to report the officer to those in charge, ‘they were all his drinking buddies’ (*The Invisible War* 2012). They minimized her concerns, telling her that it was weak to complain just because she did not like him. Ultimately, the officer beat and raped her in 2005, violently crushing her jaw in the process. After reporting the rape to her senior chief, he nonchalantly told Cioca that they needed the offending officer for training duty and that she would be fine. The documentary follows her ordeal: Cioca is in constant pain because of the jaw injury, unable to eat anything but soft food, and experiencing extreme difficulties in convincing the Veterans Affairs office to approve the jaw surgery she urgently needs.¹³

Whereas combat trauma is still the leading cause of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among men, rape, sexual assault, and sexual harassment are the leading causes of PTSD among women veterans. As demonstrated in *The Invisible War*, sexual violence is often a risk factor for homelessness among women veterans. In addition to depression and other mental health issues associated with surviving military sexual violence, victims experience high rates of substance abuse and have difficulty finding work after discharge from the military. Veteran Trina McDonald, who was drugged and raped repeatedly by military policemen in her naval station in Alaska, suffers from PTSD and went through a period of homelessness and addiction before finally finding a stable life with marriage and children. Although she found love and a supportive partner, her sexual abuse trauma continues to affect McDonald and her relationships. Like McDonald, Regina Vasquez was also drugged and raped. She was nineteen when she joined the marine corps; she served four years. She reveals that she was gang-raped: ‘I still remember them. I remember the sounds, the smells and not being able to move. Watching my own horror flick: wanting to scream and I couldn’t. I wanted to die. I lost my smile. I lost my laughter’ (*The Invisible War* 2012).¹⁴

As expected, hypermasculine values and hegemonic masculinity are eminently marked in the military. Whereas hypermasculinity has been psychologically linked with the exaggeration of male stereotypical behavior, and thus associated with sexual and physical aggression against women, hegemonic masculinity is established through one group's power over another, conceived of as controlled through domination. A number of studies have linked military culture to hypermasculinity and tendencies toward sexual coercion against females (Burke 2004; Hunter 2007; Morris 1996; Solaro 2006). One of the first studies of hypermasculinity developed an "inventory" to measure a "macho" personality constellation consisting of three components: calloused sex attitudes toward women, violence as a manly trait, and danger situations as exciting (Mosher and Sirkin 1984). Developed almost thirty years ago, the study provides the basis to comprehend some of the characteristics attached to the understanding of hypermasculine norms. Aside from this generalization, the "code" of hypermasculinity in the military fosters rampant misogyny and homophobia. Through the former discriminatory policy of 'don't ask, don't tell' (repealed in 2011), institutionalized homophobia in the military requires the exclusion of homosexuality and the compulsiveness of heterosexuality. Accusations of lesbianism, according to Benedict (2009: 169), 'have been used to silence gay and straight women who report sexual abuse or other misdoings, to punish those who rebuff sexual advances or excel in their jobs, and to drum such women out of the military altogether.'

Conceptually, hegemonic masculinity stands for men's dominant social power over women and subordinated identities perceived as "feminine," "inferior," and "weak" in a given cultural frame or society (Connell 1995, 2005; Donaldson 1993). The conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity derives from the theory of cultural hegemony influenced by Antonio Gramsci, which is meant to critique power relations among social classes. The word "hegemony," in this case, suggests the triumph of the dominant classes in developing their definition of reality

in such a way that it is accepted by other classes as common view. Thus, it refers to the cultural dynamics in which a social organization or institution claims and maintains a dominant position in a hierarchy of opposites. In this context, military masculinities are established within a system that maintains male domination by denigrating women while reinforcing the hypermasculine “real” domain. On a larger scale, the hegemonic masculine threat can be perceived within the historic sanctions of women’s patriarchal narrative of domination: in what settings were men allowed to beat their wives, or fathers to legally dictate who their daughters married; in what circumstance was rape justified or overlooked (e.g., a master could rape his slaves, a husband could rape his wife); how long did it take for women to have the right to vote, hold property, or to have reproductive rights? These inquiries are boundless and relentless.

