# CRIMINAL VIOLENCE AND CORONAVIRUS

## Perspectives from investigative journalism

Laura Díaz De León
Sergio Aguayo Quezada
Rodrigo Peña
Editors

EL COLEGIO DE MÉXICO

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Coordinadores
Laura Díaz de León
Sergio Aguayo Quezada
Rodrigo Peña González

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+52 (55) 52 54 38 52
contacto@ink-it.ink

www.ink-it.ink

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# Introduction

Laura Díaz de León
Sergio Aguayo Quezada
Rodrigo Peña González[1]

The significance of this book dates back to the early 20th century, when the independent media struggled for legitimacy and fought for freedom of expression, among other kinds of freedoms, during the rebellion against the Porfirio Díaz dictatorship and the subsequent Mexican Revolution. They were later recognized in the 1917 Constitution for guaranteeing freedom of expression.

The value of the principles enshrined in the Constitution was relative. The Sonora Group headed by Álvaro Obregón and Plutarco Elías Calles, which emerged victorious from the Revolution, took exception to the independent and critical press and crushed it whenever they could. In 1924, the weekly paper Monitor de Mexicali was closed and its director given a beating because it had printed allegations against the governor, General Abelardo L. Rodríguez, of protecting drug traffickers.

Others also put up considerable resistance, the most decisive confrontation taking place between *El Diario de Yucatán* under Carlos Menéndez and the state governor backed by Elías Calles, who had already become the "maximum leader" of the Revolution. It was such a ruthless fight to the death that *El Diario de Yucatán* had to close its doors from October 1931 until March 1933.

The governor and his allies criticized the publication for its conservative bias and sought to replace it with a pro-government newspaper. The journalists sought protection from the Constitution and won the support of the Yucatecan middle classes, the very important Associated Press of the States, and a broad sweep of international media and journalists.

The *Diario de Yucatán* defeated the government offensive by putting up a legal defense and conducting media campaigns; moreover, they used conciliatory dialog to lobby members of the Sonora Group. They were able to reopen the newspaper in March 1933, thereby demonstrating that freedom of

expression belongs to those who defend it.

We have touched upon these highlights from the convoluted history of the early twentieth century to underscore the enormous importance of independent journalism in Mexico. When published criticism is well researched and structured, the level of risk, which has evolved over the last century, increases. The Sonora Group was embedded in the Institutional Revolutionary Party, which lost its ability to control the media years ago; nevertheless, the risks of exercising freedom of expression still exist and have in fact diversified because the power wielded by organized crime and the willingness of certain businessmen to resort to violence have increased.

These are unavoidable risks that have to be taken into account when attempting to explain the roles of violence and social resistance. Reliable information enables us to make diagnoses that provide the basis for proposed solutions. Journalism in general, and investigative journalism in particular, possess the ability to provide information while building informed societies: they nourish democracy.

Investigative journalism prevents the emergence of vacuums that cloud our understanding of specific occurrences. Inspired by this backdrop and these principles, the *Instituto para la Seguridad y Democracia, A.C. (INSYDE),* in collaboration with the *Seminario sobre Violencia y Paz de El Colegio de México (SVyP)*, designed, promoted and taught the course/workshop "Press and crime in the pandemic. Investigative journalism on violence and crime in the context of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic in Mexico."

Taught between January and July 2021, the course/workshop had two goals. The first was to provide journalists from different parts of the Mexican Republic with theoretical, conceptual, technical, and operational investigative tools; the second, to encourage and help them to create a regional network of journalists following the model created by Jorge Luis Sierra, promoter of the "North Border Investigative Journalism Hub," which promotes investigative journalism among border reporters, independent media, and civil society organizations.

One of the requirements to take the course was the submission of a written article on the current state of violence and crime in Mexico. The texts produced during the course/workshop were worked on, discussed, compiled, and subsequently published in a document originally published in Spanish

entitled *Violencia criminal y coronavirus: miradas desde el periodismo de investigación*. Resulting from that editorial process, a committee especially designed for the case evaluated and selected the five outstanding articles, which were later translated into English and edited into this document.[2]

Journalism has taken advantage of the pandemic to fully endorse its relevance. The pandemic forced people to stay home, thereby raising multiple questions. How has this changed the dynamics of violence and crime in Mexico? Who suffers the impact of these changes? How should these phenomena be described? The texts in this publication, as well as the rest published in the Spanish edition, provide answers to many of the concerns raised by these questions.

Two aspects are worthy of mention. First, the intellectual property rights of the journalists involved were guaranteed; consequently, they were allowed to publish their texts elsewhere at their own discretion. Second, and as said earlier, an independent committee selected five outstanding works to be translated into English to boost their dissemination.

The texts presented here cover a wide range of topics, including the clandestine theft of gasoline, known in Mexico as *huachicoleo*; organized crime in Mexico City; marginalized minors outside the law who are also victims of violence; cases of sexual exploitation against women and/or minors through, for instance, child pornography or prostitution; gender violence explained from a variety of viewpoints, its perpetrators, and aggravating factors; life in seclusion; local crime trends, and even the design and production of weapons by the Mexican government. All the texts were framed, written, and investigated from a pandemic-sensitive perspective to shed light on how these phenomena have occurred and still occur in this context.

The coordinators thank the journalists who placed their trust in the project and who dedicated their time and talent to the course/workshop, including writing the pieces of investigative journalism that form part of this work. This publication recognizes the value of their work.

We would also like to acknowledge Dr. Saúl Espino Armendáriz for his impeccable coordination of the course/workshop project for journalists and for his unparalleled contribution to this document. Javier Garza, a well-known journalist from Coahuila, read and provided valuable feedback to the journalists on the early drafts of their texts. Iván Edaí Espinosa Russi was

present at all times during the teaching of the course that gave rise to this publication and was involved in all aspects of its production. And last but not least, Laura Sánchez provided excellent financial and administrative support, which drove the development of the project as a whole.

Finally, it goes without saying that the contents of these texts, including the source data, do not necessarily represent the opinion of the institutions that organized and taught the course/workshop, nor of the people who participated in this project, including the coordinators of this publication. However, they are published as part of an explicit promotion of freedom of expression, encouragement of investigative journalism, and recognition of the work of those involved. These types of initiatives constitute the cornerstone on which future research can be based, leading us, as a society, to imagine and promote creative solutions to the dynamics of violence and crime that afflict us.

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1 Laura Díaz acted as Executive Director of the Institute for Security and Democracy, A.C. (INSYDE) until 2021. Sergio Aguayo is the General Coordinator of the Seminar on Peace and Violence at El Colegio de México. Rodrigo Peña was postdoctoral researcher at the Seminar on Peace and Violence until Februrary 2022..

2 Our sincere thanks to Ian Gardner and David Bevis at The Seven Seas Translations Agency for translating these texts into English.

# 1. From huachicolero leader to farmer: the magic of social media during the pandemic

Pedro Alonso Benítez

Antonio Martínez Fuentes made use of "*huachimarketing*" to change the public's opinion of him and build the image of a prosperous farmer and businessman. Taking advantage of the COVID-19 lockdown, he handed out food packages to vulnerable families in several municipalities.

"Good afternoon! We're in San Ramón. This is where the line starts," says a woman offscreen, while the video shows two truckloads of vegetables and hundreds of people lining up in the hope of receiving a food package.

"Please help us by keeping at a safe distance and wearing your face mask properly," says the woman, while she continues recording women with small children, seniors, and whole families. "We've already got a long line of people waiting for their package of vegetables, which the farmers from Palmarito were so generous to donate. This is all thanks to the influence of Antonio Valente Martínez Fuentes," boasts the woman.

This video was recorded in San Ramón, a low-income neighborhood in the south of Puebla's capital on December 14, 2020. It was posted to the fan page of Antonio Martínez Fuentes, a man who took advantage of the crisis caused by the pandemic to deliver hundreds of tons of salad plants, vegetables, and pulses, presenting himself as a prosperous farmer and benefactor.

However, according to the Security and Justice Assessment in the state of Puebla conducted by the National Public Security System State Coordination Board, he's a priority target for being a huachicolero leader of Triángulo Rojo, which is run by Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG for its initials in Spanish).

The video transcribed at the beginning of this text forms part of what could be called a marketing strategy or, to be more precise, a "*huachimarketing*" strategy through Facebook, the largest social media platform in the world, which allowed Toñín (Antonio) to build this image of benefactor and broaden his social appeal.

The "Antonio Martínez Fuentes" fan page has likes from 26,000 people, a little over half the population of Quecholac, the Puebla municipality where he's from. More than 66,000 users follow his posts. Currently over 980 videos have been posted, of which 890 were about handing out food packages. These include messages of gratitude from people who received them and alleged donations from farmers in the municipality of Quecholac and the region so that thousands of families in Puebla's low-income neighborhoods and other municipalities in the states of Veracruz and Oaxaca could receive their food packages to deal with the deprivation wrought by COVID-19.

**The huachicolero leader**

In the state of Puebla, huachicol (the illegal extraction of fuel from Pemex pipelines) flourished during the term of deceased governor Rafael Moreno Valle Rosas, cheifly in a zone known as the Triángulo Rojo (Red Triangle), a strip that runs across the heart of the state formed by the municipalities of Palmar de Bravo, Quecholac, Tecamachalco, Acatzingo, and Tepeaca.

It was here where the famous Holy Infant Huachicolero was born: an image of the Holy Infant of Atocha, but with a siphon and a jerry can; apparently, there's even a popular version that already has its own chapel built by Toñín. In fact, on Candlemas (February 2), many people from the region already wanted to clothe their Baby Jesus in the style of the Holy Infant Huachicolero, as if it were some kind of amulet that would protect them from falling into the hands of the police or falling victim to their enemies.

Quecholac is a municipality dominated by poverty. In 2010, 86 percent of the population was poor, according to the National Board for Evaluating Social Development Policy (CONEVAL for its initials in Spanish), which enabled Toñín to co-opt it easily. That's how he went from being a "campesino" or field worker who would pull up carrots every day in the early hours to becoming an important huachicolero leader in the Triángulo Rojo.

As narrated by reporter Alberto Melchor on the e-consulta website, it was thanks to a good friend known as El Ingeniero (The Engineer) that Martínez Fuentes realized in 2010 that fuel theft was a great business, specifically from the Cactus-Tula-Guadalajara pipeline, so he began to purchase the land it crossed to be able to extract fuel at will.

According to newspaper stories, Toñín set up a criminal group to maintain control of the zone that specialized in stealing, transfering, and selling the fuel stolen from the Pemex multi-product pipeline. This activity increased in notoriety from 2014 to 2015, and other high-impact crimes were later added such as kidnapping, drug trafficking, and human trafficking.

In her master's thesis, academic researcher María del Rosario Carbajal Rodríguez found a source close to Toñín who told her he wasn't a simple field worker, a day laborer, but someone with medium to high economic status. This can be confirmed by the existence of the carrot produce company Martínez Produce, which has belonged to his family since the seventies.

It was precisely during the golden age of huachicol when the company, which had been in Palmarito Tochapan, was moved to Rancho Santa Cecilia on the highway to San Salvador El Seco. This fact was revealed after a raid by state and federal authorities on May 15, 2017, as it was one of Toñín's properties.

The residents of Palmarito Tochapan define him as "a friend of the town" or "the godfather," as he made donations, supported the most vulnerable people, and people even asked him to help out with the town's patron saint festivities.

On many occasions, these "altruistic" actions were fundamental to townsfolk coming out of their homes carrying stones and small children, women in front, to confront and expel the Mexican army, knowing that the military could not take action against civilians, thus giving Toñín's people time to flee.

This was recorded on a video sent to the ProyectoCINCO website, which shows how, on November 2016, the residents of Palmar de Bravo, lying within the Triángulo Rojo, took on soldiers from the Mexican army with stones to prevent an operation against the huachicoleros. Or the events of May 3, 2017, when the townsfolks' confrontation with the Mexican army resulted in ten people losing their lives: six civilians and four soldiers; as well as 26 wounded and 13 arrested. Or even the events of May 5 outside Casa Aguayo, headquarters of the government's General Secretariat, in which the residents of Palmarito brought the coffin of one of the deceased to accuse the state authorities of being the killers and demanding justice in the case.

A few days after the events, this is how a huachicorrido (huachicol ballad) narrated what had happened, stating that Toñín's people would be seeking vengeance for the death of their cousin:

You've all heard the ballads
about all the powerful drug traffickers,
but you've never heard about
what I'm gonna tell you right now.
In Palmarito Tochapan
there are also bad dudes.

There have bitchin' cars and trucks,
a lot of money too,
only organizations,
they call huachicoleros.
What I'm really sure of
is they're afraid of nothing.

