



## Hidden Gender Violence in the War on Organized Crime in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico (2010-2011)<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

Militarization<sup>2</sup> in this country – Mexico – is a fundamental factor of political definition due to the loss of life<sup>3</sup> that it has represented, and the impact on public life stemming from the constant violation of the human rights of men, but especially for women, who have both seen their everyday life modified. This fight against organized crime, some have defined it as a war against the people, which pretends to be a war on drug trafficking. In Ciudad Juárez, we already know that the presence of the army and police on the streets does not increase safety, and instead, gender violence is exposed in deaths that occur constantly, so that militarization and impunity are the key to reading the new events as part of a hegemonic project, in which the bodies and humanity are no longer relevant.

### Keywords

Gender violence; fragmentation; sensations and experiences.

### Academic Discipline And Sub-Disciplines

Sociology; Gender Studies; Psychology; Cultural Studies

### SUBJECT CLASSIFICATION

Sociology and Gender Studies

### TYPE (METHOD/APPROACH)

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## INTRODUCTION

The power struggle established between the State and organized crime between 2007 and 2011, had as its purpose finding out which of these hegemonic powers could beat the other in order to anoint itself as the dominant group over the other. It is a fact that the violence increased following the entry of the army and the federal police into Ciudad Juarez, and this place became the epitome of institutional violence that multiplies the crime rate through the impunity with which active members of the armed forces and police act, in their various interactions with citizens in the state of Chihuahua and Ciudad Juarez specifically.

In this military and police interaction, bodies were principally targeted, and among those bodies are those of men fighting against other men to dominate them, those of women that are violated by men, and even, those of women that are attacked by other women. All this, I insert in different practices of gender violence that have not been exposed, but have been promoted, permitted, and reproduced in and by a firmly established oppressive patriarchal system.

However, in the circumstances mentioned, women and young men<sup>4</sup> are those who were, and are still, most likely to be attacked. Therefore it is clear that the Mexican government does not act in accordance with international human rights commitments undertaken to take firm steps towards the eradication of violence and impunity, as at 2011, Juarez citizens had been demanding for four years the immediate withdrawal of the army to its barracks, an end to impunity, in addition to insisting on the application of justice and an end to the femicides<sup>5</sup> that for almost two decades have continued to happen.

With the above, I undertake this reflection henceforth from the following questions: what is the gender violence aroused during the militarization of the city? And, what kind of messages were conveyed about women's and young men's bodies by the various armed forces?

To respond to the formulated questions, in this paper the discussion revolves around testimonies collected in one of the focus groups conducted with women during 2010 and 2011 in fieldwork undertaken in different parts of the city. This group consisted of seven young women<sup>6</sup>, with a mean age of 15 years and located in the suburbs of Plutarco E. Calles and El Marmol. Hence, this presentation is an attempt to preserve the collective memory of certain events occurring during nearly six years (2006-2011), and which changed the social life and day-to-day of this entity and its inhabitants. The importance of preserving these memories is related to the fact that: 'memory is always present, prompt to ask and prompt to answer. Prompt to forget too. Without memory there is no notion of time, there is no present.' With this, it affirms that one of the objectives of memory is retelling, this is how it confirms its existence, gives life, as 'when it creates and generates a sequence of events' (Piñon 2006: 34-35). Thus memory preserves, forms the collective history and does not allow us to forget, which also prepares us for the future.

Therefore, even if today (2013) the army and the federal police have returned to their barracks and the authorities assure us that the crime rate and homicide/femicide rate has dropped substantially, it is important to understand the perceptions that were formed by certain citizen groups from the militarization experienced. To do this, I frame the analysis from a gender perspective in which I approach theories such as: Nelida Piñon (2006), Judith Butler (2002), Meghana Nayak and Jennifer Suchland (2006), Nidia Iris Cacho Niño (2009) and Andrea Rodó (1994), among others. I development three basic points:

- I recount the space since the militarization.
- I decipher the female body as a social representation of the projects imposed.
- I present some testimonies about gender violence from a female-citizen perspective.

## NEW PRESENCES, OTHER SCENES

During the past five years -2007-2011- as citizens, we have seen that militarization, not only the military and their vehicles on the streets but their presence, also translates into a naturalized misogynistic violence, like a further expression of patriarchy in which the dispute over the possession or control of the territory is revealed, and which is also embodied in its people. In subordinated bodies – especially female – upon transferring 'male anxiety and gender violence that the hegemony in itself holds' (Nayak and Suchland, 2006: 475) onto this group and through sexual violence by intimidating, pressuring, submitting and humiliating women of the enemy as in any war (Cacho 2011). This makes it possible to legitimize and (re) produce the androcentric power of an indolent State in the face of the violence suffered.