According to Sheila Jeffreys, the “required” military hypermasculinity as the basis of warfare contributes to the legitimization of violence, which puts women in double jeopardy. In her article ‘Double Jeopardy: Women, the US Military and the War in Iraq’ (2007), Jeffreys argues that women not only face the dangers of being killed and wounded by the enemy (when in combat), but also are confronted with the dangers of rape and sexual abuse from their fellow soldiers. She suggests that the characterization of the military as ‘an inflated coercive masculinity’ (20) helps to elucidate the pervasiveness of sexual violence exercised by male soldiers against their female comrades. *The Invisible War* exhibits the pain and consequences of such sexual terrorism, demonstrates the strength and resilience of the survivors in rebuilding their lives, and illustrates their courage and hardships in fighting for justice. The filmmaker’s use of testimony as a crucial source of empowerment provides agency to the interviewees. Their compelling narratives of experienced terror produce an alternative means for confronting not only their perpetrator and victimizer (figuratively speaking), but also their inner traumatized self. Together, their testimonies represent the

realities of individual and collective suffering in a culture largely defined by hegemonic masculinity and hypermasculinity, sexual coercion, and inequality.

<A>*Borderless Gendered Terrorism*

Radical feminist discourses have linked rape culture or the effects of institutionalized rape to “femicide” (some use femicide), which is also motivated by the sense of ownership and entitlement over women (Caputi and Russell 1992; Fregoso and Bejarano 2010; Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán 2010; Pineda-Madrid 2011; Wright 2006). Although the notion of femicide epitomizes the most extreme forms of misogynistic violence, it stems from the violation of human rights of women in the public and private sphere. In Mexico, the term has been widely used by activists and scholars to describe the murders of women and girls and the impunity that surrounds them. In the introduction to their edited volume *Terrorizing Women: Femicide in the Américas* (2010), Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano argue in favor of the term “femicide” as they consider the competing perspectives regarding the terms “femicide” and “femicide.” Fregoso and Bejarano define femicide as the gendered counterpoint to homicide, or as a way of characterizing the murder of women. According to them, femicide does not capture the complexity of gender-based violence and the notion of femicide offers an alternative perspective to understanding its implicit terrorism. They explain their ‘cartography’ of femicide by proposing ‘a reconfiguration of knowledge hierarchies that contests the notion of seamless translation—that is, the idea that Latin American feminists have merely appropriated theories from feminists of the global north without modifying or advancing new meaning in response to local contexts’ (5). The two authors consider that femicide not only describes the phenomenon of widespread gender-based violence, but also provides a new framework for terrorist violence studies.

Significantly, their use of femicide functions as cognate of the Spanish *feminicidio*. Here, I use the Spanish *feminicidio* to refer to the Juárez rapes and killings of women.

Since 1993, the number of *feminicidios* continues to rise despite international pressure and government-led initiatives. For more than two decades, hundreds of women and girls have been murdered in the Mexican city of Juárez (Chihuahua State) across the border from El Paso, Texas. Although the exact numbers are difficult to confirm, the body count is anywhere from four hundred to as high as one thousand or more. In 2005, Amnesty International reported that since 1993 more than 370 young women and girls have been murdered in Juárez and Chihuahua—‘at least a third suffering sexual violence—without the authorities taking proper measures to investigate and address the problem’ (Amnesty International 2005). The Juárez *feminicidio* targets a specific group of women and girls: young women from impoverished backgrounds, who work either as waitresses or in the *maquiladora* industry (manufacturing operation) or are students. Independent filmmaker Lourdes Portillo reports in her 2001 documentary, *Señorita extraviada*, that more than 270 young women have been raped and murdered in shocking and gruesome ways at the border of Juárez and El Paso, Texas.¹⁵ Similar to *The Invisible War*, *Señorita extraviada* uses the testimonial mode to provide agency to parents and families of the victims and the disappeared. They express their frustration and distrust of the Mexican authorities investigating their daughters’ disappearance and/or murder.