They say the Triángulo Rojo
is good at taking people down,
in shoot-outs,
it's already done the business.
They're against the government,
they're all the devil's sons.
"I want to salute all those devil's sons. High five to Palmarito Tochapan!
Son of a bitch... That's right, cousin...
Is good at taking people down,
they're out there somewhere,
the fully-armored troops
are Toñín's people,
get my truck ready,
I'll be going soon.
My buddy Raúl Jiménez,
told us on the radio:
"My buddy Sabás told me
The soldiers have arrested me.
Send me all your people
'cause we're gonna mess them up."

They killed four of my guys

and we're not leaving it like that.
I killed four of their soldiers
and it's not over yet,
I don't think they'll be alive
when Mother's Day comes around.

Because of these events, then-Governor Antonio Gali, successor to Rafael Moreno Valle and member of his political group, singled out Toñín as the person responsible and added that he had corrupted the fabric of society by buying off citizens, including the children to whom he paid monthly wages of 12,000 pesos for lookout duties, i.e. surveilling the area when fuel was being extracted and warning of the presence of state police or the army so that the criminals could get away.

According to a post from May 2017 on the Página Negra website, the huachicolero leader wanted to be municipal president of Quecholac, to which end he created the foundation Fusión y Fuerza, but at the end supported the candidacy of his brother José Alejandro, the current mayor of Quecholac, who has also just been reelected for a new term.

That same year, according to journalist Héctor de Mauleón, Martínez Fuentes extended control of CJNG to the metropolitan area of Puebla, taking advantage of the flight of Bukanas, who was linked to the Los Zetas group. However, there is another journalistic version claiming that Bukanas and Toñín were partners who fell out when it wasn't clear who controlled the profits, which led to several confrontations.

In the early hours of August 20, 2017, marines and officials from the State Attorney's General's Office did manage to apprehend Toñín in a housing complex in the Angelópolis residential area. However, he was released due to a lack of solid evidence. In fact, he lodged three suits for amparo in district courts (4435/2018, 4777/2018, 5777/2018) at the end of 2018 so that he couldn't be apprehended again and go to jail for the crime of fuel theft.

### *Huachimarketing*

Alejandra León Olvera, anthropologist at the University of Murcia in Spain, who has studied the presence of organized crime groups on social media as a

way of earning publicity, coined the term "*narcomarketing*." In this sense, the situation we have described above could be described as "huachimarketing."

Toñín was well aware of the impact of social media, so he instructed his lookouts to constantly record on their cellphones when state or federal authorities implemented any kind of operation.

On May 10, 2017, Toñín posted his version of a confrontation which had happened that day to social media and then shared it with certain media outlets, to indicate that "the soldiers were responsible" for the death of civilians in Palmarito Tochapan.

In fact, that video led to the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH for its initials in Spanish) taking up the case and later recommending that the Mexican army should not continue to violate human rights when combating fuel theft.

## The debut on Facebook

The "Antonio Martínez Fuentes" Facebook fan page was set up on August 13, 2018, with the posting of a video lasting a mere 18 seconds showing a plot of onions, followed by more videos of farmland in the town of Palmarito Tochapan in the municipality of Quecholac.

The page has around 120 photographs, in most of which he appears, but without showing his face: he poses with his two dogs, with his horse or in the fields, harvesting or sowing carrots or other crops. According to his personal profile on Facebook, he holds a bachelor's degree in Business Administration, although there is no record under his name in the National Register of Professionals.

The page was set up at the end of the golden years for huachicol, as only 2 illegal taps were found in 2018, whereas Pemex recorded 74 in 2017 and 283 in 2016. Apparently, posting videos of the countryside to earn followers on Facebook as a first *huachimarketing* strategy to depict himself as a field worker, and not a huachicolero leader, failed because he stopped posting shortly thereafter.

## "The benefactor" during COVID-19

It wasn't until December 2020 that he started posting again, taking advantage of how COVID-19 had affected the course of daily life around the world, and thus the economy, due to social distancing.

Thus, Toñín reappeared on Facebook on December 3, 2020. At that time, 5,393 people had died from COVID-19 in the state of Puebla. There were also about 1,027 active cases in 57 municipalities and 442 people hospitalized; 31,607 formal jobs had been lost according to the Mexican Institute of Social Security (IMSS for its initials in Spanish) and 7,346 establishments had closed according to the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI for its initials in Spanish).

That December, 625 videos were posted to the fan page showing the delivery of vegetables and salad plants, as well as thanks from the beneficiaries. On Thursday December 3, 2020, Antonio Martínez announced on the same page that he was sending two truckloads of vegetables, which he referred to as "chariots of hope," to families in the city of Puebla, chiefly to Agua Santa and the families of sick people who had been admitted to general hospitals (in the South and North).

"Today, I think there are a lot of people who really have lost their jobs and they have a lot of bills, like electricity, rent, drinking water, a lot of personal expenses, so I think now's the time, it's time to participate. We as farmers, thank God we're going to support as much as we can with what we produce in the countryside," says a male voice on a video with at least 4,300 plays.

"And this isn't for any political reasons; it's just from the heart, it's for humanity, to help our brothers and sisters, nothing more. May God bless you, my friends," were some of the words spoken by Antonio Martínez, who described himself as: "a farmer who grows vegetables" and "someone with a very noble heart."

In the same videos posted to the Facebook fan page, you can see hundreds of people standing in long lines, giving thanks and cheering as they wait to receive their sack of vegetables weighing between 10 and 15 kilos.

These videos are recorded by people sent by Toñín to hand out vegetables produced in Triángulo Rojo fields. They are recorded the same way as when confronting state police and soldiers to prevent them confiscating vehicles loaded up with huachicol.

"Do you have a message you'd like to send to the farmers and Antonio

Valente Martínez Fuentes?" asks a woman.

"Today, Thursday December 3, 2020, we give thanks to Antonio Valente Martínez for the vegetables he's given us," replies a woman in a wheelchair, wearing a face mask and sunglasses.

"Antonio Valente, many thanks, and may God reward you," says another woman in another short five-second video carrying a bunch of spring onions and more vegetables in a blue bag.

In another video, you can see at least 50 people waiting to receive their food packages and, according to the eight-second video, they raise a traditional cheer: "Alabío, alabao, a la bim bom ba, Antonio, Antonio, ra ra ra!"

On Sunday December 6, he continued to give away produce in Cuautlancingo, a nearby municipality. In a video from that day, a woman of about 70 wearing a face mask said,

> "Antonio… Martínez… I think you're a great leader. Thank you for everything you're doing. If more of us were like you, Mexico would truly be a great country. Thank you, sir, for helping single mothers, senior citizens, people on low incomes who really need this. May God bless you, my good leader. May God bless you throughout your life. May he give you a lot of strength and good health. Thank you very much, sir."

As a result of these actions, he was interviewed on the morning of December 9 by Javier López Díaz, the presenter of the most popular news program in the state of Puebla, from the Cinco Radio radio group. That's when he boasted of being a great benefactor and said he was just the head of a group of farmers who wanted to help people.

## The huachicolero leader

On December 9, 2020, Governor Miguel Barbosa Huerta said at his daily press conference, which was also broadcast on Facebook and YouTube, that Antonio Martínez was the huachicolero leader known as "El Toñín."

"It's something you have to look at objectively. This man has always wanted be a leader in society, so much so that his brother runs Quecholac. He probably wants... he wants to belong to a political party, but he's not going to play games with us. So, I'm telling you, he's not going to play games with us... period," he warned, in reply to a question from a reporter from the MTP

Noticias website.

Consequently, Toñín suspended the delivery of food packages to the city of Puebla on December 10, adding,

> "Because of the bad comments from the tabloids, which... to tell the truth, today we're going to take a stand and take legal action against... you know... damaging and staining my reputation.
>
> But today, we're going to stop. I don't want to offend the Governor or any politician. I don't want to offend anyone. All I wanted to do was help the most impoverished who have been put in really difficult circumstances due to this pandemic," were his words in a video with 4,600 plays.

In a second video posted on the same Thursday December 10, which has over 759 comments and has been shared 841 times, he denies that he is the huachicolero leader identified as Toñín, and justifies his actions by arguing that the Governor of Puebla had made a call to the population to donate to people in need on Friday December 4.

My name isn't Antonio Martínez Castillo. My name's Antonio Valente Martínez Fuentes. It's my cousin Antonio Martínez Castillo who's Toñín and people get us mixed up. But I'm not going to go in to detail about my cousin either, because I also want to act responsibly. At the end of the day, everyone does what they want and is who they want to be, but I'm an important farmer, right? The last thing I want to do is bother Governor Miguel Barbosa.

Three days later, Antonio Martínez denied there was an arrest warrant bearing his name for stealing fuel and he posted the corresponding documents to his fan page.

However, the state authorities implemented several operations to block the delivery of vegetable food packages. In an operation on February 3, the state police found a scooter that had been reported as stolen on a truck belonging to Antonio Martínez Fuentes.

**Fake altruism**

The case of Martínez Fuentes is not the only one in Mexico. CIDE researchers Sandra Ley and Guillermo Vázquez emphasize that several criminal organizations have handed out food packages to people in the states of Jalisco,

Michoacán, San Luis Potosí, Veracruz, and Tamaulipas during the SARS-COV-2 pandemic.

Furthermore, academics Víctor Manuel Sánchez and Sara López have identified eight criminal organizations that handed out food packages in at least 15 states over five months, in which there were 85 deliveries to 64 municipalities.

So, in the words of academics Alberto López and Mauricio Lascurain, these videos are produced to publicize altruism directed at an audience. This reveals the interest of these groups in making the protection they provide apparent, with an eye to projecting a community-friendly image that gives them social support and even legitimacy.

For these academics, this is a sign of the "limited capacity of the government to monitor and, if applicable, punish crimes committed, which leads to a low perception among the members of a criminal organization of the actual risk." And they add that if criminal groups invest in altruism, they extract intangible benefits from the population, such as obtaining silence about illegal activities and protection for the members of a criminal organization.

This premise is evidenced by the ambush of soldiers on May 3, 2017, in the community of Palmarito Tochapan, in which townsfolk prevented Toñín from being arrested and 10 people died.

A second event occurred on October 3, 2018, after a raid by marines and other authorities to search a property and arrest Martínez Fuentes. The townsfolk and Alejandro Martínez Fuentes, then president-elect and brother of the huachicolero leader, gathered to blockade the Mexico City-Veracruz highway for more than five hours to stop them.

## "*Huachimarketing*" worked

Academics Alberto López and Mauricio Lascurain say that the delivery of support to the population makes the criminal leader and his associates look like successful people and, ultimately, benefactors who are concerned about the wellbeing of the communities in which they operate. That's why this topic was then discussed at the now traditional press conferences, known as Las Mañaneras, given by President Andrés Manuel López Obrador. This occurred on April 20, 2020, to be precise, when he criticized members of organized

crime groups for handing out food packages: "By the way, I'd like to say to members of criminal organizations that I've seen them handing out food packages. That doesn't help. What will help is you giving up your lives of crime. What will help is you loving your neighbors. What will help is you not harming anyone. What will help is you not fighting and sacrificing lives."

The *huachimarketing* strategy employed by Toñín, who used the handing out of food packages to promote an image of a prosperous businessman who was concerned about his people, brought him new followers, which meant more traffic and reactions on his fan page.

These same posts began to defend him from "attacks" by the state government and communications media:

> Miguel Barbosa, it's unfair that you won't allow the delivery of vegetables that Antonio Martínez Fuentes is giving out. The food packages that you send aren't for everyone, but Antonio doesn't discriminate. Don't be selfish and don't take away the help that Antonio Martínez Fuentes is giving. (posted on December 25, 2020).

Another Facebook user wrote on the Governor of Puebla's wall on December 27, 2020:

> Mr. Governor, please let Antonio Martínez Fuentes keep helping and handing out food packages. It's not fair that you have food and the people that voted for you don't have any, as you've forgotten about us. Let someone else help us, as a lot of people couldn't have a Christmas dinner because of you.

Although he no longer hands out food packages, his posts now have more reactions, plays, and shares. They're videos of his activities as a carrot and vegetable farmer. This is the case of one of the most recent videos in which Antonio Martínez Fuentes did a live broadcast on July 15, 2021: "Hello friends, good afternoon. How are you all? I hope you're fine... not just you, but your godly families too. Friends, we're still picking tomatoes. We'll keep in touch." This post has dozens of emojis showing that people like the broadcast.

In another video, which was shared 520 times and had more than 3,700 reactions and 545 comments, the users that follow the fan page said to him: "Hello, good evening Don Antonio. Your generosity continues to bear fruit. Our heavenly father continues to bless you and your family and all your field laborers and your workers too. Sleep well."

Another user wrote: “Hello Antonio. I hope God our father helps you with your vegetables and you get a good price for them. You’re a great farmer. Blessings to you. Sending you hugs.”

