*Lydia Alpízar, the author of this article, is a feminist human rights activist. She is one of the founders of Elige Youth Network for Reproductive and Sexual Rights and of the Latin American and Caribbean Youth Network for Reproductive and Sexual Rights.***“Impunity and Women's Rights in Ciudad Juárez” *Human Rights Dialogue* 2.10 (Fall 2003)**

Since 1993, about 370 women have been brutally killed, and several hundreds more have disappeared, in the U.S.–Mexico border city of Ciudad Juárez, in the state of Chihuahua. To date, only one person—charged with only one of the crimes—has been sentenced. The victims are young women, generally under 29 years old. They are mostly poor, often workers in the maquiladoras (assembly factories), and live in the marginalized areas of the city…

The women’s killings in Ciudad Juárez began in the late 1980s and increased significantly in 1993. Since then, the total number of murders has been increasing monthly. Despite the systematic nature of these killings, authorities did not begin investigating until 1995, when they captured a man whom they continue to call the “serial killer” of the women. But the killings have continued, even spreading to nearby cities: in 1999 disappearances were reported in the state capital, Chihuahua City, four hours away from Juárez. By 2003, several women had been killed in that city, in much the same way as they had been in Juárez.

Violence against women is legitimized in Mexican society because, like other patriarchal societies, it devalues women, and the loss in particular of marginalized women often carries no political cost. The killings in Juárez are the product of a complex set of dynamics, and a number of characteristics of the city explain why Juárez presents the perfect environment for gender-based violence. The impact of free trade policies and the ensuing population growth have weakened the city’s social fabric. Jobs in the maquiladoras are characterized by poor working conditions, low salaries, and rampant labor rights violations. Juárez’s geographic location as a border city makes it an important point for the trafficking of immigrants and drugs. In addition, judicial and government institutions are often corrupt and infiltrated by interests representing the drug trade. These factors add up to a city with one of the highest levels of criminality in Mexico, with little sense of local identity or community.

Also, for many years the maquiladoras employed mostly women, which meant that women occupied the traditional “masculine role” as breadwinners. The changes in gender roles prompted by women’s entry into the labor market as maquiladora workers had an impact on gender relations and thus on increasing gender violence. Furthermore, authorities do not demand and ensure that foreign investors respect basic labor rights—as has been documented in several cases brought to the International Labor Organization and the North American Agreement on Labor Cooperation—thus allowing violations that discriminate against workers, particularly women. In most cases, abuses in the maquiladoras are not punished, adding another dimension to the existing culture of impunity.

Women’s organizations and victims’ families mobilized almost immediately following the escalation of violence in the 1990s. Involved organizations, together with the victims’ relatives, began pressuring state-level authorities to take concrete measures to stop the killings. Yet the response of local authorities was to blame the victims’ “questionable moral behavior” or dismiss them as “prostitutes.”

In 2001, as the killings escalated, women’s rights organizations joined with mainstream human rights organizations and unions to launch the campaign “Stop Impunity: No More Murders of Women.” We wanted to unveil the existing discrimination in traditional human rights work and emphasize women’s empowerment. In Mexico, where the transition to democracy is an ongoing process and the human rights debate has focused on civil and political rights, women’s rights remain marginal on the national agenda, in spite of such extreme cases as the systematic murders in Juárez.

Public outcries over the murders have been fierce—letter-writing campaigns, marches, rallies, and the production of plays, documentaries, and books—yet neither the federal nor state government has made serious efforts to address the violence. A new “integrated security plan” for Juárez marks a new attitude on the part of the Mexican government. However, this plan has no assigned budget, and even though civil society would like to view this as a positive step, we are waiting to see its impact on violence against women in Chihuahua.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. What are the factors that make violence against women in Ciudad Juarez so prevalent?
2. What role did civil society play to try to stop the violence against women? Do you think they were they successful? Why or why not?
3. Is the issue of violence against women in Ciudad Juarez from 1993-2003 reflective of Mexican politics during that time period? Why or why not?