The National Citizen Femicide Observatory already stated in 2008 that the country's militarization powers violence against women and impunity. In its report *A look at femicide in Mexico, 2007-2008*, it stresses that the administration of Felipe Calderon and its boost for the participation of the armed forces in public safety tasks, generated a significant increase in human rights violations, which include the abuse of authority, illegal searches, torture, rape and arbitrary arrests, among others. This permissiveness of violence creates a favorable environment for impunity, understood as the inefficiency of the instances of justice due to corruption and the protection of those responsible for it.



The presence of the military and federal police in the streets, as well as violating Article 129 of the Constitution<sup>7</sup>, frontally assaults life and the view of citizens whose urban landscape has changed to 'normalize' the violence that caused the steady flow of these military figures in all public spaces, in order to turn this war into a strategy of legitimation and of the exercise of power by the State (Nayak and Suchland 2006). As Nidia Iris Cacho stated (2011), the aim of this war tactic ensures the dominance and reproduction of power as the violent order that systemically subordinates society.

A state of emergency is thus installed in the locality that, rather than discourage organized crime groups, encourages them to take women as part of the spoils of this war to which they were summoned by the Calderon government. Not only that, women also become the instrument through which men are attacked in the face of manifestations of power and abuse that both federal police and military undertake by raping, harassing or sexually assaulting the bodies of those who are girlfriends, wives, sisters, mothers or girlfriends of these men.

As stated by Raj, quoted by Nayak and Suchland, '[...] the border, like the people who inhabit it, paradoxically brings together the greatest conditions so that any hegemonic order of the state is imposed there' (2006: 474). This is the circumstance under which we of the border live and the reason why this directly impacts on space and subjects, while order and hierarchical experience converge, in a kind of ongoing rehearsal in which processes are implemented in which, to quote Cacho 'the lack of opportunities, strengthening "traditional" roles, gender stereotypes, differentiated terms of labor, abuse and sexual harassment are just some of the manifestations of structural violence' (2011: 4), and – symbolically and practically – we are placed on a constant boundary by inhabiting border/marginal body and space.

Therefore, militarization became the extreme form in which the Mexican State seeks to gain control of the territories in which our bodies are included. Bodies that in the face of sexual violence carried out on these, are submitted and weakened as a form of torture used to take those bodies to the limit as long as the sexist supremacy persists within the social structure defined in a geopolitical context in which we daily transit citizens between the geographical, political and cultural frontiers imposed.

The imposition of this new enforcement process in the locality – represented by the militarization – entails the fact of living a new city. Spaces under constant deployment of patrols, military, weapons, roadblocks – all presences in constant motion with which public and private spaces are invaded, without the slightest qualms in the face of a puzzled citizenry as to the excess of the warlike-phallic symbolism. Thus, the urban space/landscape has acquired other dimensions that were hitherto unknown. Now new scenarios are imposed, in which warlike images prevail, but also murdered, bleeding, decapitated, abandoned bodies, that violate and crush not only the vision of the everyday landscape of men and women, but also beat the citizenry, already in itself constrained in a besieged city, head on.<sup>8</sup>

However, all these events – the same ones that evolve into an insulting violence and violations of human rights – are used by the State to reiterate, in various forms, the presence of military and federal police in the city as necessary and just, even if there are zones within which a desolate landscape prevails,<sup>9</sup> of abandonment, of escape, by business or property owners who, in the face of fear of extortion, blackmail or bribery, gave up the space and abandoned businesses (Ravelo and Dominguez 2010).

Unfortunately, citizens, but especially women, can realize how: 'The militarization-violence-drug trafficking circle places women in situations of particular vulnerability' (Cacho 2011: 6), as is the exposure to any type of violence. For this reason, militarization can be considered in itself a 'gender policy' which reproduces and intensifies the aggression against women by brandishing this 'sexual violence as a strategy of war' and by taking the bodies of the same women as spoils in this offensive. Here, impunity again becomes clear by dumping on women and young men – on behalf of the various police bodies – these sexist and misogynist practices, which include bullying, harassment, kidnapping, rape and derogatory 'compliments' about women's bodies, and by feminizing the bodies of many young people when free transit through the city and safety, to which they are entitled, is destroyed within them.