**Lawsuits for emotional distress**

Although the state government has said that Antonio Martínez Fuentes has been identified as the huachicolero leader of Triángulo Rojo and they know where he is, there have been no operations to capture him.

Meanwhile, Antonio Martínez has filed suits for emotional distress and defamation against Denise Maerker and even some reporters from Puebla at the MTP Noticias (Metropolitano) website and the newspaper *Cambio*.

It’s important to note that in October 2020, the Directorate General of the state’s Government Secretariat, the General Coordinator’s Office of Legal Affairs for the Attorney of Metropolitan Investigation, and the State Attorney General’s delegation stated that: “[...] The act claimed by the affected party is not true.

However, the same Governor Miguel Barbosa stressed on Wednesday February 3 that Toñín continues to be protected by the townsfolk of Palmarito Tochapan and even by the municipal police of Quecholac: “Toñín, a sweet name for someone so sinister. We know where he is. He’s protected by the Municipal Police and the people. We’re being cautious. We’re going to arrest him and dismantle his entire gang,” he said in his morning press conference.

It’s important to note that this protection from the municipal police will be prolonged for another three years as his brother Alejandro won the municipal elections on June 3 and was reelected as municipal president of Quecholac.

## 2. A woman's life after working for the narcos

Beatriz Guillén Torres

One afternoon many years ago, two SUVs kidnapped Manón Vázquez and her daughter, Montse. The mother was taken to a safe house, pushed onto a chair, and given a telephone. At the other end of the line was a girl, her daughter, begging for help: they were going to cut her into pieces. Vázquez started to pray. The kidnappers were her own people, who wanted to know if she could be trusted and moved up in the organization. They showered her with questions while the girl cried. Our Father, who art in heaven, and she stopped listening. During the whole interrogation, she simply refused to talk and kept on praying.

"You're one of the good ones. You can take it. Do you want to see your daughter?" they asked. Just then the girl, her hair in pigtails and weighed down with toys, came into the room. She had been shopping at the supermarket. "We should give a good beating, you unnatural whore of a mother," they said. "You couldn't give a shit if we cut her into pieces," they went on because the woman, the girl's mother, had not shed a single tear. "I swear I never shed a tear," she now tells us. "I didn't cry for ten years," says this large-eyed woman with pink highlights in her long dark hair, gesturing with her hands. She curls up in her chair and the tears flow. "And just look at me now! A fly comes near and I burst into tears." She laughs.

Manón Vázquez (Cuernavaca, 1969) was eventually arrested, tried, and jailed for crimes against health. She spent five years in prison. She joined the ranks of women locked up for drug-trafficking crimes. In 2011, the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) estimated that half the women in Mexican prisons had been convicted for these kinds of crimes.

Women make up just 5.7% of the total prison population but in recent years this percentage has grown considerably, mainly due to more severe anti-drug and anti-organized crime policies. Women tend to be the lowest link in the chain and are at high risk of being taken into custody. The COVID-19 health and economic crisis has worsened the situation. 10,589 women were locked up

in prison at the start of 2020, and today there are 12,397, according to the most recent National Penitentiary Statistics published in June, 2021.

Poverty and gender inequality are recognised by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) as factors bringing about the imprisonment of so many women: "Many women are in prison as a direct or indirect consequence of the multiple forms of discrimination and deprivation they experience at the hands of their husbands, their families and their communities."

Having served a full five-year sentence, Manón Vázquez founded the Women of Light (Mujeres de Luz) rehabilitation center in 2015. This organization supports women who, like her, have had to find a way back into society after prison, who have been victims of violence, have taken drugs, or simply have nowhere to go, no way to escape or start taking care of themselves. The house where the center is located in Cuernavaca in the state of Morelos is currently home to fifteen women, but has accommodated as many as thirty. Manón has lost count of the number of women who have spent time here over the last six years.

Taking a tour of this house with its high white ceilings, you come across a garden with a pool and hammocks, a large clean kitchen, and a little room with a pulpit where the women now hold Alcoholic Anonymous meetings. "You don't have to be a user. This is a safe space where you can share how you feel," explains Manón Vázquez as she gazes proudly at the women.

There are bunk beds in two of the bedrooms and single beds in two more, all with purple blankets. The bedroom with the biggest mattress and television is reserved for the youngest girls. One of its most recent occupants was a twelve-year-old girl, who checked in high on crystal meth. "She doesn't get much help from her mother or her sisters. All I can do is remind her that this is her home," says Vázquez. Here, this strong, loving woman keeps everyone busy with a range of activities like yoga, zumba, and water aerobics. Here, with the help of psychologists and therapists, they try to find whatever they left behind on the way. "Many have lost their bearings. Sometimes we get off track and have to find our way again," she says.

Women who end up in prison for drug-related crimes have similar profiles. "These are undereducated women living in poverty, who are usually mothers," according to the Asilegal report *Women Forgotten in the Narco War*. "Most of

these crimes are related to contexts involving social exclusion, poverty, and the gender violence these women are suffering and have suffered, even before they get into trouble with the penal system.

When Manón Vázquez invited us to her office in the spring, it was chock full of electoral posters and pink stickers. She was the Humanistic Movement party candidate for municipal president of Jiutepec, Morelos. She stood for office on June 6 but didn't win; she still doesn't know how she managed to get that far. Her story is a maze of significant milestones: her father's abandonment, her mother's suicide, drifting from home to home without ever settling down, abusive relationships, the pregnancy that made her give up her studies, the beatings from her first significant other, her getaway and her start in drug-trafficking under the influence of her second, the decade of drugs and guns, her daughter's murder, prison, her brother's death, the never-ending mourning, the meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous, the support she received from friends, lady directors, her children and, finally, a light at the end of the tunnel. Now in a tenuous but safe space, she speaks of the decade she spent as a drug trafficker in Morelos.

**"I wanted to be different than my family and I ended up being worse."**

A different Manón Vázquez started life in a huge house on Morelos avenue in downtown Cuernavaca. The girl —born in the middle of six siblings— learned from a young age to cut and pack the marijuana her mother used to sell. She suffered beatings and humiliation at the hands of this violent woman, who ended up taking her own life when Manón was ten. She was orphaned and lost. "I enrolled in junior high all by myself," she remembers. "And I finished by myself too. Nobody ever took an interest."

There she met the father of her two older children Diana and Christofer, who were born in 1991 and 1994. "At the start everything was great but he later became very violent. He treated me badly and gave me a lot of beatings. We eventually split up." With her children in tow, she met the man who got her into the drug-trafficking world and who fathered Monste, her youngest, in 2000. "He wasn't violent: he was an alcoholic and drug addict." She says that she had to get away from him when she saw him turning violent as had happened in her first relationship. But by then she had already become a

cocaine dealer. “I welcomed it as work because my relationship had cost me my other job, but I really chose to do it because I had no family and no one to leave my children with,” she asserts. “It made my life easier; I mean, I sold drugs but I was able to look after my kids.”

Vázquez’s start in organized crime is the story of thousands of financially-deprived women drawn in by boyfriends or male relatives and burdened by children or dependents. “There is a saying in prison that everyone is there for love: too much or too little love. There’s almost always a man in the mix: a son they are defending or, in most cases, a boyfriend,” explains the sociologist Elena de Hoyos, who has worked with women in prison for fourteen years.

“The worst of my choice was turning into them,” says Manón. By ‘them’ she is referring to her mother and her older brothers: her first family. “They are all delinquents.” “According to my mother, I was a dumbass, a whiner. My brothers were always more stubborn and tougher. I wanted to be different than her and them. And I ended up being worse,” she recalls. As if suffering the dying throes of a complicated relationship, Manón recognizes that during those years of drug trafficking, she would often raise her eyes to heaven and then back down to the earth —“I don’t know where you are”— and she would speak to her mother: “Look, this is me. Of course it was out of financial necessity, but it was also to show her I wasn’t the fool she took me for.”

At that time, Manón and her family lived in the Ricardo Flores Magón barrio in the east of Cuernavaca. There she established her own rules for drug dealing: “I did sell drugs, but never to women.” Or to minors. “No, emphatically no,” she repeats. She starts her story: “I was told to put minors to work, pay them in drugs and give them a motorbike and drugs to sell because if they were ever picked up by the federal or military police, they were taken to a children’s detention center and released quickly.” “I said no way and they pulled me off the street. She would tell them, ‘I’ll sell everything they were going to sell.’ They made me pay for my disobedience, man did they make me pay, but they respected me,” she proudly remembers.

Vázquez explains that by drawing lines never to be crossed she moved up in the organization. “They picked me up five times for not doing what I was told. They punished me physically but they never forced me to do anything. Besides, I wasn’t a user and that suited them fine. I handled the money well: most dealers are users and end up stealing some of the drugs they are given. I

was a guarantee. Somehow I came to impose myself as a woman," she declares, and her statement reveals the thick skin she has built up over the years.

Manón Vázquez adapted to a violent, macho organization by becoming masculine and aggressive. She adapted her language, her character, and her fears. "I didn't use to swear. The first time I said 'fuck that', I blushed and got goosebumps," she says. "But it was an essential part of gaining respect. I didn't swear because I liked it, but because the more I did it, the stronger I appeared. It isn't the same to say "you have to pay me, please" as "listen motherf*****", and she tails off without completing the sentence because she is embarrassed.

Over time I turned into someone else. "I don't know if I took on a new personality or just let who I really was come to the surface but later, my word, the men themselves were afraid of me." And she gives the example of Chino, one of the men who worked for her, who was selling drugs to the girls at the junior high school. Both of her golden rules were being broken. ""I had known him since childhood but I took to the streets, found him, made him kneel, and put a gun to his head. I told him, "We don't sell to women here in Flores!"

> "No, you're crazy. They'll come for you, grab you, and do you in."
>
> "Is that right? Well, until they get here, you're fucked. If I hear you've sold to one more girl, I'm coming for you."

To understand the transformation of women like Manón in organized crime organizations, Ángela Guerrero, the coordinator of CEA Justicia (Research and Action Center for Justice), gives the example of what the world of politics used to be like when the spaces available to these women were very small, and few and far between. "The first thing is to become more masculine. If they are violent or cold, I have to be like that too, or even more so, and do much more than the men to belong," she explains. The second option involves using sex to capitalize on what they don't have and to be able to move up in the organization. "There is always an asymmetrical power structure. The men always have more," Guerrero points out.

Manón says she doesn't remember fear slowing her down but it making her bolder. "Sometimes I would stand up to three or four men all by myself. When I got back to my room safe and sound, I would think, 'Why didn't they do

anything to me? They could have beaten me up.' I don't know, I think my face changes when I get angry." And she concludes, "I earned a place among them, among those people. Today I can say that people respect me. They used to be afraid of me."

The figure of Manón is a departure from the usual canon of women in drug trafficking: couriers, mules, carriers, or growers: cannon fodder for statistics. However, the researcher Ángela Guerrero has learned that these roles are changing in certain parts of the country. Such is the example of Mexico City, a region of dealers and users, where women are relegated to less important, higher-risk roles. However, there are increasing numbers of women participating in different ways in the northern states, or others like Morelos, which have become established as transportation routes of key importance for transfer and shipping to other consumer markets (whether the United States or the Mexican capital). "They have much more active roles with greater responsibility: for instance, in management, police and security relations, or as negotiators or barrio chiefs," explains Guerrero.

**"What can I do to avoid getting another prison sentence?"**

After four jail sentences, doing a fifth left Manón exhausted. She had served five years instead of the 25 handed down by the judge, and she was grateful. "What can I do to avoid coming back here?" she asked the prison officers. And she started doing things differently: she signed up for all the workshops, courses, and help groups. She took therapy and worked out every day. "I started inside so that I could have a different life outside," she tells us.

She spent three years at the Atlacholoaya prison in Morelos and seven months at Islas Marías. The unexpected transfer to the so-called Mexican Alcatraz, an open-air prison where she was only allowed to talk to her children for ten minutes every two weeks, destroyed her family. "My children felt they had been abandoned," she says. When she returned to Cuernavaca in March, 2013, to serve the last part of her sentence on a pre-release program, she found an older daughter who drank, and a younger daughter who was rebellious and foul mouthed. She still had to go back to Atlacholoaya on weekends.

On Saturday September 28, Manón went to bed in her cell. While she was asleep, her daughter Diana was murdered. Along with six others, she had lost

her life in a shoot-out between two rival gangs. “Delinquent’s Daughter Killed”, “A Settling of Scores”, announced the newspaper headlines. “I think the most distressful thing was that a lot of people blamed me when I actually had nothing to do with it. She had no business being there,” sobs Vázquez. Getting over her daughter’s death took her months without being able to eat or sleep. “I don’t how I made it through.”

