Resistance and compromiso at the global frontlines: Gender wars at the US-Mexico border (with Kathleen Staudt)

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8 Resistance and compromiso at the global frontlines
Gender wars at the US–Mexico border

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Case No. 1 January 23th. Abna Chavira Farel. Young girl strangled and beaten, raped both anally and vaginally, bruise on the chin and a black eye. Was wearing a white sweater with design and short blue pants. Occurred in Campestre Virreyes.

January 25th. Angelina Luna Villabos. Age 16 ... White, pregnant and robust form. She was strangled with the cable of a stolen television.

March 14th. Jessica Lizarde León. Radio DJ murdered by gunshots.

April 21st. Luz de la O García. Died as a result of being beaten on the streets of G. Prieto and Altamirano.


May 13th. Identity unknown. Age 25 ... White skin, light colored hair, wearing jeans and cloth shoes. Raped and stabbed. Attacker unknown.¹

Introduction

We write from the Ciudad Juárez–El Paso region, a large metropolitan area of 2 million people that spans the international boundary between the United States and Mexico. Ciudad Juárez, Mexico's fifth largest city, has been at the frontlines of globalisation for decades. Mexican and public policies have facilitated the establishment here of mostly US-owned export-processing factories, known as maquiladoras, by encouraging capital investment, lowering tariffs and making available a pool of cheap, mostly female, labour. Ciudad Juárez is now home to hundreds of maquiladoras that, at their high point in 2000, employed a quarter of a million workers, the majority female (Staudt and Coronado 2002).

Since the early 1990s, over 300 girls and women have been murdered here and many hundreds have disappeared. Most of the victims are Mexican teenagers and young women, although others are from the United States, Honduras and the Netherlands (Washington Valdez 2002; Benítez et al. 1999; González 2002; Staudt and Coronado 2002: ch. 6). A third of the victims were mutilated before death, in horrendous and gruesome ways, their bodies left to decay in the outlying desert. The death tally keeps rising,
although absolute numbers are contentious and continually revised by the Mexican authorities. In February 2003, four more victims were found within a week, including several teenage girls and a 6-year-old child. The judicial authorities have done little to investigate the murders of these girls and women, most of them poor, and their families lack the political clout and economic means to secure justice. Activist organisations and networks on both sides of the international border are struggling to confront this violence, the globalised political-economic system in which it is produced and the inadequacies of a Mexican state and judicial system which has little interest in solving the murders and which lacks respect for the victims’ families.

We propose that these murders need to be understood in the context of pervasive violence and gendered conflict at the border. The concept of ‘gender wars’ is useful here. Gender wars occur at three levels: (1) overt, brutal violence against women; (2) normalised, everyday violence involved in the struggle for survival for women and their families, with maquiladora workers earning the Mexican minimum wage of $30 a week; and (3) conflict between women activists (and a few men) and the disinterested, male-dominated state.

How are these gender wars linked to globalisation? At the most basic level, the porous character of the border is significant. Globalisation is often associated with the eradication of borders, the capacity of social problems to transcend particular territories and the consequent inability of states to respond to these problems on their own. Certainly, gender wars in Ciudad Juárez are not contained by the international border but rather amplified by it. Many of these killings could well have been carried out by people who are border-crossers and this militates against their prosecution. More fundamentally, the border has helped to create a context in which the female labour pool has been sexualised and viewed as disposable. From the days of prohibition, when border cities like Ciudad Juárez became centres for bars and nightclubs catering to North Americans and prostitution became rampant, to the establishment of Ciudad Juárez as a free trade zone, the economy in the region has burgeoned on the backs of women. Women’s labour is crucial to the maquiladora industries but the women themselves are seen as low status and not fully respectable. Indeed, negative stereotypes of young maquila women have become embedded in the minds of police and policy-makers to such an extent that they encourage inaction in addressing the crimes of murder and mutilation. Finally, the globalisation of the masculinised state is key to the women’s predicament. The Mexican state will not prosecute the murders if this is likely to jeopardise the maquiladora system on which its economy depends; conversely the United States and corporate owners claim no responsibility for this ‘Mexican problem’. This situation forces activists attempting to apply political pressure into creative and complex transborder political strategies in response.