The Mexican *policía* have seemed to follow bizarre leads unsuccessfully while ignoring or failing to investigate evidence of police complicity. With evidence destroyed, crime scenes contaminated, files lost, information ignored, and disinformation spread, the “investigation” brings neither answer nor relief to the people of Juárez. Suspects ranged from a man with a history of sexual harassment to gang members working with others or on their own. Portillo

asks pointed questions in the film. Is it a conspiracy of bus drivers or the work of drug traffickers? Are the police involved? After years of investigation, no one has been prosecuted for these crimes and the *feminicidio* continues.¹⁶ The police have routinely dismissed the parents when they report their daughters missing, claiming that the missing girls are probably working as prostitutes or strippers or have run off with boyfriends. The discourse of the “prostitute-victim” is a common reaction of state officials. They have used this as justification of the Juárez *feminicidio*: blaming the victims for somehow bringing the violence on themselves, and, thus, the victims have no right to justice because they are not “innocent.” The discourse of the “prostitute-victim” is rooted in the gender power relationships entrenched in Mexico’s (and elsewhere) *machismo* and *marianismo*. Both have contributed to demarcate the virgin–whore dichotomy. As a form of hypermasculinity, *machismo* leads to aggression and domination; *marianismo* constitutes the compulsive normative feminine role forced on women. Women are expected to be pure and passive like the Virgin Mary and should fulfill only domestic roles (as wives and mothers) and not take part in paid labor outside the domestic sphere. The dichotomy simply implies that women must assume subservient roles, either as virgins to be protected or, when they disobey, as whores to be punished by men.

One of the most disturbing stories in *Señorita extraviada* is the interview with Maria, the victim of a sexual attack by police officers. She and her husband had called the police when someone attempted to attack her husband. Instead of arresting the attacker, Maria and her husband were detained and imprisoned. Maria was assaulted by police officers in prison and was told that it was common for women to be raped and beaten while in prison. According to Maria’s testimony, one of the officers showed her an album with photos of several young women taken to the desert and surrounded by guards who apparently had raped and tortured them. In the film, Maria describes the terror and hopelessness of the women in the photos.

Maria did not file a complaint about her attackers because of threats made while she was in jail and her fear that perhaps all officials were like the ones who abused her. In the end, she decided to report her abusers, who were supposedly prosecuted but were set free soon after. The movie suggests that the authorities may be involved in the deaths and disappearance of women.

The media and investigations following the *feminicidio* over the years have often implicated state police officers, drug traffickers, and the upper-class “juniors” (sons of the wealthy), among many others. In 2004, the arrests of several state police officers suspected of involvement in the drug cartel and in the *feminicidio*, led to a confession of an unidentified suspect who claimed that each time a major drug shipment crossed the border into the US, members of the cartel would celebrate by killing women. Some cartel members were even found wearing chains around their neck with the nipples of their victims. From 2004 to 2006, about 130 state officials were implicated in the *feminicidio* through the work of federal special prosecutors, but the majority of suspects were not convicted (Pineda-Madrid 2011; Rodriguez, Montané, and Pulitzer 2007). In the summer of 2013, a report announced the arrest of twelve people in connection to the killings of eleven women. According to the prosecutors’ office for the northern state of Chihuahua, alleged drug dealers, pimps, and small store owners were among the suspects. They allegedly belonged to a cartel that forced young women into prostitution and drug dealing and then killed them when they are ‘no longer of use’ (Fox News Latino 2013).

Whereas *Señorita extraviada* represents a cry for justice for the young women of Juárez, whose deaths have been ignored for two centuries, the documentary’s powerful footage also shows a disturbing portrait of Juárez, ‘the city of the future,’ as Portillo calls it in the film’s description. The irony implicit in her remark alludes to the implementation of the North