Manón said goodbye to prison life in 2015. “Adapting has been difficult even though I was inside for a short time. To start with, I was afraid when I got out and then the old gang started coming for me,” she says. But what is really hard to deal with is the so-called triple sentence: the commission of a crime, the abandonment of the family, and having been a drug dealer. “You have to live with people’s rejection and a judgmental society and if you’re an ex-con, you believe it’s well deserved. If so, I believe that we’re responsible but we’ve paid a price. I don’t believe society should treat us like that when we get out,” she reflects.

Vázquez drew strength from support groups. On her release from prison, Vázquez voluntarily put herself into a 24-hour help center; while there, she decided to set up her own shelter. She acknowledges that she saw girls and women abused in these mixed centers. She opened Mujeres de Luz (Women of Light) on September, 2015. They began with 3,000 pesos (about 150 US dollars) and a packet of spoons. They now have partnerships with other institutions but receive no financial support from any. They are financed by the so-called recovery fee paid by families, and they provide free assistance to those who have no support network.

Manon’s political ambitions further demonstrate that she is a woman who has always played the central character in her own life. “I have learned a lot from my life that I can share with others. Had I won the election, my idea was to help many women and teach them that the system can be broken, and that it doesn’t have to be rigid: it can be flexible despite its authoritarianism. And that we really can make a difference.”

Although her decision to run for the Jiutepec municipal presidency made her the target of several attacks (“a delinquent wants to hold office”, “she used to be a drug dealer”, “she was at Islas Marías”), the woman, mother, ex-convict, group leader, entrepreneur, and politician stood firm. “If you know about my past, it’s because I’ve told you. I’m not flying a banner, but I’m not ashamed,”

she answers. “Of course it was a bad decision and today I would tell you not to do the same, but I’m not going to live in shame; I’ve had that experience and I’ve paid a high price.” Today, now that the stigma is gone and people no longer point her out in the street, Manón Vázquez, tall and upright, feisty and sensitive, looks back and dares to say, “Life has prepared me for this”.

## 3. "The santitos": migrants as bargaining chips: an organized crime scenario

Alejandro Mendoza Benitez

In the heat of the railroad, among the bushes growing in a gully in the north of the State of Mexico, tired-looking men, women, and children wait with defeat in their eyes. Here, Central American migrants interrupt their journey to the United States border after being put into forced labor at the front lines of organized crime and gangs.

"We have to do it for our families. If we don't, we're marked men and end up on the altar," explained Marvin Josué, a Central American migrant who was recruited and currently works for a faction of the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), which belongs to the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG for its initials in Spanish). He affirms that if he hadn't agreed to work for the gang, he would have been murdered and his bones placed on an altar to la Santa Muerte (our Lady of The Holy Death).

In the State of Mexico on the 12th of May at 11:17 in the morning, Marvin Josué, a young man who had agreed to talk off the record under a pseudonym, was sitting beside the railway with a cigarette in his left hand, his hoodie pulled up and his sneakers tied to his dreams, just as when he left home. Another two thin-faced men with chapped lips sat beside him. The first contact was direct but wary:

> "Good morning," he said, holding out his hand to be shaken. "What do you need?" he went on unflinchingly. They had brought a backpack with them, which they pushed a bit further away at the start of the conversation. When Marvin Josué heard the reason for the meeting, he gave a short laugh and said, "I can't answer your questions. If I talk, by the time you've taken away my answers and written your story, I'll be dead. But let me tell you what I CAN do."

After talking for about twenty minutes, Marvin Josué accepted that the interview was not out to entrap him and revealed that when he had arrived in Tultitlán in the State of Mexico a few months earlier, he was approached by a

"recruiter". Marvin and some other men were taken to a distant location where —without going into detail— they were put to work on a variety of tasks by MS members.

Without specifying the date, he related how he had left what he called "a country down there" (referring to Central America) and, being very poor at the time, was forced to travel across Mexico to the United States by the cheapest of the three principal routes available: the central route that runs to the State of Mexico from Tenosique in Tabasco or Tapachula in Chiapas; it is just over 1,000 km to get to Tultitlán, where migrants were infrequently able to get on the freight train known as "the beast". Previously, migrants had only been able to make their way to Reynosa on the border between Tamaulipas and Texas; however, because that route is under the strict control of the Zeta cartel, they now head northwest to the border between Sonora/Baja California and Arizona/California: the so-called route of "hell", the longest road to the "American dream".

The freight train known as "the beast". Photo by Jessica Lizbeth Mendoza Benitez, 2021.
https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1ESRf5gEgkP8GblHN95troR7UtOL0_jtS?usp=sharing

Marvin is currently one of more than 177 foreigners with irregular migratory status that have been victims of some kind of crime in Mexico during 2020 and one of the 3,732 cases that have been recorded since 2016, according to statistics published by the Center of Migratory Studies of the Migration, Registration and Identity of Individuals Policy Unit (UPMRIP) of the Ministry of the Interior (SEGOB).

Data published by the Mexican Federation of Public Human Rights Organisms (FMOPDH) reveals that until April 25, 2021, at least 2,000 migrants were reported by their families to have disappeared in Mexico. Intercepted by organized crime and gangs, the undocumented become victims of crimes such as torture, kidnapping, extortion or robbery before being murdered and used as offerings to the "niña blanca" as they call our Lady of The Holy Death.

Criminal activities have taken the lives of hundreds of people in the country. Migrants are replaced on the gang's front line when they make a mistake or refuse to obey orders from above, according to the testimony of a source close to the gang who, for his own safety and the integrity of this story, shall be assumed to live in Cuautitlán under the name of Alberto. Migrants recruited in the state distribute and deal drugs, work as enforcers, and are called "soldiers". Most Central Americans are under the direct orders of an MS "ringleader" working in the State of Mexico, comprising 125 municipalities and a total 163,244 inhabitants, which, according to data published by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), has become a "red zone" for the migrant community.

Gang members on board freight trains threaten to throw the undocumented under the wheels of the moving wagons unless they pay a quota, or hold them captive in "safe houses" strategically located near the railway until they pay up: such is the life of the migrant.

**Migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic**

During the last year, the SARS COV-2 pandemic has brought about changes in migrant movements. The usual travel routes have been affected and the cartels in the country have moved into new territories. The interest and solidarity initially shown by local residents was transformed into unrest and

xenophobia upon the appearance of organized caravans. The ever-growing population clusters that began getting organized to cross international borders in 2018, resulted, along with federal government contradictions and international policies, in the collapse of local public systems, increased labor market competition, cultural incompatibility, and exclusion.

Even during 2021, organized crime had taken over strategic zones with the consequent increase in targeted operations, social empowerment, and economic diversification. It took over the so-called "value niche" comprising the migrant population in the country that is potentially worth as much as 134 million dollars a year from activities like kidnapping, collection of protection money, and the theft of contraband tariffs (not including illicit people trafficking tariffs).

According to a report from the Robert S. Strauss Center for International Security and Law published in June, 2018, as many as 101 out of every 300 migrants are victims of crimes in certain Mexican states; such is the case of young Central Americans Marlon José, Julio César and Jairo Enrique who, when questioned last August 30 on the health conditions as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, replied, "We are more concerned about the murders." Marlon José was shot six times on June 26, 2020, in San Luis Potosi, one month after the interview; after a few telephone calls, Marlon became unreachable on August 8 of the same year. Julio César and Jairo Enrique became separated in Guadalajara after an attempt on their lives.

Marlon José, Central American migrant. Photo by Alejandro Mendoza Benitez, 2020.

## MS-13 negotiates with Mexican cartels

Paradoxically, hundreds of migrants leave their home countries due to the growth of gangs and the payment of protection money; however, when they arrive in Mexico, they discover the "other migration route": the one where the cartels gained a foothold with the *clikas* and took control of "the beast", the train that transports fuels, materials and supplies over 5,000 kilometers from the southern border to the northern border. The gang's intimidation practices make it virtually impossible for migrants to escape.

In 2012, the Infobae daily newspaper published a report concerning how the practices of dismemberment and decapitation used by the Mexican cartels were intimidation techniques learned from Salvadoran gangs, according to the Attorney General's Office (PGJ). Later, on February 14, 2021, the U.S. Embassy in El Salvador confirmed this connection, as an accusation was made in Central Islip, New York, against 14 top MS-13 leaders, who formed part of the Board of Directors of the organization known as the Ranfla Nacional, and

who had been identified as responsible for illegal businesses in different parts of the world, principally in Mexico. The Zeta, the Gulf Cartel, Jalisco New Generation Cartel, and the Sinaloa Cartel are recognized as the main organizations with whom the gang is involved in people trafficking; in other words, those who have turned Mexico, in the words of José Carlos Aguiar, into a "bone garden".

Furthermore, during one of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's morning press conferences on June 25, 2020, the National defense Secretary, Luis Cresencio Sandoval González, presented a map of the State of Mexico marked with the principal areas of operation of four criminal organizations; however, the CJNG is in control of the Tultitlán-Huehuetoca railroad corridor, headed by Omar Ramsés "el Calaca" in the state and in Mexico City. Data taken from the National Drug Threat Assessment (NDTA) of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) indicate that the criminal organization under the leadership of Nemesio Oseguera Cervantes, aka "el Mencho", operates in at least 23 Mexican states including Guadalajara, Guanajuato, and the State of Mexico.

From 2006 to 2016, state authorities reported that 1978 clandestine graves had been found, and the PGR reported 132. According to a map of the site drawn by "Where do the disappeared go?" research journalists and the Quinto Elemento Lab (Fifth Element Lab), 24 district attorney's offices found graves with at least 2,284 bodies in their territory; however, the locations of only seven graves and ten bodies were reported in the state of Mexico. Nothing indicated the existence of the grave in the municipality of Huehuetoca.

On August 17, 2016, while workers belonging to an external company contracted by the local government of Huehuetoca were busy cleaning up the "Planta Noria" water well, the current site of the Railway Museum, 900 skeletal remains were found, of which 792 were human and 72 animal, according to Alejandro Jaime Gómez Sánchez, the District Attorney of the State of Mexico, now the State Attorney General. One of the genetic profiles of the victims was that of a woman; however, MVS reported that no additional information was available due to their advanced state of decomposition. A local man, who refused to be recorded, interviewed on the May 2, 2021 says that they knew the identities of the victims at that site: it was an "open secret that you hoped wasn't true".

"One of the local residents told me that one time when he was walking past, he heard shouting and then two shots. He thought it better to take the bridge and walk round," the senior citizen told us. Two more people close to the case were contracted but they said they weren't allowed to talk about it.

The current State Attorney pointed out that no line of investigation would be discarded, since one of the hypotheses indicated that, due to the location of the grave in the municipality, it was clear that the victims were Central American migrants; however, this could not be proven and the genetic profiles were sent to the National Migration Institute (INM). Recently, young Albert claimed that "every so often", new migrant "soldiers" turn up and are "usually sent to different territories". He mentioned that, having discovered the remains of 12 people in the vicinity of the Huehuetoca town hall, the "soldiers" were moved away to other regions run by the gang and the CJNG.


The "Planta Noria" water well. Photo by Alejandro Mendoza Benitez, 2020.

## The santitos

“They call us the santitos. Do you know why they call us the santitos? Because if you don’t do it (drug dealing and distribution), they sacrifice you to our Lady of the Holy Death, but you have to do it. It makes no difference where you are. If you don’t, they kill you and your family,” confirmed Marvin Josué at another point of the interview. The young man said that some time after being recruited he was “marked” for death by someone in the MS-13, but the person who was taking him to an unknown location in the state confused him with someone else, who was murdered instead and placed on an altar as an offering to our Lady of The Holy Death.

Since then, Marvin has gone under a different name in the gang as he was forced to adopt the identity of the person taken “in his place”. Marvin managed to sneak away... and standing with the train tracks at his back, he said:

> I’m from there. And I saved myself, look at me. They took me away to kill me. They showed me photos of where they put people and the state they are in. They said, look, that what’s going to happen to you. But look, here I am. They would have taken me to their altars. That’s where they take the bones of the santitos; that’s why they call us santitos - because they transform us into saints. Did you know they have altars?

In this sense, Arturo Fabián Jiménez, a researcher into emerging religious organizations in Mexico, considers our Lady of The Holy Death to be directly linked to what he refers to as “five categories”: the catholic religion, Santeria, angels and pre-Hispanic beliefs and Satanism or black magic. However, it is in Satanism or black magic where human remains are used for “witchcraft” as there is currently no evidence of a relationship with pre-Hispanic beliefs: it would be quite a “finding were you to discover human remains on a pre-Hispanic altar to our Lady of The Holy Death specifically related to organized crime”.