In this chapter, we focus on one particular activist organisation, the binational ‘Coalition Against Violence Toward Women and Families at the US–Mexico Border’, hereinafter called the Coalition. We are both participants in this organisation, with Irasema acting as co-chair since 2002. The Coalition, with its central focus on violence against women, would not generally be considered part of the ‘anti-globalisation movement’ that is the subject of this book. Why? Theorists and activists rarely link the issue of violence against women to globalisation processes. It is our view that this is a major limitation of established discourses on resistance to globalisation. The concept of gender wars elaborated above shows how violence against women in the region is intrinsically linked to the global maquiladora system, the seemingly ‘disposable’ workers it creates, and also to transnationalised political hierarchies and strategies that evacuate responsibility and allow impunity. Further, the Coalition explicitly sees itself, and is seen by other groups, as an integral part of the broader resistance to globalisation in the border region and beyond. It was born after a labour-organised solidarity meeting in Ciudad Juárez in 2001 in which violence against women emerged as a major issue for women workers. A subsequent labour-organised meeting in November 2002 drew activists and commitments to the Coalition from as far afield as Canada and the Caribbean. Activists in the Coalition have links, past and present, to anti-violence programmes, grassroots community and feminist organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), labour unions and the Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladoras.

In what follows, we develop the argument that the struggle around violence against women, as represented by the Coalition, must be acknowledged as central to resistance to globalisation. We do this in two stages. In the first part, we expose the limitations of dominant discourses on resistance to globalisation from a grounded feminist perspective. In the second part we correct the imbalances and silences of those discourses by giving a detailed empirical account of Coalition aims, strategies and outcomes. In addition, in the third part of the chapter, we argue for the need to interrogate the relationship between resistance and academic knowledge, reflecting from our position as both activists and feminist academics. As part of our elaboration of a grounded feminist perspective, we introduce and affirm the concept of compromiso, which compels us in our study of globalisation and resistance to move beyond the collection of data and to work with others to connect theory with practice in the struggle for justice. We reflect on the implications of compromiso for academic work. How do we balance our commitments as activists and scholars? What responsibility do we have to students and to the groups in which we are involved when teaching about resistance?

**Gendering discourses of resistance to globalisation**

In recent years, academic and activist accounts of ‘resistance to globalisation’ have grown by leaps and bounds. These accounts cover a range of ideological agendas and actions, from reactionary religious revivalism (Barber 2001) to protest coalitions at world meetings of trade moguls (Smith...
2002), and from efforts to reform the WTO or instil social accountability principles (selections in Broad 2002) to adaptations of Marxist political economy by academic critics updating their language and strategies for these global times (Mittelman 2000). But where are women and gender in this literature? A grim déjà vu sinks in at this point. Women and gender are not central to most analyses, sometimes appearing editorially, or in a token chapter, or in lists of ‘interest groups’ that have problems with global neoliberal economics (Staudt et al. 2001). The relationship between women and resistance to globalisation is central to avowedly feminist texts (see, among many, Peterson and Runyan 1999; Meyer and Prügl 1999; Kelly et al. 2001). The marginalisation or absence of this dimension of resistance indicates some very significant problems with non-feminist accounts of resistance to globalisation.

In our view, most accounts converge on a representation of resistance that paints just a partial view of reality. Activists are depicted as ‘summit jumpers’ who travel to distant global cities, usually in developed country locations, from Prague to Sydney, and who use direct action against symbols of globalisation associated with international financial institutions and transnational corporations. Alternatively, the role of organised labour may be stressed, whether in terms of union resistance to transnational corporations in the workplace or in terms of a more fundamental revolutionary role. All resistance literature from the North privileges English as its lingua franca and it may also rely heavily on theoretical language that abstracts from the reality of people’s lives. Each of these dimensions of accounts of resistance produces gendered exclusions.

To begin with, the habit of locating resistance in abstract, capital city, high-level, global realms functions to detach protest from local contexts and everyday worlds. It privileges the activism of white, Western middle-class youth who can afford to protest at distant conferences. It encourages the anti-globalisation activist to fly to Prague or Sydney, rather than coming to the border and queuing in lines to cross the international border bridge. Further, the representation of resistance as oriented towards the operations of abstracted economic processes and international financial institutions says little or nothing about patriarchy and the systemic, multifaceted subordination of women. It hardly speaks of the problem of sexual aggression or violence against women, and of the need for women to resist the violence they may face in public and private worlds. The prioritising of engagement with international institutions encourages the neglect of other institutional sites at the national and local levels, which may be more pressing in terms of countering violence. Activists in Ciudad Juárez seek to strengthen Mexican democracy, reform the state judiciary and combat corruption. They are compelled to seek assistance from, as well as to challenge, flawed and complicit political and police authorities.

