

In Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, a large city on the U.S.-Mexico border across from El Paso, Texas, at least four hundred young women have been murdered since 1993, and approximately six hundred more have 'disappeared.' The numbers continue to rise as the murders go uninvestigated by the local, state, and federal police, a number of whom are themselves implicated in the crimes. So many women have been tortured, raped, killed, and dumped in the desert that the phenomena now has its own name: *feminicidio*, or serial sexual femicide. Victims of *feminicidio* are poor young women who are virtually powerless in Mexican society, and as a result, their murders are most often ignored or mishandled by the corrupt city and state governments. The vast majority of the victims are employed by the 440 *maquilas*, or factories, which lie on the outskirts of the city of Juarez. The average *maquila* worker makes around \$35 a month working 45-hour weeks; for lower-class Juarese citizens, the *maquilas* and the illegal drug trade are the only viable sources of employment. Moreover, many of the 180,000 women employed in Juarez's *maquilas* are single mothers facing dire economic circumstances in their struggle to support their children, and they have few opportunities to advance their economic position through education or additional job training. Older children, especially girls, are often forced to work in the *maquilas* to support their families, sacrificing their chance to get an education. Thus, the vicious cycle of victimization and oppression of lower-class women in Juarez is perpetuated.

We propose to address one of the root causes of this violence against women in Ciudad Juarez through the formation of an alternative scholarship fund with the cooperation of the Frontera Women's Foundation<sup>1</sup>, which would support the education and economic empowerment of young female leaders in low income communities. The horrific murders which continue to occur in Juarez represent just one part of the larger system of oppression faced by women in the city. Poverty, inadequate access to education, and the societal devaluation of women contribute to a symbolic violence against the women of Juarez. We believe that this violence can be transformed through the liberating force of education, through which women can become empowered to transform their own lives and the lives of their communities. Our project aims to enact peace through education. As the communities of Juarez struggle to heal from the trauma of the *feminicidios* and to secure justice for the victims, we hope to empower young women engaged in this struggle by providing access to education and resources which would otherwise be out of their reach. In the long term, the empowerment of these young women and the creation of a community of leaders among them would contribute to the change considered most important to combating violence against women: a transformation of societal attitudes towards women, especially lower-class working women. The ultimate goal of our project is to bring peace to the lives of young women in Juarez by combating violence through empowerment.

As a grassroots approach to women's development and empowerment, our project would work through the cooperation of young women from two different worlds, in which the autonomy and voice of the women grantees would be highly valued in determining the amount and type of aid given. Thus, unlike a traditional 'scholarship' fund, the project would not restrict financial aid to certain types of education, or to certain educational expenses. Instead, by asking young women what they need to improve their economic and social positions, we will ensure that women are actually able to complete their goals, unhindered by other economic constraints (such as a lack of income or transportation funds). This

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<sup>1</sup> More information on the Frontera Women's Foundation is available at <http://www.fronterawomensfoundation.org/>.

specificity will allow the aid given by the project to be efficient and effective. Further, because of the capacity and community building nature of our project, we will sponsor monthly seminars to develop the leadership and life skills of the grantees. By fostering a community amongst grant recipients and teaching them the skills necessary to become leaders in their own communities, we will ensure the sustainability of the project's goals. With better educational and economic opportunities, these women will be able to help other young women in their communities pursue similar educational goals, and will become mentors to subsequent generations of grant recipients from our project.

During a recent trip to Juarez, Amy was able to interview Irasema Coronado, a dean at the University of Texas at El Paso and an activist working to stop the killings in Ciudad Juarez. Our inspiration to start this project first came from Irasema herself, who suggested the formation of such an alternative scholarship fund at a conference on the *feminicidios* which Amy attended in the fall, and she has promised the cooperation and support of her organization, the Frontera Women's Fund, in the development of our project. With help from members of the Fund as well as from local activists whom Amy met during her trip to Juarez, we will arrange for the nomination of young, low-income women by local community leaders as applicants for the grants. After forming a selection committee made up of members of the Fund, local activists, and ourselves, we will review the applications of the nominees and choose recipients based on aspects such as leadership, responsibility, and feasibility of the educational goals they seek to accomplish with the grant. After selecting as many recipients as our budget can support, we will arrange an initial orientation for the recipients of the grants. Such an orientation will allow recipients to network amongst themselves, while giving us the opportunity to meet with them one-on-one and distribute the first grant checks. Once grants are distributed, we will begin the task of organizing monthly seminars focused on developing the leadership skills of the grant recipients. Additionally, we would establish accountability mechanisms for the grant recipients, such as making personal visits to them or arranging for their supervision by the community leaders who originally nominated them for the grant. Aside from these projects, our time after giving the grants would be spent on additional fundraising efforts to support the fund. Though we believe that funding even a few young women will create long-lasting effects by creating community leaders and contributing to the empowerment of women in Juarez, we also realize that the more young women we can fund, the more far-reaching our project's effects will be.

While the financial aspect of the scholarship fund will directly impact individuals, we expect the impact of that support to be reflected throughout the community. The peace we strive for in Juarez is focused in the concrete needs of families and communities, and the women who hold them together. Ending the murders in Juarez is crucial, and our project will contribute to that goal by pinpointing the root causes of violence and seeking to negate them through changing the lives of individuals. Our Project for Peace will serve as a catalyst for the women of Juarez to form their own communities to further support, empower and educate young women. We will bring passion and commitment to this task, and continuously listen to the grantees in order to best support them in accomplishing their goals. Our success will be evident in the empowerment of the grantees, in the increase of opportunities for young women in Juarez, and in the continuation of support for our project. While we cannot single-handedly put an end to violence in Juarez, we hope to inspire significant change in the lives of individuals that will have the broader impact of bringing peace to their communities.