American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, which has resulted in the expansion of the *maquiladora* industry, creating a labor force mainly for women.¹⁷ The availability of cheap labor has been a great motivator for owners to open factories in Mexico, and the abundance of employment has motivated many women to migrate from southern regions of Mexico to border towns such as Juárez. Statistics of the gender representation in the *maquiladoras* show that for every three male workers, there are seven women between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five. Studies have shown a significant correlation between economic and political issues and violence against women along the border (Herrera et al. 2010). The *maquiladora* labor force has grown to nearly a quarter million workers in more than three hundred plants in the city, most of them owned by US businesses. In the midst of capital expansion on the border, economic and political structures fluctuate ‘between the formal and the informal, the legal and the illegal’ (González Rodríguez 2012: 8). Between paradoxes and contradictions, the perverse effects of institutional corruption and impunity consume the city’s inhabitants. In his book, *The Femicide Machine* (2012), journalist Sergio González Rodríguez sees the implementation of the *maquiladora* industry as a transborder, ultracapitalist scheme that contributes to the transformation of Juárez into what he calls the ‘femicide-machine.’ He uses the machine allegory to explain what seems to be an almost incomprehensible level of misogynistic violence and systematic failure of the Mexican authorities to address the *feminicidio* effectively. I read his ‘femicide machine’ as a neocolonial, patriarchal contact zone where the abstract terror of capitalism and globalization intersects with entrenched *machismo* and male hegemony in a judicially corrupt state (Chihuahua) plagued by drug trafficking. Thus the Juárez victims become everyday victims of this capitalist/criminal machine, to use González’s allegory, the casualties of what MacKinnon (2006) calls ‘male reality.’

Although women are needed in the labor force, and therefore indispensable as a group, they are undervalued and invisible as individuals (and thus easy to disappear) in this highly volatile contact zone. Similarly, although female soldiers have become a significant force in the US military, they are made “invisible” or less than by the military’s double standard of protecting the men and not protecting the women. The military’s continued failure to recognize that rape is enforced by its coercive conditions of gender/sex hierarchic inequalities is itself an act of terror against women.

<A>*Conclusion: Performing Activism and Empowerment*

Although the documentaries *The Invisible War* and *Señorita extraviada* were made eleven years apart, the filmmakers have the same goal of representing the forces of misogynistic violence while raising public awareness. Both films not only inform, but represent calls for action in their own contexts. *Señorita extraviada* follows the grassroots tradition of feminist activism; the release of *The Invisible War* initiated a campaign run by FitzGibbon Media in partnership with the filmmakers, turning the documentary into a project for change. The film has effected a policy change in the Pentagon: after watching the film, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta ordered that sexual assault investigations be conducted by a higher ranking colonel instead of the unit’s immediate commanding officer, and that each branch of the armed forces establish its own Special Victims Unit. Through the campaign, a petition was launched to urge the US Senate to move the decision to prosecute military sexual assault out of the chain of command. Another petition has persuaded the Department of Defense to use the film as a training tool and it has become part of the Pentagon’s curriculum.

It is also apparent that the film and its campaign have made the “invisible” visible by placing the US military and its handling of sexual abuse scandals under heightened public scrutiny. In

the 2011 Lackland Air Force sexual abuse scandal, the air force investigated twenty-five military training instructors for allegations of sexual misconduct, ranging from unprofessional relationships to rape, against forty-nine victims. Five of those instructors have been court-martialed and convicted, two more scheduled for court-martial, and one has received nonjudicial punishment as of November 2012. Significantly, the air force is also investigating the environment at Lackland that allowed this misconduct to occur. According to a public affairs officer at the Pentagon, ‘this swift response would not have happened without the film’s influence’ (FitzGibbon Media 2013).

On the other front, since the release of *Señorita extraviada* in 2001, Portillo has distributed copies of the film among grassroots groups throughout the southwest, the US–Mexico border, and Mexico City. The movie is used as a tool to raise public awareness and to fund-raise for the families of the murdered and the disappeared. As Fregoso (2003: 26) notes, this process of ‘radicalization’ empowers the agency of the mothers of the victims and activists on the border, ‘women who affirm the continuity of life while acting as politically motivated citizens demanding the rights of women within the nation-state.’ *Señorita extraviada* marks a critical juncture for Portillo as a human rights activist: she becomes involved in all aspects of seeking social change, as director, narrator, femicide detective, and interviewer. She affirms her role in her website: ‘as I traveled with it throughout Latin America and to other continents, presenting it in festivals, on college campuses, and to civil liberties groups, I understood for the first time that this is my job as a filmmaker: to teach, mentor and inspire others to be fiercely courageous and endlessly creative in making documentaries that confront oppression.’¹⁸