Academic analyses focusing on work and organised labour also need to broaden their focus. Trade unions such as the AFL–CIO increasingly use discourses of transnational solidarity rather than nationalist protection in their bid to position themselves as central to resistance to globalisation (Sweeney 2002). Academic literature on resistance needs to catch up with labour union organising on this point: as Jackie Smith states in her analysis of the 1999 ‘Battle of Seattle’, ‘social movement scholars may need to rethink their assumptions about relationships between the social movement sector and organised labour’ (2002: 223). In the literature on labour, women have received some attention in analyses of global assembly-line production and the informal sector, including within Mexico (Hemispheric Social Alliance 2002; Sklair 1994; Fernández-Kelly 1983; Staudt 1998). Yet to ‘gender’ resistance fully, we also need to move beyond a narrow focus on labour in terms of paid work and attend to unpaid or informal work along with violence in the home and on the streets. Maquiladora workers in Ciudad Juárez and other border communities also worry about affordable and safe housing, access to water, transportation, and access to education for their children.

The notion of resistance as a revolutionary challenge to the globalisation of capitalism raises even deeper questions. How does this speak to those compelled to enter the ‘belly of the [global] beast’ by seeking employment in export-processing factories? It is notable that the families of the murdered women and activists organising on their behalf have not called for a boycott of maquiladora work and some have raised funds for their struggles by engaging in micro-enterprise. In Ciudad Juárez, poor families have to pool their resources in order to survive. It is common for several family members to share a small dwelling, contribute to the household economy in a variety of ways, exchange baby sitting and, even after working a nine-hour day, work in a second job which can range from making tamales and empanadas to selling cosmetics. At the same time, these families are demanding services such as garbage collection, water delivery and other basic urban services. A revolutionary perspective would be likely to dismiss or misinterpret such actions as encouraging petty capitalism and continued integration into the ‘global assembly line’. Resistance to globalisation needs to be conceptualised in ways that allow for strategies of survival and subversion as well as direct confrontation. The feminist distinction between ‘practical’ and ‘strategic’ interests may be useful here (Moser 1993; Molyneux 1985). But from our perspective, analysing and acting within the Coalition, any dichotomy between everyday survival and systemic challenge is ultimately unsustainable.

With regard to the privileging of direct action in discourses on resistance to globalisation, we wonder why the sometimes stridently male protest actions – confrontational and even violent – get such attention, both in academic writing and in the media. This mode of action may be problematic, especially for women challenging male violence and mutilation murders. As we show later, organising in Ciudad Juárez involves a strong emphasis on symbolic drama, with religious overtones, that seeks to challenge rather than sustain the norm of violence. It also aims to gain broader public support than may be possible for more confrontational modes of direct action. 

Gender wars at the US–Mexico border
Finally, we would also highlight the limitations of an exclusive focus on the English language in discourses of resistance to globalisation. This moves beyond a general feminist concern with seeking to include space for gender analysis and women's activism within the discourse on resistance to globalisation. It reflects more specifically a Third World or postcolonial feminist concern with racialised and geopolitical hierarchies and the ways they intersect with gender and class (Mohanty et al. 1991; Alexander and Mohanty 1997; Saunders 2002). English is often the dominant language for Internet use, prominent in the kinds of resistances to globalisation emphasised above; and it also dominates other forms of activism and analyses of them. This generates obvious exclusions. In Ciudad Juárez, CNN reporters and journalists from prominent dailies seek out English speakers. The person who is engaged in conversation with the reporter clearly has an advantage in presenting their side of the story and in making other connections. Spanish speakers are at an obvious disadvantage, both in accessing information and in presenting themselves as sources of information. Further, at least with respect to Spanish, translation into English neutralises, sterilises or depersonalises complex, radical or emotional language. It is often dry (seca), technical, narrow and bland. For example, in English the word 'education' means formal education; in Spanish educación can mean one's manners and social graces. In Spanish the word lucha can mean struggle and fight in English, but it evokes a very strong emotion when used in the case of social justice.