## THE SOCIAL BODY OF WOMEN

In Ciudad Juarez, to speak of human rights for women is implausible when we have been the center of the internationally known femicide. With the militarization experienced in the locality, again the women are those who confront a reality in which other violations of their human rights arise, by gender itself being 'a site of violence' (Nayak and Suchland 2006: 467). This means that these bodies become the place where this type of violence is embodied by being built and becoming objects/subjects of the sexism prevalent in patriarchal societies and in which, to quote Nidia Iris Cacho, 'a social learning is guaranteed where the right of "ownership" over women affirms the historically granted prerogatives of the male gender and deepens the inequalities between genders' (2011: 9).

If we look to Andrea Rodó, she explains that bodies are 'a social and subjective reality', so the primary form of these is that of 'social objects' in which we come to establish ourselves as instruments of meaning, symbolic instruments, but above all, we are private objects with our own direct interpretation of our experience, life lesson and practice (1994: 85). But what can this experience and/or life lesson be when the norm was imposed hierarchically marking differences and inequalities between, among other things, gender, class, race and generation? No doubt the answers require deep reflections, but it is clear that women experience the hierarchical order: first, from the rule imposed through fear of authority; second, under a discipline that aims to break the body through punishment and/or aggression; and third, through



the mediation of guilt we have injected from the Judeo-Christian ideology which has marked us with the original sin, the reason why when we talk, - especially - of women in vulnerable circumstances, it is impossible to ignore the experience of that hierarchy supported in/by the existing patriarchal system.

Here it is important to consider the disquisition that Judith Butler makes on the body when she talks about 'the body posited as prior to the sign (language), is always posited or signified as prior' (2002: 57). That is, we can say that while the body precedes the sign, in the same sense the action also precedes it and thus, it is through language that significance is given to both - body and action -, so it is through this means that the body and the action occur at the same time that they are (re) produced by language. With this, Butler invites us to (re) think the body as a map with certain marks inscribed in some context by the social structure in a significant practice, which is the culture and that makes the body this regulated social space (2001: 162).

Taking up again on Rodó (1994), we have that she states that the body as an object is a space of meaning, practices, attitudes, and images. A statement with which Butler agrees, when discussing the body and arguing that 'What is important in an object is its matter [...] and the distinction of the form/matter that converts into an essential element for the articulation of a masculinist policy' (2002: 59). Taking into consideration the masculinist policies that this author - Butler - alludes to, nothing more is observed than a hegemonic project imposed through the constant representation of misogynist/sexist practices that configure and give form to the reality in which feelings, values, messages, norms, customs and habits are materialized. Everything that makes up the matter/substance that shapes us as people. And even though Butler also argues that bodies are not a passive medium in which culture inscribes itself without resistance, both authors - Rodó and Butler - refer us back to that palpable matter - physical or not - in which the social representation is inscribed on bodies and in which a personal, whilst also collective, story lies.

In the specific case of the women of Ciudad Juárez, this social representation is expressed overwhelmingly in a masculinized androcentrism that continues to observe and reproduce stereotypes of oppression and subordination on female and/or feminized bodies when these continue to be considered as objects of possession, pleasure, submission, vengeance and revenge, while these same bodies acquire a devaluation of themselves. Thus the gender condition is (re) produced, leading to the continued perpetuation of guilt, fear, doubt, shame, ambiguities, feelings, all acquired in advance within the clear and existing sexist ideology.

Without a doubt, this helps us to observe - despite these hierarchical systems - the fact that women's bodies are the product of a series of knowledge, hegemonically organized and accumulated, which leads us to the perception of a dichotomous reality that is naturalized; the reason for which the implication is seen in said bodies - according to what Rodó mentions - of 'the individual and the social, the subjective and the objective, the inner and outer' (1994: 83). Characteristics with which, says the same author: 'a general overview of actions and behaviors is established; opinion and attitude that are partial reflections of a social representation at the individual level' (1994: 83). Something that refers not only to the body/matter in the abstract, but to concrete bodies signed with social stories and stratum that have come to constitute socialized and subjective individuals that give identity to individual bodies.