The expert affirmed, nonetheless, that what “is at stake” in this type of witchcraft cult is not “the capacity of our Lady of The Holy Death”, but belief in the person who is to the job: belief that it will make a difference. He explained that not all types of cults that worship our Lady of The Holy Death are negative as there are “positive associations” and, even in the case of organized crime , they might pray to our Lady of The Holy Death to protect their children or, in an at-risk pregnancy, offer the baby. “That’s what families

do."

"Both police officers and criminals figure among our Lady of The Holy Death devotees, in addition to mothers whose children have been kidnapped and the kidnappers themselves," wrote the anthropologist José Carlos G. Aguiar in a publication for Aristegui Noticias. Paradoxically, although our Lady of The Holy Death "doesn't do miracles, she grants favors", and she doesn't seem to do so in equal measure. With no support, migrants are forced to set up relationship networks with the gangs, the very same situation that, in many cases, led to their fleeing their countries of origin in the first place.

"Migrants are viewed as having a dollar sign on their backs: as people who can be put to work, sexually and economically," says Father Horacio Robles Cedillo, the diocesan who oversees Human Mobility at the Cuautitlán diocese. Bands vying to take over more territory take advantage of migrants by charging them protection money, "a common situation in Central American countries", or at least this is what migrants told him during his tenure as director of the Casa del Migrante San Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin (San Juan Diego Cuauhtlatoatzin Migrant Home) from 2015 to 2017. Father Horacio Robles remembers that the part of Tultitlán where the facility were located was dangerous: "there were strange cars".

However, when the facility were moved to the municipality of Huehuetoca, "it was rumored that 'polleros' (cross-border people smugglers) were working in the vicinity of the safe houses". This change of geographical location did not bring an end to the aggressions against migrants; on the contrary, they became more widespread and intense. In his testimony he expresses the opinion that his neighbor's lives were complicated by "the appearance of 'polleros' or those who wanted to kidnap or extort money from migrants passing through the region"; as a result, pressure exerted by the community was more due to the "negative actors" causing the conflict than the migrants themselves.

The house belonging to the Cuautitlán diocese was located in the Lechería district of Tultitlán but later on, following disputes with local residents, it had to be closed on July 10, 2012. Afterwards, it was moved to Huehuetoca, one and a half kilometers from the town hall, in a sparsely populated area across from the railroad tracks, where it currently operates under the strict health measures required by the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, whereas the migrant flow was as high as 300 a day from 2008 to

2010, today's numbers have dropped to between 10 and 30. In 2020, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) reported that, as a result of current health-care initiatives implemented by governments, migrants find themselves in a series of precarious situations: restricted mobility due to health-care initiatives, eviction from safe shelters, people stranded in detention centers and, last but not least, exposure of migrants to COVID-19.

**The law of ego and Princess Diana**

At this point, our source brought up another question. Two things that will shed some light on the phenomenon of crime against migrants. Marvin said, "I'm going to tell you so you have a better idea what it's about." He explained that you have to know about the "law of ego": "you're not going to put one over anyone else just because you're smarter, and that's what happens here," he began. "Check out what happened to my lovely Diana when she asked too many questions. If you look into that, you'll understand a lot," Marvin went on (revealing his admiration for Diana, the Princess of Wales).

On August 31, 1997, Diana Frances Spencer, the Princess of Wales, died in a car crash at the age of 36 while she was being driven through the Alma tunnel in Paris, France; however, there are different theories about her death. In a BBC News "point-by-point" segment on February 19, 2008, the following statement was made: "The car crash in which Diana, Dodi and their driver Henri Paul were assassinated was orchestrated by MI6 on the instructions of the Duke of Edinburgh". It is conjectured that her remains were not buried at Althorp House as the public was informed, and although this was never corroborated, it is paradoxical that everything would become clearer with the answer to a rhetorical question from Marvin: "Did you know that her bones were stolen?"

Finally, standing on the train tracks used by "the Beast", Marlon Josué, now hatless, brought the interview to an end by bumping fists and nodding his head; his eyes reflected everything but tranquility.

When they cross into Mexico, migrants are faced with situations like those that forced them to flee their home countries but with the difference that in Mexico they are forced to join gangs to survive. They become sicarios and mules: soldiers at the service of the MS leaders who have made deals with

Mexico's largest criminal organizations, which are constantly extending their influence in new territories and are positioning themselves as new "financial sectors". Like large companies, drug cartels diversify their activities and are increasingly playing a part in the everyday life of modern Mexico.

## 4. The orphans of femicide forgotten by the pandemic

Aldo Rodrigo Nicolai Yáñez

Illustration: Alexis Nicolai.

Ruth Veloz didn't know how to answer her grandson, Erick. One day when she picked him up from school, he told her, "One of the kids told me someone had my mom killed." The first thing she thought of telling him was that it had been an "accident". Then, she explains, the boy forgot all about it She still hasn't told him what happened. It has been two years since the femicide of Argentina, Veloz's daughter, the same two years that the grandmother has been looking after 11-year-old Erick and his fifteen-year-old brother, César. For two years she has been seeking justice for the murder, while struggling to do her best by the boys. Minors are the invisible victims of these crimes: girls, boys, and adolescents who are orphaned by gender crimes in Mexico.

A variety of organizations report that this group of youngsters is exposed to different vulnerabilities, which have become more serious in the context of the COVID-19 health crisis. Among other aspects, they flag the lack of attention on the part of the government concerning the provision of psychological and

educational support, even before the virus appeared. The National Women's Institute (Inmujeres as it is known in Spanish) reported that 796 cases of orphaned children were reported in Mexico in 2019 for these reasons; however, these data were only made available by 26 of the 32 federal[3] states in the country. The precise number, and the full extent of the problem, could be much greater.

Veloz, who is 54, lives with her grandchildren in San Pedro de las Colonias in the state of Coahuila. She says that she has sought help from the authorities since she started taking care of them. She turned to several government agencies but had little success; in her own words, "So much red tape". César, the older of the two, takes therapy once a week, but privately. The grandmother says that only recently did she receive a call from the Attorney General's Office for Children and the Family (Pronnif). "We got some support for both children about a month ago (in June). After a wait of two years," she comments.

Sandra Soto at Orphans by femicide[4] points out that when a woman is murdered, her children are left "completely unprotected". She mentions several factors. Sometimes they lose two forms of financial support: not just their mother, but also their father, who commits the crime. On an emotional level, she believes that children are not usually given adequate psychological treatment. And finally, she affirms that they are left in a legal quandary with no one responsible for their custody. "They are the most innocent, and those that suffer most collateral damage," she adds.

The pandemic has weighed those who take on the responsibility of caretakers down with worries: in many cases, the mother's family, especially grandmothers. Many of these are elderly women who not only have to deal with their own grief at the loss of a daughter, but also uncertainty about who would take care of their grandchildren should they meet an untimely end, especially due to their vulnerability to the coronavirus, Soto explains. The activist says that she has heard of cases of grandparents whose only recourse in recent months has been to go back to work: "They have had a hard time of it, some more than others. Some of them are not even pensioners yet. These are people who live from day to day, or women who are left alone with their grandchildren."

**Home Care**

Veloz took on once again the role of mother and along with it all the unpaid housework that is often taken for granted described by certain organizations as "invisible". She is a domestic worker; she combines her daily chores with the additional work caused by having her grandchildren in her home. She gets them up at 9 o' clock in the morning. Getting them ready to set off for school is a noisy affair. She tells them to make sure they have everything their teachers left them for homework. One of her daughters usually packs their lunch. And then she goes back to her housework: "God has given me this mission: to bring them up properly and turn them into good men."

Cases like her grandsons Erick and César are repeated in other parts of the country: thousands of children have lost their mothers in Mexico, where an average of three women a day were murdered in 2020,[5] —crimes known as femicides— according to the Executive Secretariat of the National Public Security System (SESNSP).

**Minors who have been orphaned "are those that suffer most collateral damage".**

Friné Salguero, director of the Simone de Beauvoir Leadership Institute (ILSB), comments that domestic work, in general, is essential to sustaining life, reproduction, and society. According to ILSB estimates, in Mexico, women do 80% of these chores.[6] However, it is not simply a case of an unfair division of labor, it is also the time invested: as many as 30 hours a week in the case of unpaid activities. "The fact that women have become breadwinners in no way reduces the amount of work they have to do at home. And this leads to their investing their time in double or triple working days," she estimates.

Available data do shed a little light on those who take responsibility for orphans by femicide. This is true, at least, of the figures published by the INMUJERES documentation center on the state of Sinaloa for 2010:[7] after the loss of their mother, children were taken in by their maternal grandparents (76%), their maternal uncles and aunts (9%), paternal uncles and aunts (3%), and their paternal grandparents (3%).

Salguero emphasizes that the pandemic has had an adverse impact on amount of work done by these women caregivers. The suspension of face-to-face classes at various academic levels meant they had to take on new tasks, such as

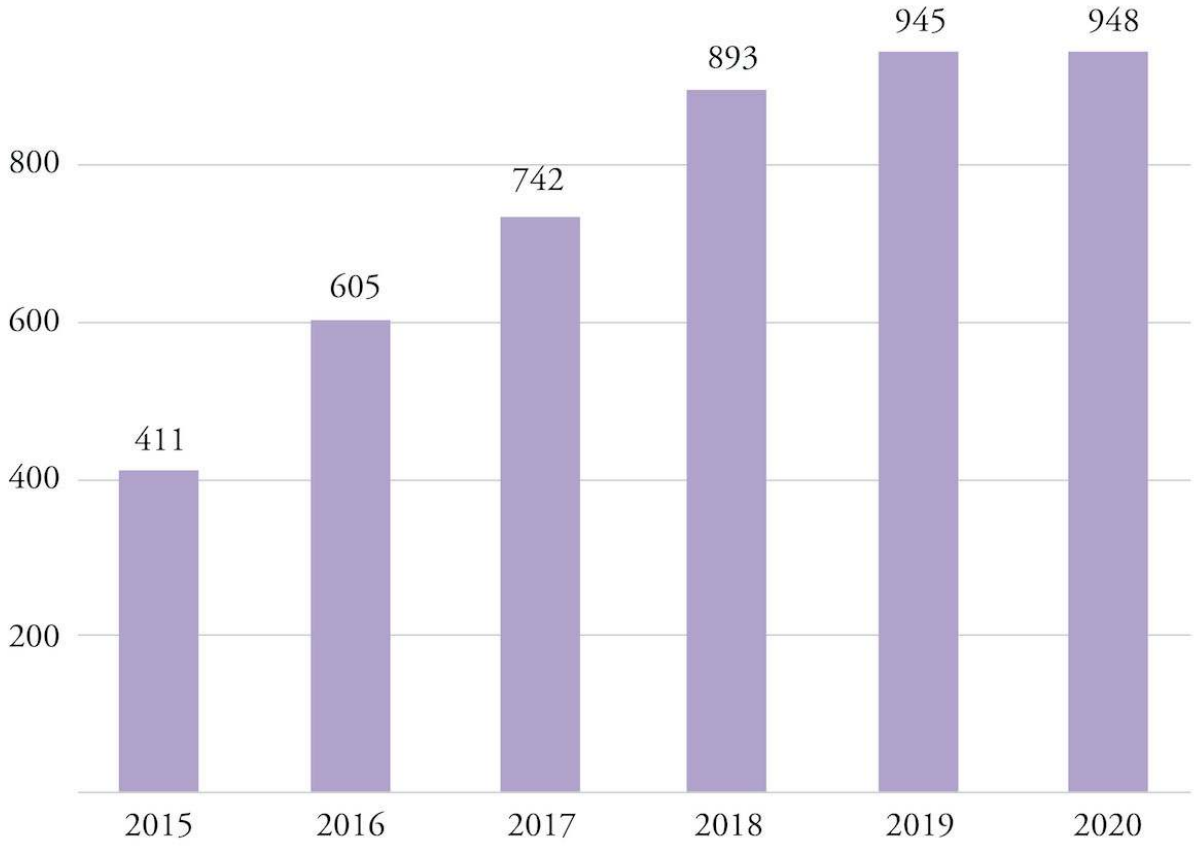
following up on school requirements, doing more housework, and spending more time at home with family members due to business closures and voluntary confinement.

The ILSB director suggests that many have had to give up their jobs or reduce their workload to take care of their dependents at home. "All that work and the new roles of being a teacher, like telling children what to do and organizing fun activities fall once again on women's shoulders because of the poor distribution of domestic caregiving," she says.

**Government Neglect**

Aglae Méndez believes that the government has neglected her family. They are constantly seeking support for Jorge and Leonardo, who are 12 and 10, respectively. Elizabeth, their mother and Méndez's niece, was murdered in February the previous year in San Martín Texmelucan (Puebla). Her ex-boyfriend committed the femicide and is still at large. The children were supposed to be given therapy by the state District Attorney's office but when their sessions were canceled time and again due to the coronavirus, they chose to go private. "The whole family has chipped in any way we can to buy them clothes, shoes, school supplies, and cover all their expenses," she concludes.