Critiques of exclusions generated by language must attend not only to the problem of English as a hegemonic language but also to the problem of obtuse and abstract theorising about resistance. Gender, for a start, does not translate well as a concept into other languages (Jahan 1995). Comprehensive theories, including some developed by feminists, are often written at very abstract, conceptual levels, rather than drawing on knowledge that emerges from the muddy and complex realities of desperate needs. Marnia Lazreg has questioned abstract theories that fail to 'comprehend [women's] lived reality' (2002: 128). The lived reality of poverty and violence must be central to any discourse on globalisation and resistance that is to be inclusive and hold out potential for real change.

The theory and practice of resistance to globalisation that we elaborate in the rest of the chapter is eclectic in its use of feminist theoretical resources, drawing on elements ranging from liberal to socialist, and from radical to postcolonial. Moreover, it is pragmatic to the extent that it is grounded in the everyday lived realities of women's lives. Finally, it is informed by our compromiso, the literal translation of which means 'commitment' or 'engagement'. In Spanish, however, the term implies a far deeper obligation towards a cause than both these English words convey. In certain cases, a compromiso implies a sense of indebtedness for services rendered. For example, when working in poor colonias to interview victims of crime or their family members, researchers can express a sense of compromiso with the people providing the data, a commitment which transcends friendship to ensure that the research in some way benefits or addresses the cause. We work closely with people, greet with abrazos (hugs), and care about each other.

Compromiso obviously involves socialisation for the academic that is very different from the positivist training provided in 'scientific' research, which privileges objective, quantitative approaches. We live and work at the border, often called the 'Third World' given its poverty and associated characteristics (Sharp 1998; Staudt 1998). Perhaps academics in more privileged territory can easily afford to maintain distance and neutrality from what they are studying in ways that we cannot. The political demands of the border context are too pressing, particularly given the epidemic of violence against women. Like Paulo Freire (2000), we do not wish to pretend neutrality on violence. We are against violence towards women, not in between. We move from analysis to action immediately, not waiting for the usual processes of peer review, journal publication and validation through which academic knowledge is constructed. In the starkest terms, we ask: how many more women would die with the wait? Names and faces are connected to our data, rather than abstract numbers. We think of the names of female victims, attached to carnations given to visitors at Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) altars in El Paso and Ciudad Juárez. We think of Anna Chavira Farel, Jessica Lizalde León, Angelina Luna Villalobos – and the many others whose names are unknown.

Compromiso demands that the researchers bring together their empirical work and political involvement. Thus in the next part of the chapter, we offer an account of the Coalition, outlining its strategies and achievements not as abstract academic questions but rather as pressing political concerns in which we ourselves have a personal investment. This empirical account of the Coalition's diverse strategies also functions as an important corrective to the absences recorded above in the discourses on resistance to globalisation. The Coalition – its participants, strategies and struggles – needs to be incorporated if that discourse is to be inclusive and relevant to women's lives on the border.

Analysing Coalition resistances

The Coalition Against Violence Toward Women and Families at the US–Mexico Border draws together individuals and organisations from many walks of life. It is a loosely knit, non-hierarchical network, not itself an officially registered, formally structured tax-exempt organisation (known in the United States as a 501c3). Core Coalition activists come from formal NGOs and from academia, labour unions (as mentioned at the start of the chapter, the Coalition emerged from union meetings) anti-violence centres, faith-based groups and others. Several of the NGOs bring resources garnered from US, Canadian and European sources: from private citizens, state organisations
and corporations. Within the Coalition network, individuals and groups can act autonomously and pursue different priorities. Some focus on work with the victims and their families, particularly in terms of fundraising for anti-violence services (‘practical’ interests). Others emphasise systemic policy change and the need to challenge the authorities (‘strategic’ interests). The shared goal of all participants is to draw public attention to the murders, demand judicial responses and to broaden the range of voices being heard.