In the specific case that concerns us here, these women from Ciudad Juárez consider themselves, with good reason, bodies with greater permeability and helplessness while there is a bio-power<sup>10</sup> implanted beneath the creation of certain 'hegemonic practices', which go against a 'private world of being and meaning' (Nayak and Suchland 2006: 470). Hence, the bodies, newly ordered, subdued, trained for oppression, develop a permanently questioned subjectivity - in this case feminine - that crystallizes in exacerbated gender violence directed towards the bodies of women in this city. At the same time, the foundations are laid so that now it is the young women who experience being victims of the sexism that they are exposed to by soldiers and police, by being the objects of obscene - tacitly and explicitly - expressions, taunts, harassment, bullying, kidnapping and continuous violations by police and military bodies, in the full use of their social-judicial prerogatives, but above all in the exercise of power conferred by the State - currently - in all public and also private spaces - streets, parks, dance halls, and even homes-.

Given the situation laid out, not only has a 'social construction of fear' formed from the subjective, as Reguillo assures (1998: 3), but also this fear becomes an objective in the presence of constant intimidation and threat, taking a prominent place in the lives of women that later converts into 'hopelessness, isolation, resignation and violence' (p. 3). Here, some phrases of these young women that evidence what is mentioned:

'[...] you cannot do anything, because the same police walk with the drug traffickers and all, they just say that it will end and that it will end, but they do not say when, and then we go from bad to worse', or:

'[...] they are the same federals the ones who disrespect us, and well, I am already scared. ..., I pretend I am very brave and everything, but no, the truth is yes, it scares me.' (Focus groups, February, March 2011).

It is important to note that the feeling of threat and harassment stems from the effectiveness of the fear implanted, so that this account is the product of the contemporary collective memory, since the bodies, their bodies, are 'a whole, a continent, a geography that exceeds anatomical limits to be the territory of fantasy, of desire and of rights' (Piñon 2006: 51) and they do not visualize their rights.



## THE CASES ARE NOT SCARCE

The institutional and social violence in this war disguised as a fight against drugs principally has an effect on the bodies of women and young men. We have seen how the consequences of militarization are varied and complex for the lives of women. The militarization causes a persistent increase in prostitution around military settlements, and this puts women in a situation of risk and stigmatization while encouraging their vulnerability by exposing them to situations of harassment and sexual abuse by police forces.

In this context of militarization and police presence on the streets of Ciudad Juarez, cases of rape, torture and harassment against women have been exacerbated, creating and reproducing, to quote Lagarde (1992), what female/feminized bodies represent: territories to be occupied and in times of war – as presently – to be invaded.

The focus groups undertaken with young women, have allowed me to confirm the prevalence of situations of violence and violation of the human rights of women. The testimonies of these women demonstrate how sexual violence itself becomes a form of torture – by these police groups – that weakens and subjects women to this territory, that they already consider their domain; this same patriarchal ideology also turns against the youngest men when they are subdued or feminized, making a show of their authority over them, and reverts against women in various manifestations. The following is an example of this:

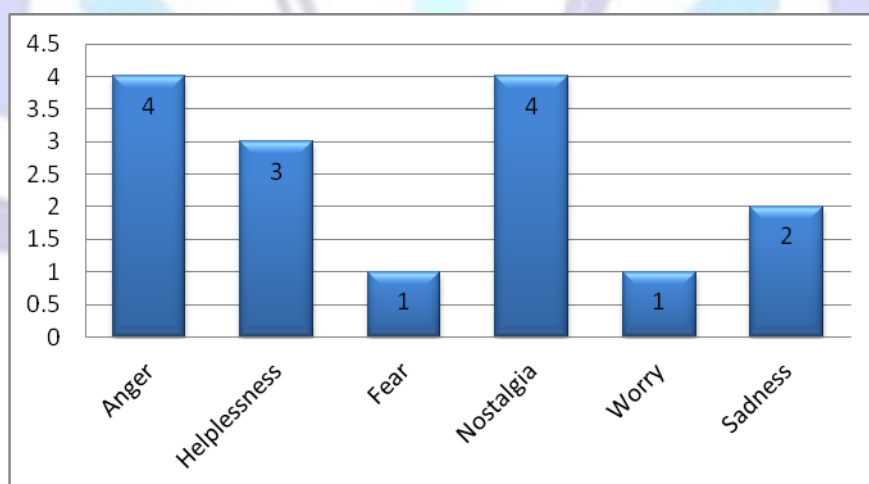
'[...] the soldiers are the ones that yell things at us and they aren't even nice, [...] that is, they are vulgar things, things they should not do because they are here to serve us';

'[...] also the last time I went downtown and me and my husband were walking, and there was a very pretty girl and the soldiers were yelling obscenities at her, I mean, I think that they are here to take care of us not to be doing things that this';

'[...] in the school where I was downtown, which teaches nursing, we would pass by and they would say to us: oh little nurse my heart just stopped. And they shouted obscenities at us, I mean us, the girls and the soldiers shouting things at us, and then suddenly some classmates no longer arrived at school';

'They have said many things to my sister when she walks around downtown, the federals have said them to her, I mean, they have harassed her, they have made her feel uncomfortable, since she defends herself, but well she can't do anything and besides they are in public areas, but well yes, it is also part of the police, the federals, the authority, everything.' (Focus groups, January, February, and March 2011).

