

¡JUSTICIA!



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Most of the missing and murdered victims are young, pretty, and poor. A wooden cross and a call for "justice!" mark the spot where this woman's body was found.

Activists Esther Chávez (left) and Eve Ensler are determined to stop the killings.



the city of murdered women

During the past 10 years, hundreds of young women have gone missing in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. Many end up dumped in the desert—raped, mutilated, murdered. Is this the work of a serial killer? An organ-trafficking ring? Or is it simply a problem of poor women the world would rather forget? *Marie Claire* sent antiviolence activist and founder of V-Day Eve Ensler to investigate

BY EVE ENSLER PHOTOGRAPHED BY PAULA ALLEN



Brenda Guillen (right) walks down this deserted road, often before dawn, to get to her job at a *maquiladora*. Bottom left: Any one of these factory workers could be the next victim. Bottom right: In 1991, eight bodies were found at this spot, now known as the Killing Fields.



“Juárez reminds me of a war zone.”



The turbulence in the airplane is the kind that makes me inappropriately squeeze a business associate’s hand as we land in El Paso, TX, en route to Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. The sky is liquid mud; murky, windy, and dangerous. It’s as if something terrible is about to happen. This, it turns out, is the ongoing state of being (or non-being) in Juárez, where in the past decade more than 300 women have been murdered, one-third of whom were also sexually violated. Within minutes of leaving the airport, I am crunching dust in my teeth, which tastes like bone. So many of the stories of the atrocities that occur to poor women here get discovered as bone, end up as bone.

Esther Chávez, who has met me at the airport, is a 70-year-old woman who came to Juárez 22 years ago for what she thought would be a few months, to take care of an ailing aunt. But the stories of murdered and violated Juárez women began to slowly occupy her, and before she knew it, she was dedicating her life to their safety and protection. She opened Casa Amiga, a center for the battered, raped, and missing women of Juárez.

The first thing Esther tells me as we drive toward Juárez is that a mother recently went to a morgue to identify her brown-haired daughter, who had been missing. The girl the police had found actually had red hair, but authorities dyed her hair brown, hoping to fool this mother. Of course, the woman quickly noticed the dye job and knew it was not her daughter’s body. “This is what the Mexican authorities do now,” Esther says. Rather than finding the killers, they change the identity of the dead, hoping to trick the surviving relatives.

As we speed over the border going into Mexico, I notice that we do not get stopped. There is no one even in the security booth. The last time I was in Juárez and left going in the other direction, security was so high going into the United States that it was almost a three-hour wait to cross the border. I wonder why no one cares who goes into Juárez.

Juárez is like an exhausted prostitute, endlessly used. It gets used by the multinational corporations who have built their *maquiladoras* (factories) there and pay thousands of workers, mainly women, less than five dollars a day for nine hours of work. It gets used by drug dealers who buy and sell there with no ▷





Ever since Brenda Guillen (left) was kidnapped, her mother, Silvia, walks her to the bus stop before work.

consequences. It gets used by men who abduct, sell, rape, brutalize, murder, and mutilate women there with impunity. Juárez reminds me of war zones and refugee camps I have visited. The same existential landscape of broken nothingness, the same sense of danger, the same remnants of terrible violence. The same dark despair that settles into your bones with the dust.

Esther and I go to Casa Amiga, a center of stories and nightmares and resistance. The first story I hear is about a young woman named Brenda. The next story I hear is about a young woman named Brenda. They are different women, and their stories do not end the same, but I realize very quickly that Juárez is a world of Brendas. They are young, brown, pretty, and very poor. Sometimes their bones turn up next to old bottles in parking lots. Sometimes their bodies are never found. They are rapidly becoming an endangered species.

Brenda who got out of the car

At 5 a.m. the day after I arrive, Esther picks me up and takes me to meet 19-year-old Brenda Guillen at her house. Brenda and I walk together through the empty streets, tracing her route to work. Every morning

“Many bodies are never found.”

for the past two years, Brenda has walked down this dark, potholed road on the outskirts of the city to an even darker corner, where she waits for a bus to take her to her job as a machinist at a maquiladora. Since Brenda was attacked and almost murdered on this walk two months ago, her mother, Silvia, now walks her to the bus stop.

On the day of her attack, Brenda had stayed late at the factory. She remembers saying good-bye to the man who sold candies outside when she left. She then went to the public phone and called home to say she was leaving work. Her back was to the street. Suddenly, she felt someone grab her. She hadn’t heard a car drive up. They tore off her backpack. They threw her into a car, facedown on the floor. There were three men: two in the front, one in the back. The man in the back pulled out a gun.

“I was wearing Band-Aids where the machines at work had hurt my hands,” Brenda tells me. “One man said, ‘Look at her wrists. She wants to die.’” I said, ‘No, you ▷

Who is killing the women of Juárez?

There are no definitive answers. Some experts speculate that an organ-trafficking ring is responsible; others contend that local drug lords are involved. And many wonder if the actions of one serial killer a decade ago have spawned a copycat movement.

For 10 years, police in Chihuahua state, where Juárez is located, have spearheaded the murder investigations. In that time, surviving family members have identified only 70 victims’ bodies. While suspects have been detained and convicted over the years, the murders continue. What began as a local problem became a national issue when, in 1998, Mexico’s National Human Rights Commission demanded that local authorities step up their investigations; demands from the United Nations Human Rights Committee and Equality Now followed.