The Coalition operates in a complex political setting. On the one hand, it has to confront unresponsive political authorities on both sides of the border. Both Mexico and the United States are ostensibly federal democracies. In Mexico, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) lost its seventy-one-year grip on the executive branch of government in the 2000 elections. Multiple parties are now represented in the legislative branch of government, at national, state and local levels, contrasting with the two-party system. However, Mexico still has a ‘clientelist’ system wherein powerful people and those with access to them (and occasionally their pocketbooks) exert inordinate influence. Political parties historically have co-opted NGOs (or asociaciones civiles) in order to secure votes; alternatively, NGOs may be threatened and intimidated by the police or hired hugs. Legal experts declare that the ‘rule of law’ does not exist in Mexico, and the judiciary lacks independence (Domingo 1999; Human Rights Watch 1999; Taylor 1997; Giugale et al. 2001: 136). Thus political activists in Mexico face great difficulties in accessing power. Local governments and agencies are not much more responsive, given that the system there is characterised by an ‘elite pluralism’ in which access to positions of influence is restricted.

On the other hand, Coalition activists must deal very sensitively with the victims’ families who are at the heart of their work. The families are disempowered in several ways. Victims tend to come from poor working-class families who lack resources. As a consequence, just attempting to earn a living consumes most of family members’ time and they rarely have the opportunity or the inclination to participate in political activity. Only after they have been contacted do some get involved. Most feel intimidated in their dealings with governmental agencies, as exemplified by the common complaint ‘no tengo las palabras para expresarme bien’ (‘I do not have the words to express myself well’). This sense of inarticulacy and powerlessness is exacerbated by the fact that agencies and the international media privilege the English language. It is further aggravated by the fact that many of the families feel too ashamed to speak publicly about their situation given the sexualised nature of the murders and the subsequent stigmatisation of the victims. Thus the Coalition has a heavy responsibility: it has to speak forcefully on behalf of silenced families, while remaining sensitive to the problems of representing those less powerful than themselves.

In this context, what strategies are pursued by the Coalition? In what follows, we describe four distinct but interrelated strategies: lobbying politicians in an effort to bring about legislative change; working with cross-border and international agencies with the aim of influencing their practice; building solidarity with organised labour; and holding demonstrations and making other symbolic interventions designed to highlight the murders and to influence public opinion. Almost all of these strategies are pursued bi-nationally, involving complex layers of cross-border co-operation.

First, in terms of lobbying politicians, the Coalition has met frequently with Texas State Senator Eliot Shapleigh, one of the few politicians who proactively supports anti-violence actions and who has been willing to let us use his name to push for bi-national co-operation. Further, Senator Shapleigh, with Representative Norma Chavez, introduced a joint resolution for the Texas legislature on the investigations, with hearings held in early April 2003 in both House and Senate committees. These were audio-taped, video-taped and made available online. The Coalition was invited to testify in front of Representatives and Senators, and Coalition-supplied black-crossed pink pins were placed on politicians’ lapels to indicate their support. The measure passed.

In addition to working with Shapleigh, Coalition members have targeted the wives of politicians and other influential figures, in an effort to create a sense of solidarity amongst women in the region and to influence male decision-makers indirectly. For example, Coalition members dressed in mourning at luncheons hosted by the Twin Plant Wives Association and the Republican Women’s Club. Twin-plant wives, who reside in El Paso, are married to the managers and corporate executives of the largely US-owned assembly plants in Ciudad Juárez. The murders have been discussed and wage inequalities criticized at these events. The First Lady of Texas, Anita Perry, was willing to be ‘pinned’ with the symbolic black cross on pink and participated in brainstorming sessions on strategy.

Furthermore, in early 2003, the Coalition spoke with city and county political representatives in Ciudad Juárez in order to get a resolution passed condemning the violence and a proclamation issued for International Women’s Day. The resolution that was passed had a narrow focus, calling for a bi-national task force and the pooling of cross-border police resources and information, amongst other things. The proclamation that was issued was more general, aimed at educating the general public about systemic gender inequalities and gender violence in everyday life.

The efforts of Coalition members to get the attention of national, political figures and departments have been rather less successful. The Coalition has sent numerous letters to President Bush, the Departments of Justice and State, and the FBI. Months pass before responses are received. Most define the issue as a narrow judicial matter that Mexico must resolve on its own, unless the government asks officially for the assistance of the United States. However, in October 2003, Congresswoman Hilda Solis, a Democrat from Los Angeles, led a Congressional delegation to visit both sides of the border and has since introduced a bill on the topic into Congress, with the support of the Hispanic and Women’s Caucuses.
Turning to the second strategy, that is working with agencies on both sides of the border, the Coalition has called for a bi-national task force to foster cooperation over investigating the crimes. In particular, it has demanded greater FBI involvement. This is despite the fact that for some in the Coalition it is problematic to look to police and investigative agencies for solutions. Through the good graces of Senator Shapleigh’s office, Coalition members were put into contact with FBI officials. Since then, a bi-national task force on the crimes has been created and the FBI has responded to a Mexican government invitation to become involved, albeit in a limited training rather than investigative role.