As can be seen in the declarations presented, gender violence is not only present, it has also been alarmingly reproduced and intensified on those who are represented as objects of possession of others – fathers, brothers, husbands, sons – other men to beat, others to dominate. Therefore, we as women, being defined by men as the 'other', are considered bodies that can also be made available since as Butler says, we are a product of culture, so that to experience one's body is 'to take on and reinterpret gender norms' that have been handed down from a masculine hegemony, concretized by the patriarchal system, one that triggers feelings of sadness, fear, anger, worry, helplessness and nostalgia, as shown in the following chart (figure 1).



**Figure 1. Effects of violence presented by seven young women from the focus group 'Youth Promotion House', residents of the suburbs: Plutarco E. Calles and Marble, Ciudad Juarez (2011).**

Source: Self-elaborated figure with data obtained from fieldwork of the Project: 'Strategies for the prevention and intervention in Juarez femicide'

Today, in this locality the hierarchical system is present in any force with judicial/military authority which exercises a power conferred and created by and for the hegemony conceived as the link between discourse and practices charged with



gender violence aimed, in this case, at women and that require deciphering so as to stop generating in them a sense of threat and fear by having perceived, known or seen the outrage of other women like them and that is narrated here:

'[...] I saw that the federals took two girls, and yes, [...] me and a friend were walking, and the girls were behind us, far behind us, and if we didn't turn around, danger and they would have grabbed us also, just that we ran, we turned the corner';

'Well it is dangerous because the police do not look after us, on the contrary, it is the same police that make us feel uncomfortable with their abuse of authority, we don't trust, as much because of the thieves as for the police.';

'[...] the police themselves are the ones who, supposedly, are looking after us and I feel that it is not the truth and so you feel unsafe, we used to say, no, here comes a patrol we must speak to them, that's good, so they respect us and stuff. And now no, since you can't trust, you can even trust them';

'And I also think, well it is assumed that the police are here to look after us, right? And they are the ones, [...] they are the ones who are really taking women and doing all these things' (Focus groups, February 2011).

No doubt hearing or reading these stories of young women, most of them underage, leads us to the consideration that the body itself is the territory in which violence is inscribed. As such, they not only run the risk of harassment when walking the streets or being subject to inspection of their vehicles, their possessions and their bodies at checkpoints, but, as the testimonies inform, this harassment by federal police and military in parks and suburbs has become part of everyday life, since the rounds in their communities are continuous and to them, imply verbal abuse, harassment, and in some cases sexual harassment, including kidnap. With this, the suspicion and mistrust are more than reasonable, because the police mechanisms and authority, according to Reguillo, generate exclusion and new forms of everyday life in which 'places of sociability and collective encounter are diminished, resulting in a "downsizing" of the urban experience' (1998: 11).

Another concern is that the testimonies highlight that they do not make any type of complaint out of fear or for having the certainty that their demands and complaints will not trigger any action against the perpetrators, police, military or members of organized crime. The worst though is that between among the new practices acquired, some young women from the focus groups come to the conclusion that there is no way to feel protected, that their only option is to stay home and not expose themselves because transiting through the streets, and even leaving school or home to go outside, is a risk, so that a retreat to the private space is perceived.

As can be observed, different people – different women, different suburbs, different words – share similar experiences and feelings, of a hegemonic domination that rests on those bodies again relegated by fear, anxiety, dread; feelings that foster concealment, not only of a permanently undervalued subjectivity, but of material bodies in order to safeguard them from the violence that ignores their rights as human beings and citizens.