**Gráfica 14.1** Femicides in México (2015-2020)




Source: Figures on the incidence of state crime from the Executive Secretariat of the National Public Security System.

Several of the sources interviewed for this report highlight progress made in the northern state of Coahuila in this respect: an exceptional case where there is even a support program for indirect victims[8] of femicide in the region.

In November 2020, the president of Mexico, Andrés Manuel López Obrador and the governor of Puebla, Miguel Barbosa, visited the community of Tlaxcalantongo in the municipality of Xicotepec. Méndez got several family members together and they took a letter addressed to the president. They managed to get close to him. "He actually slowed down to listen to us. After all, we did have signs and banners, and we were shouting," she admits. The news item was picked up by several local communication media. [9] "All we wanted was for him to listen to us, to understand that no one was helping us and that the children need some care," she explains.

A month later she received a phone call from an officer at the Ministry of the Interior, at that time with Olga Sánchez Cordero at the helm. The reason for his

call was to tell her that the agency head had instructed him to get in touch with the family.

"We'd like to know how we can help."

"Everything is in our letter. We're looking for support."

The family's objectives are that the children should be cared for, that they should not be re-victimized, and that investigations should continue until the murderer is found. They were offered financial aid. The family submitted the documentation but so far there is no sign of the aid.

Ana Yeli Pérez, legal council at the National Citizen Femicide Observatory (OCNF), denounces the care provided by the authorities as insufficient. "The State has let them down for decades," is her verdict. As far as psychological therapy is concerned, she dares to say it is "non-existent". "You would expect psychological care to be guaranteed; in other words, in the event of a crime, especially that kind, girls, boys, and adolescents should be taken care of by the State. But that's not what happens," evaluates Pérez, who is also the director of the Pro-Person Justice (Justicia Pro Persona) organization.

Civil society entities warn that these orphaned children and adolescents in Mexico experience a high degree of vulnerability that makes it difficult to safeguard their integrity and rights in accordance with the best interests of the child. Certain entities like Los machos nos Matan en México (Machos kill us in Mexico) or Huérfanos por Feminicidio[10] (Ophans by Femicide) have distributed food packets to the families of victims that have suffered severe financial hardship during recent months. The pandemic has hit many people's economies hard, but group solidarity remains firm.

**Custody cases in limbo due to the virus**

The health crisis stopped the whole world. And during this pause, judiciary activities were also delayed. In March, 2020,[11] the Federal Judiciary Board suspended work until August of that same year; only hearings "of an urgent nature" were held. Work at the Mexico City Judiciary, for example, was interrupted again for a few months in 2021.

Ana Karen Flores, a lawyer specializing in family law, takes an in-depth look at the complications that have been detected in custody cases during these months. One such complication is the delay to legal proceedings. "For every

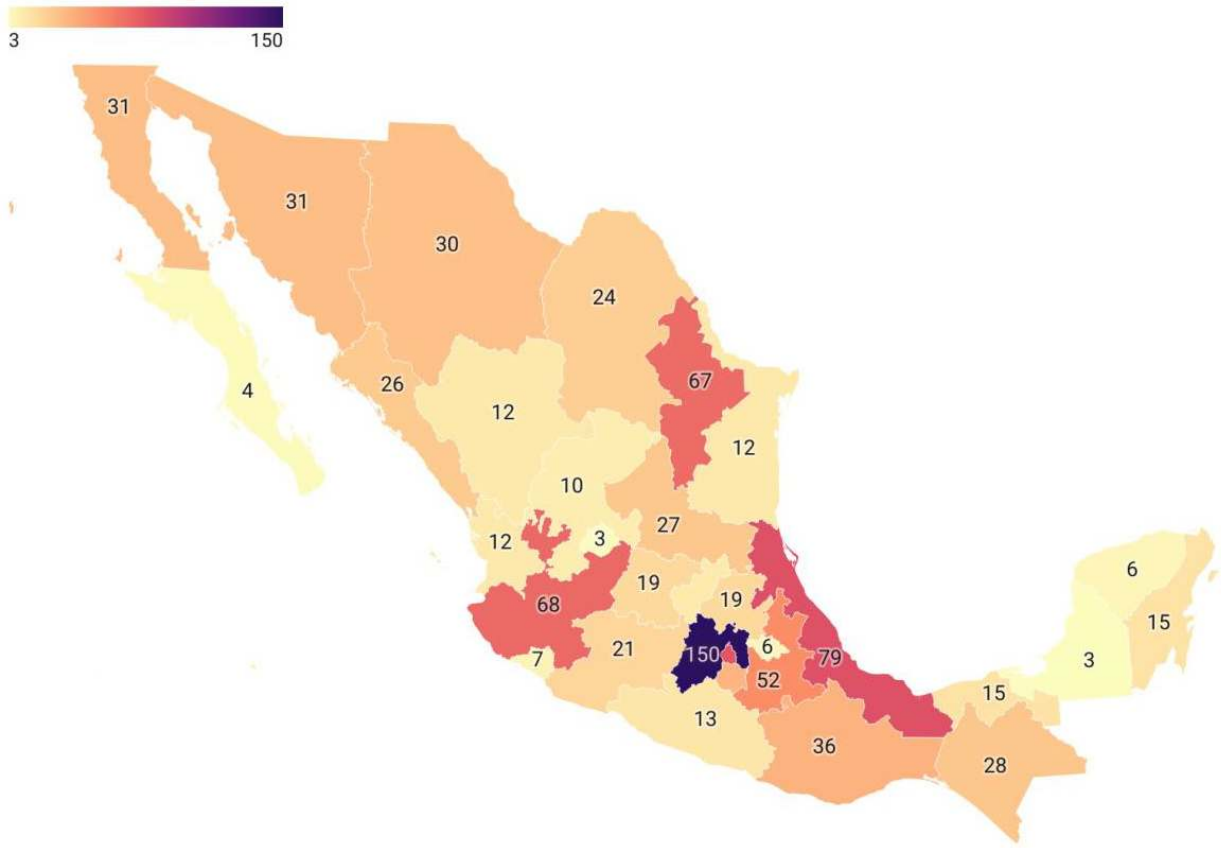
three proceedings, we are lucky if the first is completed. They are being delayed two, four, even six months." Another point she mentions is that files have been misplaced or archived. "They have become overloaded with new cases and the active cases they already had. Judicial powers are not, so to speak, able to cope with the workload," she stresses.

**"Some matters have been paralyzed by the pandemic."**

Orphans by femicide, in many cases, are left in custody of relatives of alleged criminals. Or of the murderer himself, who claims custody as one of his paternal rights, according to a report published by the Mexico City Human Rights Commission (CDHCM).[12] This document suggests that "the authorities themselves" make a telling argument by observing that these families possess "greater wealth" than maternal grandparents.

The CDHCM alleges that the authorities in charge, due to their misinterpretation of the family, deny custody to maternal grandparents for this very reason. "The relatives of victims are very often so overwhelmed by the process of demanding justice, protecting themselves from institutional violence, and dealing with their grief that they have neither time nor resources to apply for custody of their grandchildren," states the report.

**Map 14.1** Femicides in México in 2020 by state Alleged cases recorded in initial preliminary inquiries or investigative files




Source: State crime incidence figures, 2015, May 2021.

Flores says that, due to the health crisis, service access at certain prosecutor's offices has been through appointments or electronic portals. "This makes it difficult for people to file a complaint. They don't know how to go about it," he explains. He asserts that some people don't have the necessary tools, mobile devices, or the internet. And this brings about delays in waiting times. "Certain matters have gone as far as they can go. Bogged down due to the pandemic," adds the lawyer.

948 women were murdered[13] in the country last year. Almost a thousand lives taken by machista violence. No state was left unscathed. The states with most cases of alleged crimes labeled solely as femicides in investigative files were the State of Mexico (15.8% of the total), Veracruz (8.3%), Mexico City (8%), Jalisco (7.1%) and Nuevo León (7%), according to SESNSP data.

## Care protocol, waiting

In mid 2019, Inmujeres director Nadine Gasman informed that, in conjunction with state prosecutor's offices, a register of orphans by femicide in the country was to be created. In an interview in the Jornada newspaper,[14] she commented that orphan numbers are being documented with details of the type of care they are being given.

Another story is that of the National Protocol for the Care of Children and Adolescents Orphaned by Femicide (PNNAOF for its initials in Spanish).[15] Inmujeres, the Comprehensive Family Development System (DIF) and the National System for the Protection of Children and Adolescents (SIPINNA) published a certain amount of information concerning their activities in 2020. Since then, very little additional information has been forthcoming. Organizations such as Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa (Our Daughters Home Again) or Nos Queremos Vivas (We Want to Be Alive) spoke up at the start of the year, [16] and demanded that the measure be published as soon as possible in the Official Gazette of the Federation (DOF, for its initials in Spanish).

In a press release, the government announced[17] that Inmujeres, in conjunction with municipal, state, and federal authorities, would draw up a final version of the protocol. But that is not what happened. One of the institution's social communication sources clarified that a draft version was eventually provided to the DIF (Comprehensive Family Development System) for it to be aligned with state legal frameworks. The source said that the DIF has produced a final version and that they are waiting for it to be published for it to be implemented throughout the country. Furthermore, the source revealed, the document will probably be made available in the coming weeks. "We cannot talk about the issue at this time because it is about to be presented," it concluded.

Oliver Castañeda, the DIF Federal Attorney for the Protection of Children and Adolescents, corroborated that the text was submitted to the agency. "It has been authorized by the DIF board of governors. And when it was approved, the pre-publication review process, which has all but been completed, was set in motion," he said in a telephone interview. Castañeda guaranteed that this kind of initiative improves institutional coordination: "Basically, the idea is to coordinate our actions better and to develop a greater response capacity to offer the basic services required by any person in this situation".

While this is being finalized, [18] the number of femicides in Mexico continues

to grow and the all-pervasive cycle of violence it has suffered for several years remains unbroken. In the first semester of 2021, these crimes grew 3.77% in Mexico with respect to the same period of the previous year, according to National Public Security System (SESNSP) figures. Between January and June, 495 women were murdered because of their gender.

To create this report, an attempt was made through a variety of digital channels of communication to set up a conversation with Fabiola Alanís Sámano, the current director of the National Commission for the Prevention and Eradication of Violence against Women (CONAVIM). She was one of promoters of this protocol during the previous stage of her career at Inmujeres, according to her profile published on a Mexican government website.[19] However, on the date of the publication of this text, it had not been possible to schedule an interview.

**Last year, 948 women were murdered in Mexico. Almost a thousand lives taken by machista violence in the country.**

Margarita Alanís, who is 63, tells her story. At the end of 2016, her daughter Campira brought her grandchildren to her home in Acapulco for a visit. Campira went back to the capital, Mexico City. "I came here for Christmas. I was going to take the children later. That was when she was murdered," she remembers. She has been looking after Vladimir and Alexa, who came to live with her when they were 12 and 2 respectively, for a long time. "It wasn't easy. I had to start over as if I had children again," she notes.

The woman and her husband pay for the children's upkeep mainly with their own resources. They have made a point of sending them to a private school. They have a small pension. They also have several apartments that they rent out, but she confesses that they have gone through a period of three years during which time their tenants have abandoned their properties owing them large sums of money. They sold a house very cheaply to a lady friend in Chalco in the State of Mexico. "I have some really large debts. I had to apply for three credit cards and use them to pay school fees," she laments.

All the psychological care given to Vladimir has been private. She went to live in Mexico City with Alexa for a full school year, where both of them underwent therapy provided by the government for a while. They were also given food

packages. But all of that came to an end when they returned to Acapulco. She complains that she fought hard to get a scholarship. Eventually, in August 2020, both of her grandchildren were given an 832-pesos monthly grant known as the "Leona Victoria" by the Mexico City government[20]. Fortunately, she says, the money is paid punctually. Unfortunately, it is "very little".

"I had made life plans with my husband, even for a rest home, a place where we would be taken care of. We couldn't have imagined that we would have to take care of children..."