Another example of this focus on cross-border agencies can be seen in the collaboration of the Coalition with the non-governmental Transborder Consortium on Gender and Health at the US–Mexico Border. In an effort to modify a report issued by the government-appointed US–Mexico Border Health Commission, which made no reference to violence against women, the Transborder Consortium proposed a series of amendments which are now being considered by the official Commission (still unresolved at the time of writing).

It is worth noting that the Coalition has also worked with international agencies such as the United Nations. The UN 47th Commission on the Status of Women invited two Coalition members to New York City to participate in its session in March 2003. This provided another channel through which pressure could be put on the Mexican authorities, although human rights commissions tend to report abuses rather than enforce solutions. Travelling to New York also enabled the Coalition to develop networks with sympathisers in distant locales.

The third strategy involves the Coalition continuing to build links with cross-border labour organising. In a sequel to the meeting that gave birth to the Coalition, a labour anti-violence conference was held in Ciudad Juárez on 22 November 2002. Although the mayor of El Paso refused to attend and the Municipal President of Ciudad Juárez left immediately after his short speech, solidarity within the labour movement was reinforced, with leaders of unions such as the telefonistas offering to support Coalition campaigns with strike action.

Fourth, there have also been numerous dramatic and heavily symbolic actions, ranging from demonstrations to theatrical performances, which are aimed at influencing public opinion more generally. Every year, on International Women’s Day on 8 March, large-scale demonstrations are held. On International Women’s Day in 2002, for example, hundreds of people held rallies on each side of the border, then blocked border traffic by converging near the large wooden crucifix-like cross in downtown Ciudad Juárez, onto which nails for each victim have been hammered. Some protesters dressed in dramatic and symbolic colours and the quasi-religious symbolic signs of the deaths were everywhere: black crosses on pink backgrounds. Day of the Dead celebrations on both sides of the border have also been a focus for mourning and protest, with student activists displaying altars covered with candles, artefacts and memories of the deceased. In April 2002, students in the Feminist Majority Leadership Alliance of the University of Texas at El Paso sponsored a silent mourning, holding large black crosses on pink placards, in a well-traversed part of campus. Many newspapers snapped photos of the 150 mourners, including one dressed in full costume as the ‘grim reaper’. In Ciudad Juárez, short, shocking ‘guerrilla’ theatre performances have gained attention on the streets. Lourdes Portillo’s award-winning documentary film, Senorita Extraviada, which focuses on the murders and especially the victims’ families, has been shown many times by activists, both for public education and for fundraising. The film has dramatically increased public awareness of the murders. Interviews with city councillors in El Paso reveal that Portillo’s film has created feelings of empathy and solidarity with the victims and their families. Further, Eve Ensler’s play, The Vagina Monologues, has been performed several times in the border region, and Ensler herself visited Ciudad Juárez for ‘V-Day’, 7 February 2003, for a full day of cultural events and meetings with state officials. In 2004, V-Day worldwide focused on the murders of girls and women in Ciudad Juárez. Ensler once again visited the border and marched across it with celebrities from Mexico and the United States, and approximately 7,000 activists and concerned people, in solidarity with the victims’ families and NGOs (see V-Day n.d. for further information on V-Day).

Recently, the Coalition has been working to extend its strategies in new directions: identifying ‘model’ legislation in other states for potential adoption in the region; attending Congressional hearings; building new national and bi-national coalitions; contesting the economic pressures on Mexico. It can be seen that the Coalition is neither timid nor purist in the strategies that it pursues but rather pragmatic, imaginative and adaptable, changing strategies to suit particular contexts in pursuit of the overall goal of an end to violence against women in the region. All Coalition work remains informed by awareness of globalised political and economic structures that produce ‘cheap’ labour at $30 a week and images of disposable young women. Yet, as we have seen, resistances at the border face many challenges and the murders continue.