## **SUMMARY, MORE THAN CONCLUSION**

Once again, in Ciudad Juarez it is confirmed that which the women of the state of Chihuahua have experienced for decades since their confrontation with femicide: there exists an institutional violence generated from a hegemonic project, resulting in omissions and acts by public servants who discriminate, delay, obstruct and impede the enjoyment and exercise of the human rights of women, as well as their access to public policies designed to prevent, respond to, investigate, punish and eradicate the different types of violence. From the demand for justice for the femicides, relatives of victims, activists from social organizations and academic defenders of the rights of women in Ciudad Juarez know all too well how the impunity and absence of an ethic of truth, foster an environment of vulnerability and helplessness for women, through the reproduction of the idea that the murders of women can be committed by any group or individual without receiving any punishment. With the current militarization experienced in the city, if the bodies of men do not matter, those of women are even less important because we are considered part of the spoils of war that can be distributed without any intervening penalization.

The women of Juarez, not only do we experience femicide as the act of extreme violence that we suffer for being women, now we also live in a context in which we breathe fear, the threat, the risk of a war that we did not request and of which more and more we form part of the statistic of the so-called 'collateral damage'. All this has caused women to withdraw into the private domain, making sure to not go out alone, to not go out at night, to not stray from the places that we go to, to not engage in conversations with strangers, to not give out personal information – among other things – that have managed to not only significantly reduce our daily activities, but also our space for mobility has focused sharply on risk and the lack of confidence to circulate and walk the city.

Today, in the distance, we can say that it is clear that existing public policies have not been sufficient or effective enough to guarantee the observance of human rights of women and ensure their access to justice, the right to a life free of violence and the conditions to enjoy public safety, rather than the uncertainty that immures.



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## FOOTNOTES

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<sup>2</sup> This is defined as: the action of instilling discipline or military spirit or giving military character or organization to a community, according to the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language. In this case, to quote Robles, the State discourse refers to establishing an order making the dominance of one group prevail – the State – over another – organized crime, drug trafficking -, which does not stop constituting gender violence between the same gender, men.

<sup>3</sup> The statistics change from day to day, during this period, but even still, according to Ruben Mosso's article in Milenio, Police. 12 January 2012-5:18, a.m. 'Attorney General: in 9 months, 12,903 deaths for "narco-fight" '. In Ciudad Juárez this corresponds to 1,206 of the total number of deaths registered in the country up until the month of September 2011, the reason for which this locality continues to be considered among the five most violent cities in the world. Electronic reference: [www.milenio.com/cdb/doc/noticias2011/f33c980e45771284cf4cae82125b5b12](http://www.milenio.com/cdb/doc/noticias2011/f33c980e45771284cf4cae82125b5b12), January 14, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Luis E. Cervera and Julia E. Monarrez Fragoso, document that in the state of Chihuahua in 2008 the number of homicides recorded are mainly of young people aged 15 to 19 years and that this was multiplied four times between 2007 and 2008, in Ciudad Juárez alone 133 young people died during 2008.

<sup>5</sup> In Monarrez Fragoso (2009), the definition of femicide is: '[...] the murder of a girl/woman committed by a man, with all the elements of the unequal relationship between the sexes: the generic superiority of man against the generic subordination of women, misogyny, control and sexism' (p. 86). All elements favored and reproduced in/by a permissive State in a system of patriarchal domination.

<sup>6</sup> On this article is only shown one of the four focus groups used on this research due to space and time required to analyze all of them. However, the results of each focus group are conclusive and similar to the one which is presented on this research.

<sup>7</sup> Article 129 of the Constitution says: 'In peacetime, no military authority may exercise functions beyond those that are directly related to military discipline.' Clearly, if it is not wartime the army should remain stationed for the protection of citizens and itself. Address/page: <http://info4.juridicas.unam.mx/ijure/fed/9/130.htm?s=> Consulted January 22, 2012.

<sup>8</sup> If, as Zygmunt Bauman assures (2004) in the text *Society Situated* that 'places are no longer protected, no matter how heavily armed and fortified they are' (p. 114). A clear representation of this is the fact that in Ciudad Juárez, even with the amount of military and federal forces at hand, the violence does not stop and instead this militarization has curtailed the space of the citizenry.

<sup>9</sup> Luis Cervera and Julia Monarrez (2011), in the analysis and geo-referencing that they make of the violence that occurs in Ciudad Juárez, they mention that the Central zone reports a low rate of events, the Pronaf zone very low, and they classify as the critical region of this series of events as the Zaragoza-Clouthier zone. (p.12).

<sup>10</sup> Rossana Reguillo defines bio-power by looking to M. Foucault to indicate, 'the subjection of the body to a discipline that leads to the optimization of its capabilities and the increase of its usefulness' (1998: 6)

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### Author' biography with Photo



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