The rape culture in the US military and the *femicidio* in Ciudad Juárez are but two of a myriad of gender-based terrorism occurring globally, which calls for the envisioning of

effective borderless projects to reevaluate human rights violations against women as symptomatic of gender/sex hierarchic inequalities that extend beyond geopolitical borders.¹⁹

Notes

¹ *The Invisible War* premiered at the 2012 Sundance Film Festival, receiving the US Documentary Audience Award and was nominated for Best Documentary Feature at the Eighty-Fifth Oscar Academy Awards.

² Although statistics report that men are also sexually assaulted by other men, most sexual assault victims are women. According to Benedict (2009: 6), ‘27–30 percent of military men say they received “unwanted sexual attention” from other men, including rape.’

³ Since 1993, the border city of Juárez (bordering El Paso, Texas) has been a killing field of young women—the site of hundreds of unsolved murders and many abductions. According to the Amnesty International report *Mexico: Intolerable Killings* (2003), one-third of the women murdered since 1993 were in their early teens. The young women were raped and mutilated and their bodies dumped in the desert periphery or on city streets.

⁴ The Global Partnership to End Violence against Women was launched in March 2010 by the Avon Foundation, Vital Voices Global Partnership, and the US State Department. Since then, international multidisciplinary experts and nongovernmental organizations gather annually to develop and create global action plans to end gender-based violence. The last meeting was held in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in the Summer of 2013.

⁵ The US armed forces has five military branches: army, air force, navy, marine corps, and coast guard.

⁶ An official report by David F. Burrelli, *Women in Combat: Issues for Congress* (2013), indicates that from September 2001 to 28 February 2013, 299,548 female service members have been deployed for ‘contingency operations’ in Iraq and Afghanistan. In approximately

twelve years of combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, more than eight hundred women have been wounded and more than 130 have died. According to the Department of Defense, 16,407 female members were deployed in ‘contingency operation’ as of 29 February 2013.

⁷ Benedict points out that all but one of the soldiers interviewed did not allow her to use their real names. In cases where real names were used, the participants had already separated from the military.

⁸ Although Benedict notes that a few interviewees had also served in the Afghanistan war or elsewhere, the majority who participated in her study served in Iraq.

⁹ Since the early 1970s, radical feminists have linked terror to women’s oppression. For example, in ‘Rape: An Act of Terror’ (1973: 233), Barbara Mehrhof and Pamela Kearon argue that the ideology of sexism justifies rape as a political act which is embedded in the praxis of subordination by ‘members of a dominant class on members of the powerless class.’

¹⁰ William Ryan coined the phrase ‘blaming the victim’ in his 1971 book *Blaming the Victim*, describing victim blaming as an ideology used to justify racism and social injustice against black people in the US. The phrase ‘blaming the victim’ was adopted later by advocates for crime victims, in particular rape victims accused of fostering their victimization.

¹¹ The use of “walking mattress” implies that a woman receives a promotion by having sex with superiors. The abbreviation WM in the military is used for both woman marine and walking mattress. Other misogynist terms used against women in the military culture are “fresh fish,” “wookie monster,” “waste money,” and “target practice” (Wilson 2011).

¹² The statistics reported in *The Invisible War* are from studies by the US government. These are some statistics revealed in the film: an estimated five hundred thousand men and women in the military have been sexually assaulted since World War II; and in 2009, an estimated twenty thousand men were victims of military sexual assault. An estimated 15 percent of

recruits attempted or committed rape before entering service—which is double the rate in civilian society.

¹³ As shown in the documentary, the Veterans Affairs office denied Kori Cioca's request for jaw surgery. In a recent interview, Cioca revealed that anonymous donors who had seen the film contributed to help pay for her jaw surgery (Kiesewetter 2013).