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3 Mexican government, "Children and adolescents orphaned by femicide are protected by the Mexican State", National Women's Institute, press release, July 20, 2020, https://www.gob.mx/inmujeres/prensa/las-ninas-ninos-y-adolescentes-en-orfandad-a-causa-del-feminicidio-estaran-protegidas-y-protegidos-por-el-estado-mexicano?idiom=es

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5 Mexican Government, Ministry of Security and Citizen Protection, "Incidencia delictiva del fuero común 2020" (Incidence of common law crime, 2020) México, July 20, 2021, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ZlaH1QdITZrQWL3b3R9KlsngSu02LOCo/view

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9 Martha Cuaya ("Not even one more, Mr. President") demands justice from AMLO (Andrés Manuel López Obrador) for the femicide of Eli", El Sol de Puebla, November 21, 2020, https://www.elsoldepuebla.com.mx/local/estado/ni-una-mas-senor-presidente-exigen-a-amlo-justicia-para-el-feminicidio-de-eli-maria-elizabeth-orea-mendoza-san-martin-texmelucan-tlaxcalantongo-xicotepec-puebla-andres-manuel-lopez-obrador-jorge-ernesto-aglae-mendez-6043794.html

10 Los machos nos Matan en México (Machos kill us in Mexico), Facebook page, @losmachosnosmatanenméxico (community service), https://www.facebook.com/losmachosnosmatanenmexico/posts/155466156120925 ; Huérfanos por feminicidio, Facebook page, @huerfanosfeminicidiomx, https://www.facebook.com/huerfanosfeminicidiomx/

11 General Agreement 4/2020 of the Plenum of the Federal Judiciary Council, concerning contingency measures in jurisdictional bodies due to the public health phenomenon caused by the COVID-19 virus, Mrch 20, 2020, https://www.dof.gob.mx/nota_detalle.php?codigo=5589993&fecha=20/03/2020

12 Andrea Medina Rosas, "Las niñas y los niños huérfanos víctimas del feminicidio y otras muertes violentas contra mujeres" ("Orphaned Children by Femicide and Other Violent Murders of Women"), Defensor, human rights magazine, December, 2017, https://cdhcm.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/dfensor_12_2017.pdf

13 Mexican government, "Incidencia delictiva del fuero común, 2020" (Incidence of common law crime, 2020), Ministry of Security and Citizen Protection, July 20 2021, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ZlaH1QdITZrQWL3b3R9KlsngSu02LOCo/view

14 Jessica Xantomila, "Se creará un registro de huérfanos por feminicidio, anuncia Inmujeres" ("A register of orphans by femicide to be created, announces Inmujeres"), La Jornada, August 5, 2019, https://www.jornada.com.mx/2019/08/05/politica/014n1pol

15 Mexican government, "Children and adolescents orphaned by femicide are protected by the Mexican state," statement by Inmujeres, July 20, 2020.

16 Nuestras hijas de Regreso a Casa (Our Daughters Home Again) https://nuestrashijasderegresoacasa.blogspot.com/2021/

17 Mexican government, "Children and adolescents orphaned by femicide are protected by the Mexican state," statement by Inmujeres, July 20, 2020.

18 This report was written before the publication of the National Protocol for the Care of Children and Adolescents Orphaned

by Femicide (PNNAOF) in the Official Gazette on August 4, 2021. Its purpose is to "provide guidelines" for the intervention of personnel charged with the protection of these children and adolescents. Among other points, emphasis is placed on generating institutional coordination to deal with cases, on supervising psychological and socio-educational care, as well as on providing family members with counsel on legal proceedings.

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# 15. Peripheral networks of women during the pandemic

Tania Ortega García

On March 10, Laura, a resident of Santiago Tlacotepec to the south of Toluca was added to the WhatsApp group Las Montoneras (The Female Crowd) to promote and find out more about women's rights. Simultaneously, she received a message on the same platform from a man who had been harassing her for a long time. She wondered how he'd come by her telephone number, so she asked the group about him.

Laura is 22, inspires trust in the people who know her and is empathetic and sensitive. She likes to feel the sisterhood of her friends and fights for the improvement of women's circumstances, which is why she joined Las Montoneras, a group of women who share her perspective.

After Laura asked whether anyone had given her number to this man, she discovered that they all had the same stalker, "Beto J," who had found them on social media. Some had been harassed since their teens.

This was the case of Alma, the youngest sister of one of the group's members. Her Facebook account had been hacked right after she'd refused to send a picture of herself naked to "Beto J." After receiving insistent messages and calls via Messenger in the middle of the night, she blocked him; but that didn't stop the guy.

"Beto J" had done the same thing to most of the girls and women he stalked in Santiago Tlacotepec, where he lives. He was one of Laura's neighbors, who would only stare at her from afar; however, he would repeatedly greet her through his different virtual profiles and ask her out, as well as send her revealing photos. Laura had blocked him, but he was stalking her through another profile.

This was a watershed moment for Las Montoneras to begin telling each other their stories about harassment, which is why they decided to set up a Facebook page called "Acosadores de Santiago Tlacotepec y alrededores" [21] on March 11, 2021, where they talked about these cases.

Under the hashtag #YoTeCreo (I Believe You), they publicized one of "Beto J's" profiles and reported his harassment; they got 48 reactions and five comments. After that, the guy deleted his profiles on social media.

Since then, whenever Laura encounters "Beto J" in her community, he doesn't "Look me straight in the eye" like before; he just "lowers his gaze and walks away." Now, he leaves her alone and doesn't contact her through these platforms either. "You feel afraid because you think about what's going to happen if you go out and they do something to you, but then you think: 'I shouldn't have to live in fear,'" said Laura.

One case that went further was that of "Emmanuel D," another virtual stalker from the area. "Ever since I was about 11, he would send me messages like: 'Do you want me to perform oral sex on you?' And I really didn't understand and I said: 'What's that?' and he said: 'Come here.' I was so scared that I deleted and blocked him after that," reads an anonymous complaint posted on the page.

After that post, there was an outpouring of screenshots with messages from the same account addressed to girls and women from the community of Santiago Tlacotepec. The complaint received 170 comments with 43 screenshots, through which 38 girls and women demonstrated the harassment and bullying they had suffered.

For several years, "Emmanuel D", despite not having been added as a contact, harassed them through private chats with repeated unanswered greetings, insistent invitations to go out with him, sexual innuendo, as well as photos of his genitals; he also made calls and video calls. Some women simply blocked or ignored him. Others had been contacted through different accounts since 2015, under the same process of sexual harassment. Although teenage girls replied to his messages, they decided to stop responding when he became insistent.

## Hate for feminists sparks cyberorganization

Las Montoneras is one example of how women have organized themselves to tackle harassment during the pandemic. Alison, a student and one of the founders of the "Acosadores de Santiago Tlacotepec y alrededores" page, created a group on social media made up of girls living in Santiago Tlacotepec,

Capultitlán, San Juan Tilapa, and Toluca, in order to attend the March 8 (M8) demonstration safely.

When she was 13, Alison was sexually harassed in cyberspace and on the streets; now 21, she had experienced a relationship in which there was pathological jealousy, control, and violence. Since then, she has borne silent witness to her surroundings. She realizes that sexism is prevalent in her family, in her uncles, in her cousins, and even in her mother.

Alison is studying for a degree, even though she sometimes feels that she'll never complete it. She draws hope from the Las Montoneras organization, as it provides understanding, support, and friendship, despite its virtual nature.

The history of this collective began on March 6. After meeting their goal of accompanying each other to the protest, the girls returned home satisfied; however, social media was flooded with attacks on feminism. "After the march was over, I noticed that there was a lot of hate towards feminists in the comments of Facebook groups," said Alison, "where they'd upload videos of the march and say that the women who went were crazy, that they didn't represent them, that they were vandals, that they weren't women..."

Her friends, chiefly those who displayed their activism on social media by sharing different content against gender violence, received many friendship requests from men or women with fake profiles; they also received offensive photos via Messenger, a "letter to a feminist from the patriarchy" or phrases such as "one more feminazi," "jilted and upset," "it's your own fault," and "you're all crazy women."

"They've always belittled the struggle," said Alison, so she maintained the group created for M8 and converted it into a virtual space for feedback called Las Montoneras.

It wasn't until Laura spoke about her stalker that they realized the need to "set up a page to report these people and reveal what they do, in order to warn more women and girls who might even be living with them," said Alison.

The pandemic has exposed the weaknesses in the system of justice in Mexico and the world. The issues that had existed before became worse and were bolstered in different ways. That's how gender-based violence increased during the emergency within a context of unemployment, a crisis in the health system, and intensified poverty.

According to the World Bank, the practices of courts and judicial levels

improved access to complaints by adopting "technology to share information and perform operations such as lodging petitions and requesting protection orders." However, this has never been the case for the victims of violence from Santiago Tlacotepec and the surrounding area. Added to this is a key element mentioned by the international organization on its official website, "the stretched capacity of response services might reduce the protection and support available, contributing to a heightened perception of impunity among perpetrators."

Las Montoneras was created in the midst of this panorama and they then set up the anti-stalker page. For Carmen, who is another of the site's founders, one of the page's goals is to prevent impunity going unchecked in the area. "When we started to point out abusers, we began to show that victims can raise their voices... and aggressors have no greater fear than that of being pointed out," she said.

There are close to twenty teenagers and women in Las Montoneras, including students, mothers, businesswomen, and even a lecturer. The lecturer is Carmen, who's 30 years old. She likes to promote women's rights and she stays active to do so. Just like the others, she joined the group to participate in M8 and stayed because she liked the shelter and support of her friends.

Zay is also part of the organization. She went on the march carrying a picture of a girl who'd been reported missing bearing the phrase: "Found dead." This was a picture of Leonarda, a girl who'd gone missing on October 15, 2020.

"She was my friend. I met her on Facebook, but she disappeared. She had a four-year-old daughter. That day, she and her family came back from visiting her aunts. She said she was going to top up her phone at the shop, three blocks away. Not many people live there. There's maybe ten houses over several blocks. She never returned. They don't know if someone snatched her off the street. Some say it could have been her ex-husband," said Zay.

Zay is a 28-year-old mom who goes whenever she can to demonstrations or public activities opposing violence against women.

These women are members of Las Montoneras. They have all suffered some kind of violence at different levels, but have experienced sexual bullying and harassment on a daily basis.

**Harassment increased from 2020 to 2021: ENSU**

According to data from the National Survey on Urban Public Safety (ENSU for its initials in Spanish), sexual bullying or harassment in physical and virtual spaces increased from 2020 to 2021, although it went down from 2019 to 2021.

In other words, 27.2% of women over the age of 18 were victims of personal harassment and/or sexual violence in the street and virtual spaces in the second half of 2019.

Based on results from seven cities across the country, the survey indicates that 21.6% of women were victims of this crime over the same period during 2020; while this rose to 24.7% in 2021. Meanwhile, men experienced this form of violence to a lesser extent, with 10.1% being the highest figure in 2019.

Regarding the specific crime of cyberharassment, 23.9% of internet users were victims; 9.4 million were women (24.2%) and 8.3 million were men (23.5%), according to data from the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI for its initials in Spanish).

Although the difference appears to be minimal, 54.8% of aggressors identified in the case of women were men, while 61.8% of aggressors in the male population were also men, according to data from the Cyberharassment Module (MOCIBA for its initials in Spanish) for 2019.

Out of all the women who had been cyberharassed, 40.3% received sexual proposals or innuendo, while 33% of men received offensive messages. INEGI counted the population of over 12s who had been victims. Moreover, 36.4% of women between the ages of 20 and 29 were more exposed, which was the same for 28.1% of men between the ages of 12 and 19.

Furthermore, the Executive Secretariat Report from the National Public Security System (SNSP for its initials in Spanish) indicates that the State of Mexico held fifth place for complaints of this crime from January to May 2021, with 231 emergency calls, which represents 6% of those received nationwide.

**Virtual harassment is more invasive**

Digital space is also public space, so when woman appear a lot by posting too much, uploading numerous photos of themselves or engaging in activities that bring them into the digital universe, an attempt is usually made to penalize said violation of the gender norm (taking up too much space). That's when they are warned not to do so, says academic Erika Pérez.

According Pérez, who holds a doctorate in Social Sciences from El Colegio de México, this warning in the street is violent, whether with verbal or written aggression, sending them photos, mocking or exposing those women who break this gender norm. So, these attitudes become violent mechanisms for making them return to the place these men believe is theirs: the domestic space, in silence.

"The aggression is even stronger in digital settings, in the sense that there is often anonymity with fake profiles. There's also a sensation of being observed, because the spaces and times in which you're visible are multiplied in the digital world," says Erika Pérez.

People can be connected from any place at different times, so they're permanently visible. Even if they only have a cellphone with no internet, they can receive a message from someone harassing them and this makes them feel they're being observed. "If someone says something to you in the street, you can run away and escape that situation. However, digital space makes you feel permanently exposed," explains the researcher. "People feel less inhibited in attacking others. It's very easy because they're not physically present."

For her part, Sonia Frías, who holds a doctorate in Sociology and is an academic at the Regional Center for Multidisciplinary Research of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM for its initials in Spanish) says that sexual bullying is a form of violence in which there is an abusive exercise of power. Although there is also an abuse of power in sexual harassment, this takes place over time. Bullying can happen in a moment, whereas harassment can be extended unpredictably.

They tend to get confused with each other, as "the behaviors associated with these concepts may be the same. In English, sexual harassment tends to be the only term used to refer to this behavior, or people think that both terms can be used interchangeably," says the researcher in an online interview.