Compromiso in academic activism

We are political scientists, working in academia. As such, we were trained to take an objective, neutral stand towards the subject of our research. However, our involvement with the Coalition as researchers has required us to cross the line into activism – an activism compelled by the urgency and horror of the violence against women in our back yard. We suggested in the first part of the chapter that adopting the concept of compromiso compels us to use our insights and skills for political purposes. Thus what follows in this last section of the chapter are our individual, personal reflections about
our roles as both activists and academics. What is at stake in taking compromiso seriously? What kinds of questions and dilemmas does compromiso raise?

**Irasema**

**Professional concerns**

The fact that I am an untenured assistant professor scares me at times because traditional views of academia dictate that one should write theoretical or empirical, number-crunching pieces, publish in prestigious journals, and advance the creation of objective knowledge. Will my colleagues value my work when I am going up for tenure? What worth will my newspaper articles or contributions to various community newsletters be given by tenure committees? Also, what will my university say about my activism, especially in a relatively small community where the university has a very high profile in television and the print media? Am I becoming better known for my activism than for my academic work? This balance is also a major concern because I consider myself an academic first and an activist second.

Should I be spending more time on researching and writing rather than raising awareness about the mutilated and murdered women of Ciudad Juárez? After all, even crossing the border takes time: up to one hour for each crossing, increasing to up to three hours with the security alerts since 11 September. At least I can justify attending meetings and rallies because they are also places and opportunities to gather data. Participant observation as a methodology is valid and legitimised in the social sciences, and first-hand experiences and actual contact with people give greater insight into the issue and its surrounding dynamics.

Another professional concern has to do with the use of university resources. I have spent some of my own money on airfares, telephone calls, photocopies, faxes and donations to women’s organisations in Ciudad Juárez. I exercise great care in not using any university resources for these purposes in order to minimise any appearance of impropriety. I do not use the university email or telephone or copy machine for my activism, though I feel torn at times when the activism is a legitimate part of my research.

I have a final concern here to do with teaching. It is possible that some of my students may feel that I am likely to reward those who attend rallies or choose violence against women as an area of research. Of course, it is enriching to hear in class discussion from those who have been able to attend rallies and meetings or those who have got more involved in the Coalition. I also sense that such students gain respect from other students. However, I do not reward them in any way. I am acutely aware that many students have many responsibilities and time constraints that preclude them from becoming involved in community actions.

**Activist concerns**

I sometimes wonder if the families have read, or even know about, my published work in newspapers, newsletters and academic books about the murdered women of Ciudad Juárez. If they have read it, I wonder what they think about it. Is it an accurate portrayal? Even more worrisome to me, am I benefiting from their pain (lucran con mi dolor)? Is my work respectful of them and their feelings?

In terms of my relationships with other activists, I strive to avoid taking sides. Many women’s organisations have emerged in Ciudad Juárez that support and promote this cause. It is a source of consternation to me that the organisations have different modus operandi, different levels of government recognition and make alliances with different political parties and factions, all of which serve to divide women and their efforts. There have recently been allegations that one organisation has misused funds and this causes me discomfort because many women on the US side have donated money to the struggle at my behest. What kind of explanations do I give to people who ask me if ‘their’ money was misused?

It is also difficult working as a Mexican activist critical of the Mexican government. Many people in the United States have a stereotyped, negative image of Mexico and much of my work thus tries to present Mexico in a positive light to them. However, it is irresponsible to pretend that the legal and political systems in the country are working well. With the election of President Vicente Fox, the first opposition party member to win an election in over seventy years, many North Americans thought that a wave of democracy would sweep the country and corruption would be stamped out. This has certainly not been the case and Mexican institutions have a long way to go in that regard. It saddens me to hear the stories that family members tell of their experiences with the local police, the attorney general’s office, the Ministry of Justice, and the like. The fact that the representatives of these institutions are not well trained, well funded or politically motivated to solve the crimes of the mutilated and murdered women indicates a systemic problem. How can these institutions be strengthened and fortified to legitimately fulfil their missions?