¹⁴ Regina Vasquez's testimony is briefly featured in the film. An extended version of her testimony is included in the film's 'Extras,' wherein her husband John Vasquez is also interviewed. He describes Vasquez's journey to recovery: she did not disclose the military rape to him for years, making it difficult for him to understand her deep-seated anger. Apparently, it took her eleven years to work through the sexual trauma. In part, her "recovery" took form through her creativity and activism. Vasquez's art, called *Fatigues Clothesline*, was part of an exhibit 'Overlooked/Looked Over' at the National Veterans Art Museum in Chicago (February–September 2012). After the exhibit, she founded the organization Fatigues Clothesline, described on its website as 'a vehicle which bridges a gap between survivors and their family, their therapists and the advocates who are advocating for us in Washington DC by providing communication, symbolism, awareness and Change regarding military sexual trauma.' On the website Vasquez also introduces herself: 'My name is Regina Vasquez. I am a United States Marine Corps Veteran, survivor of military rape, military sexual harassment and gender discrimination.' See <http://www.fatiguesclothesline.com/default.html>, accessed on 24 September 2013.

¹⁵ The film was awarded the Special Jury Award (2002) at the Sundance Film Festival; the Nestor Almendros Prize at the Human Rights Watch New York Film Festival (2002); the Distinguished Achievement Award and the IDA Distinguished Documentary Achievement Awards, Feature Competition by the International Documentary Association (2002 and 2003);

Best Documentary Award at the Havana International Film Festival (2002); El Ariel Award, Best Mexican Documentary at the La Academia Mexicana de Artes y Ciencias Cinematograficas (2002); and the Official Selection at the International Public Television INPUT Conference (2003).

¹⁶ According to statistics provided by Casa Amiga, a nonprofit organization that shelters many victims of sexual crimes and other types of violence, between 1993 and 2007 (before Mexican President Felipe Calderón escalated the war against the cartels in Juárez), there were a total of 385 women reported murdered. From 2008 to 2011, Casa Amiga reported that there were 789 women officially reported murdered, a more than 100 percent increase despite a saturation of military and federal police in the city. Through June of 2012, another sixty women have been killed, reports show (see Kolb 2012). Several organizations such as Casa Amiga have been formed as a response to the *feminicidio*: Amigos de Mujeres (Friends of Women), Justicia Para Nuestra Hijas (Justice for Our Daughters), Mujeres de Negro (Women in Black), Mujeres Por Juárez (Women for Juárez), and Nuestras Hijas de Regreso A Casa (May Our Daughters Come Home). Susana Chávez Castillo, a well-respected activist who was an active member in Nuestras Hijas de Regreso A Casa, was herself murdered and mutilated in Juárez in early January 2011. Her body was found strangled with a bag over her head and her left hand cut off. Sadly, and ironically, she coined and popularized the slogan ‘not one more death’ (*Ni una muerte más*).

¹⁷ *Maquiladoras* originated in Mexico in the 1960s along the US–Mexico border. However, the number of *maquiladoras* has increased exponentially after NAFTA. *Maquiladoras* are factories created to reduce production costs for capitalist investors by employing cheaper Mexican labor: they produce electronic equipment, clothing, plastics, furniture, appliances, and auto parts. A majority of the *maquiladoras* are owned by US companies; some are owned

by investors from Japan and European countries. The *maquiladoras* are also considered sweatshops where mainly young women work for as little as fifty cents per hour. In Juárez, *maquiladoras* are known for providing free buses to transport their workers from work to home and vice versa. However, reports exist that many women who get on those buses do not make it home. As suggested by Portillo in *Señorita extraviada*, the bus drivers may be implicated in the *feminicidio*.

¹⁸ See Portillo's personal website: <http://www.lourdesportillo.com/index.php>, accessed on 30 July 2013.

¹⁹ Rape has become another instrument of war and genocide at the end of the twentieth century. From the conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina to Rwanda, girls and women have been raped, tortured, imprisoned, and executed. The UN has reported that in Rwanda between 100,000 and 250,000 women were raped during the three months of genocide in 1994 and estimates that up to 60,000 women were raped in the former Yugoslavia (1992–1995). As reported in 1998 by the UN, sexual violence during wartimes is tacitly accepted as inevitable (see UN Department of Public Information 2013).

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