Sexual bullying occurs when strangers, usually men, ogle one or more women in physical or virtual public places and address them with lewd words

or gestures. They uphold their right to bother the woman by forcing her to interact with them, through sexist behaviors that may end up defining her as a sexual object.

The aggressions that women suffer on a daily basis are normalized and minimized, in both public and virtual spheres, says Sofía Frías. We can change this through prevention, raising awareness in children.

## Connected multitudes

A large part of the recent wave of feminism, which began in 2014, is due to mass use of social media. Although this movement has a long history, it had never been as strong as it is now, explains academic Erika Pérez. "Untraditional forms of organization, like meetings, began to emerge. It's not necessarily a case of students congregating physically and then moving into a virtual environment; they're now operating under a logic that some authors call connected multitudes, which are people who may have nothing in common but are brought together by a common cause on their digital networks," says the researcher.

On Facebook, communities are connected or articulated through weak connections that are useful for making demands and raising awareness of topics. In other words, these connections are activated when necessary and can eventually build up strength and have repercussions.

There are movements that only stay in the digital layer and do not move into physical life, but there are others that do. In the case of women's organizations created during the pandemic, technology is a tool. Social media are a dissemination resource that strengthens and raises awareness of their activities, which can be virtual or physical; so their actions are balanced between these spheres.

Although Facebook is one of the platforms with most bullying on the internet, these women use it as a conduit for reporting and preventing violence; it's also a medium for channeling cases, monitoring and supporting victims, and promoting women's rights.

"The pandemic has moved many of the practices that were exercised on the streets to social media, such as the M8 march," explains the researcher. "Although there were many (women) who went out, many decided to stay at

home and demonstrate in virtual ways. Numerous people who prefer to stay at home have moved their lives to the digital arena."

The networks of women created during the pandemic have experienced greater difficulty in the face of this global tragedy. They have had to find their way towards resilience and resistance.

Calls to helplines and the need for attention have overwhelmed the agencies and organizations responsible. Government offices were closed. If there had been few solutions from the authorities before, now there were even fewer. However, strength, creativity, and a capacity for resilience allowed women to find a way to exist as a community without neglecting their lives.

## The periphery exists because it resists

The organization Brujas Cósmicas (Cosmic Witches)[22] appeared in a similar way to Las Montoneras, but on the other side of the city, to the north of the valley of Toluca in a predominantly Otomi area. Formed by six students between the ages of 18 and 30, its name comes from one of their favorite singers, Janis Joplin.

On September 28, 2020, known as S28, many women commemorated the Day of Action for the Decriminalization and Legalization of Abortion in the center of Toluca. Using phrases such as "Women's rights don't have to be consulted, they are guaranteed" or "Legal abortion to prevent deaths," they symbolically remembered that The Law of Free Birth granting freedom to the children of female slaves was passed in Brazil on the same day in 1871.

After that day, Lucía and Elisa got together to create the collective; more joined on March 8 and by April 20 they had set up their Facebook page. After the events of M8 in Toluca, through posts to social media, they realized that it wasn't just the two of them. More girls were interested in building a women's network. After that, they invited more people to join.

Lucía is studying for her degree and has also suffered from violence against women; she has experienced it in the street, in her family, in the government, everywhere. "Some of the reasons we had for getting started have to do with our being symbolic victims, as you suffer from a certain amount of violence just because you're a woman. For example, in San Andrés, mothers and fathers tend to say to their daughters, 'Why are you studying if you're a woman? You're

going to get married, have kids, and you'll be taken care of... It's pointless,'" says Lucía.

In the northern periphery, the female population starts having an active sex life at a very early age, between the ages of 13 and 14, so they already have children at 17. Most of them are single mothers and perhaps 20% are supported by their partners.

According to Lucía, "Girls are denied the right to study because they're women. So, how are they going to know about female condoms so they can say to their boyfriends, 'You know, we should use a condom,' if they don't have access to the internet or cellphones? That's how we began to consider what people in the towns needed."

Thus, the organization focuses on towns such as San Pablo Autopan, San Cristóbal Huichochitlán, San Andrés Cuexcontitlán, San Diego de los Padres, and Palmillas, where they think the most deep-seated sexism is.

Lucía says that those on the periphery have no voice, which is why one of this movement's goals is to empower girls and women from this zone so they can access the right to education, in addition to marking a bike lane in San Andrés on the Toluca-Temoaya highway so they can move around safely.

They held a feminist bike ride to announce this on Sunday June 20. More than 30 girls and women traveled by bike for the first time in the north of the valley of Toluca, bearing the slogan "Women on the periphery exist because they resist."

This first feminist bike ride started in Campos Ávila, in San Pablo Autopan, went through San Cristóbal Huichochitlán and finished in San Andrés Cuexcontitlán. It brought girls from these towns together seeking better infrastructure for the bike lane to make it safer, as it is mainly used by male and female laborers.

During the journey, the contingent received insults, aggressions, and were even spat at by other women and men, who seemed to disagree with their struggle. Police officers and other residents along the route looked on curiously and asked what they were doing.

**Sexual harassment and being an artisan**

Elisa is a law student who founded Brujas Cósmicas with Lucía; she's likeable

and convivial. She has witnessed sexual harassment in the workplace, which she believes is silenced and normalized. Elisa worked with another 10 women in a resin workshop in San Andrés Cuexcontitlán.

A painter returned to work at the workshop, but this time, "I realized he began to ogle the women without pretence; it wasn't just me, but all the other girls. There were two who were younger than me: one was 17 and the youngest was 14. On one occasion, I caught him looking at the youngest." That's why she says, "I decided to mention it to the owners, so that they would do something about it, because it was our workplace and it wasn't fair that we couldn't even be at peace and free from that harassment when doing our jobs. They thought about it and that same afternoon spoke to the painter and other guys who were also making comments," she said.

"It all began because there was only one restroom in that workshop, but it was in the part where only men worked. We had to go through there to go to the restroom and all the guys were there. They'd make lewd comments every day, so I mentioned it that day."

When Elisa expressed her annoyance at the painter's harassment, she confronted him. Because of that, the owners asked the other women directly if the same thing had happened to them. They all said yes. The painter was fired. He already had a reputation for harassment at other workshops.

It was an important experience for Elisa, as she was able to bring about a change. "We'd been asking for that restroom for over a month. When that situation occurred, they installed one in our area the next day."

**Going online and music in action**

S28 was a watershed moment in 2020. Many women from Toluca found more common ground to team up and establish networks despite the pandemic. One day before, Brujas Sonoras (Sonorous Witches)[23] decided to join the demonstration. Ever since, they have held in-person and virtual activities.

For example, there was the campaign #YoMarchoEnRedes (I March In Networks),[24] with which they started a digital mobilization for M8 to mark International Women's Day. Through this, they flooded social media with photographs of the feminist struggle to help women keep speaking up.

Working together with other collectives from the municipality, such as the

Women's Front for the State of Mexico, many participants sent their photos. This is how China Mendoza tells it in an interview with the participants: "That small campaign was well received. Many women took part. They came up to us to ask what they could do. They were from all over the place, from the north and south. There was broad participation."

Brujas Sonoras is a group of 15 women from Toluca, including students, mothers, workers, lawyers, doctors, graduates, but they're mostly musicians to the core, not academics. Some believe in something, some are religious, others are "against God, nation, and political parties."

Their name is a political statement, as the term "witch" was a way of repressing women who possessed knowledge of herbs and medicine during the Inquisition, because any woman who was interested in learning was considered a witch instead of a scientist or a physician.

According to China Mendoza, when they decided to meet up and ask more women to participate, "There was an unbelievably strong rejection from the musical community of Toluca, from people at the Conservatory, because they were upset that we would act through music and call ourselves musicians."

The organization has conducted several activities to support families who are victims of femicide, channeled cases of violence to other organizations, and given musical performances at organized events in the State of Mexico and neighboring areas in the valley of Toluca, Ecatepec, and Nezahualcóyotl.

**The message is in the music**

"Many of the songs we play, sing, and so forth have to do with what women experience. There are songs whose lyrics are about the autonomy of our bodies. I'm especially thinking about 'Querida Muerte' (Dear Death) by Renee Goust, which talks about the eyes that stalk us. This has helped us to convey messages, including ones about harassment," says Miss Mendoza, another member of the association.

Similarly, playing "Querida Muerte" and "Cumbia feminazi" (Feminazi Cumbia) has led to them being mentioned in this Mexican singer-songwriter and composer's Instagram stories.

Vivir Quintana, author of "Canción sin miedo" (Fearless Song), has also asked them to take part in a video in which this song was performed. They

constantly use these compositions in their performances.

Mata Mendoza, a member of Brujas Sonoras, recalls that being online allowed her to form part of this group, as she didn't join until the call went out on social media. "We also have to be grateful to the pandemic and take a positive view despite the unfortunate deaths of many people, which has hurt us a great deal. I found out about the movement over the internet. If it hadn't been for this boom in social media, I wouldn't have joined this collective. I wouldn't be here," says Mata Mendoza.

The use of social media has been a launch pad for this association, who constantly disseminate their musical performances in physical spaces or play live music remotely. That's how they could help some women in Guerrero, who asked for their support in the Félix Salgado case.

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21 Acosadores de Santiago Tlacotepec y alrededores (Stalkers in the vicinity of Santiago Tlacotepec), Facebook page, @niunacosomasyotecreo, https://www.facebook.com/niunacosomasyotecreo

22 Facebook page Brujas Cósmicas, @ColectivaFeministaBrujasCosmicas, https://www.facebook.com/ColectivaFeministaBrujasCosmicas/

23 Brujas Sonoras, Facebook page, @BrujasSonoras, https://www.facebook.com/BrujasSonoras

24 #YOMARCHOENREDES, Facebook hashtag (video file), https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=721209418767339

# Author biographies

**Pedro Alonso Benítez**

He holds a CENEVAL examination degree in Journalism, a diploma in Investigative Journalism from CIDE, and has taken CENCOS-IRI training courses. As well as working as a correspondent, he is the founder of the Proyectocinco.com website.

**Beatriz Guillén Torres**

She is a journalist who works at *El País* in Mexico. Beatriz was born in a small Spanish city, worked in Madrid for five years, and came to Mexico City at the end of 2019. She is constantly fascinated by a country that she has discovered in the midst of a profound health and economic crisis.

**Alejandro Mendoza Benitez**

He holds a degree in Communication from the Autonomous University of the State of Mexico, Huehuetoca campus. Alejandro is a journalist and founder of *Revista Brújula MX*, on the media outlet list of SembraMedia, as well as being a member of the LATAM Network of Young Journalists. He appears on social media under the username @es_mendoza_

**Aldo Rodrigo Nicolai**

He was born in Mexico City in 1994 and is a Data researcher/Fact-checker for the Reuters agency. Aldo has worked at media outlets such as *El País*, the *Verificado 2018* initiative, and *El Universal*. He holds a master's degree in Journalism from UAM-El País; a bachelor's degree in Digital Media and Communication from Tecnológico de Monterrey; and a diploma in Investigative Journalism from CIDE.

**Tania Ortega García**

She holds a degree in Communication Sciences from UNAM, with a specialization in 20th Century Mexican Literature from UAM Azcapotzalco; she has studied diploma courses on human trafficking and violence against women at the Ibero-American University in Mexico City and Puebla; and her work has been published in *Animal Político*, *El Universal*, and cultural magazines.

Twitter: @TanOrtega_

*Criminal violence and coronavirus:*
*Perspectives from Investigative Journalism*

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To locate the meaning of this book we must go back to the early years of the 20th century. During the rebellion against the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz and the subsequent stages of the Mexican Revolution, the independent media gained legitimacy because they also fought for freedom of speech, among other freedoms. The Constitution of 1917 acknowledged their role as guarantors of freedom of speech. More than a hundred years later, however, the struggle for freedom of speech continues.

Reliable information makes it possible to make diagnostics on which to build proposals for solutions. Journalism, in general, and investigative journalism, in particular, has the potential to inform and build informed societies. It nourishes democracy. After all, investigative journalism prevents the emergence of zones of silence that make it difficult to understand what is happening in specific places.

Inspired by this history and principles, the Instituto para la Seguridad y Democracia, a.c. (INSYDE), in partnership with the Seminario sobre Violencia y Paz de El Colegio de México (SVyP), designed, promoted, and taught the course-workshop "Press and crime in the pandemic. Investigative journalism on violence and crime in the context of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic in Mexico."

WORKING DOCUMENT OF EL COLEGIO DE MÉXICO´S
SEMINAR ON VIOLENCE AND PEACE

EL COLEGIO DE MÉXICO
SEMINARIO SOBRE VIOLENCIA Y PAZ
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