**Kathy**

My issues are slightly different from Irasema’s, given the semi-security of tenure I gained two decades ago. Having entered academia in the late 1970s, I expected to face gender discrimination, so my record represents that of an overachiever with plentiful refereed publications to ensure that tenure denial would be legally actionable. Of course, most of those publications were ‘buried’ in highly specialised journals in political science and development during a time when the audience for this analysis was miniscule. Even with job ‘security’, I am acutely aware of risks that I take in crossing political and institutional lines.
My work and life at the border for a quarter of a century make me identify myself as a *fronteriza*, the quintessential border crosser (Anzaldúa 1987). However, my name marks me as an ‘Anglo’ and I am acutely aware of my privilege as an Anglo and as an academic. This functions to position me at the top of the hierarchy of voice and knowledge claims at the border, where 80 per cent of residents claim Mexican heritage. My preferred leadership style in the community is that of a ‘behind-the-scenes-enabler’ but I am often pushed into more prominent roles at rallies or in front of television cameras. This makes me uncomfortable, and I tell people so, because I cannot speak for the majority Mexican-heritage residents.

I feel a deep obligation to use my talents and skills for social justice, and, for me, walking the walk, not just talking the talk, has always been important. My classrooms are very much about civic engagement, critical thinking and dialogue, and student empowerment. I believe academia should play a much stronger role in facilitating student leadership and practical political skills. How many students graduate knowing how to organise meetings, get rally permits, engage in strategic planning, write press releases or policy papers? Indeed, how many faculty members know and practise these skills?

Some of my activism takes place in formal political institutions, where I am often disgusted at the hypocrisy and attention-seeking behaviour of some politicians and officials and at the compromises I have to make (in the English sense of the term). I feel like screaming inside sometimes at their outrageous and ignorant remarks, but I have learned to keep a straight, even pleasant, face. If they vote to support the resolution that I am fighting for, that is what counts for me. When they do not support what I struggle for, or when new elections change the cast of characters, I must counter the weary fatigue that sets in about starting over and/or cultivating new relationships and coalitions. Sometimes the fatigue is overwhelming.

I share with Irasema a certain wariness of journalists. We have been misquoted, and in one case ‘burned’ by an overzealous, out-of-town reporter who quoted us to a local official when we had thought we had given the information in confidence. However, we have been very happy to work with other journalists who seek to publicise the issue abroad and in other parts of Mexico and the United States and who are prepared to share information with us that they have gleaned from interviews with Mexican officials and victims’ families (Guillermoprieto 2003).

I fear for some of these journalists, as well as others who are vocal about these issues. In Mexico, reprisals can come in a variety of forms. Reporters can lose their jobs; academics may not be promoted; police stop, harass and beat lawyers. I am sometimes anxious for my own safety, wondering if politicians and public officials have read my work. Are myself and Irasema on a Mexican government list of political subversives? Are we are being watched in some manner? I still have a child at home. My face is on television, criticizing the police (however diplomatically). We know other activists whose family members have been threatened. All this is in the back of our minds, but does not really affect how we work. While our *compromiso* may put us in danger, it also gives us the strength to continue.

**Conclusion**

We began this chapter by describing the numerous gender wars at the US–Mexico border, detailing the globalised power relations that render poor women’s lives nasty, brutish and short. We then went on to describe the work of the Coalition Against Violence Toward Women and Families, focusing on the diverse strategies it has deployed to resist and transform those power relations. We have suggested that, although localised in the border region and dealing with the issue of violence against women, such activism should also be seen as resisting globalisation. Is such organising of less worth than sporadic trips to the meetings of international financial institutions like the WTO? We think not, yet such organising around violence issues is virtually invisible in discourses of resistance to globalisation, whether academic or activist.

The Coalition is succeeding in building new political relationships, developing intricate knowledge of political institutions, and spreading ever-expanding ripples of awareness throughout the region, Mexico and the United States, and the world. Power relations at the border are changing, if ever so slightly. However, we must be aware that patriarchy continually causes division and competition between activists, which serves only to reinforce the power of male-dominated governments and the inequalities within the global economy. It behoves activists and academics to recognise the danger of such divisions and to work in solidarity to build peace in the region, to respond to women’s concerns, and to open up space for silenced voices.

**Note**

1 These details about murdered women are taken from a list kept by Ester Chávez Cano of Casa Amiga since 1993, as cited in a PowerPoint presentation by Amigos de las Mujeres de Juárez entitled *Ni Una Mas*. The details excerpted here are only the first seven cited, with all murders appearing to have occurred within a single five-month period, presumably in 1993. There have been many, many more victims since. The PowerPoint document, and further information, can be obtained from Amigos de las Mujeres de Juárez, PO Box 2449, Mesilla Park, NM 88047, USA, e-mail: amigosdemuñecas@yahoo.com (see also Amigos de las Mujeres de Juárez 2004).