The increased attention finally prompted Mexico’s federal government to take action. In May 2003, after more rumors of organ-trafficking—a federal offense—surfaced, federal authorities

claimed jurisdiction. Additionally, the United States’ FBI offered its laboratories for DNA testing and its expertise in profiling serial killers. In October 2003, a U.S. congressional delegation traveled to Juárez to meet with victims’ families, women’s-rights organizations, and government officials—and vowed to make the murders a priority in Mexican-American relations.

But the killings continue. As long as they do, the women of Ciudad Juárez need the strength and voices of women worldwide. To find out how you can help:

- Log on to amnestyusa.org to add your name to a petition to the Mexican Ambassador to the U.S., calling for justice.
- Fund self-defense programs and other vital services at Casa Amiga. Send checks to Casa Amiga Crisis Center, 6928 Commerce Avenue, El Paso, TX 79915.
- Join V-Day and other women’s-rights groups in a call-to-action rally on February 14 in Ciudad Juárez. For more information, log on to vday.org.



Above: Brenda Luna (right), then 5 years old, poses for a family portrait. Below: She was buried here after being murdered at age 15.

motherfucker, I do not want to die.' He slapped my face. He threw me on the floor again. He covered my eyes with cloth. He told me not to look at him, or he would kill me. He started taking things out of my bag.

"He found my work card and asked me if I was really 19. He asked if I knew what 'having a man' was. I told him I doubted there was a man in the car. They were inhaling cocaine, getting crazier and crazier, smoking, dropping the ashes on my legs. They touched me sexually. I scratched one of them. He hit me again—they were all hitting me. I thought about how angry I was. They kept hurting me. It went on forever. Then, suddenly, they were talking about needing to find a new girl. They got sick of me and threw me out of the car."

When Brenda finally got home, she was a mess; her face was beaten and swollen, and her clothes were completely bloody. Her mother called Esther Chávez.

I notice during Brenda's story that she wears three rubber bands on her wrist. "My therapist told me to wear them," says Brenda, who sees a counselor to cope with the trauma of the abduction. "I have so many negative thoughts. The word 'always' repeats in my head: Something bad will *always* happen. You will *always* be afraid. I snap the

rubber bands when my brain starts to talk like this. They hurt, and it stops for a while."

Brenda tells me she didn't want to tell her story to anyone at the beginning, but Esther helped her. She thinks of those men in the car saying they needed to find another girl, and this gives her the strength to speak out. "I hope my telling this will help the others," she says quietly.

Finding Brenda's grave

Next, Esther takes me to the mother of another young woman, coincidentally also named Brenda. The first thing



"Esther knew the mutilated body was Brenda."

this mother, Esther Luna, shows me is a portrait of herself and her three daughters. They all look strangely terrorized and detached. Brenda, who is 5 years old in the picture, is making a funny, twisted face. It's as if she was anticipating her future.

Esther Luna is 46. She is beautiful, humble, gentle, and intense. She tells me her family used to have a normal life until the violence came to the city. Well, normal like the normal life of living with an alcoholic husband: He terrorized and abused her and the children for years. Then he kicked all of them out. They had no money, nowhere to go. Esther got a job as a domestic worker, but

she still couldn't pay the rent. Brenda was 15 by then. She suggested that her mother get a second job and let her take her job as a domestic worker, as well. Esther was reluctant, but desperate.

The day before Brenda was to begin the new job, her mother took her to the bus stop and walked her through the route to work, half an hour away. Brenda left for work the next morning and never returned. At first, Esther thought she was with friends, but when the morning came and she was still not there, Esther became worried. She went to the home where Brenda was supposed to have started work the day before. Brenda's boss told Esther that her daughter had never been there. Esther panicked. Brenda's boss brought her to the police. This began Esther's torturous search for her daughter.

Three weeks later, Esther was summoned back to the police station. A body had been found. Most of it was bone, except for several places where flesh remained.

"They found a knife inside her body, where her stomach once was," Esther says. On the left calf, Esther identified a scar where a dog had bitten Brenda when she was a child. She also recognized the clothing that was found next to the body. They were definitely Brenda's panties and bra. Esther knew this mutilated body was her daughter.

"There was something in my heart," she says. "I touched the body. I wasn't repulsed. I just felt this pain." But the authorities said a scar wasn't enough to identify a body. They did a DNA test. One year later, they told Esther it wasn't her daughter. ▽



Devastated, she insisted that they do another DNA test on another part of the body, another bone. She waited another year for those results—only to be told by the authorities that they had been lost.

Esther demanded a third test, but the police started getting angry with her. They started saying terrible things to her, that her daughter was crazy and had been seen “on the streets with a man.” “I told them I didn’t care if she was with a man on the streets. I wanted her alive, no matter what she was doing,” Esther says. “They made fun of me. After a few more years of this, I stopped going to them because I was humiliated.” Then she found Casa Amiga.

“Esther Chávez helped me get a lawyer, and they did the first *real* DNA test, and it turned out that the body was my daughter. It took almost five-and-a-half years

Upon finding Brenda Luna’s grave, her mother throws herself facedown on it, clutching the earth.

“Esther kisses Brenda’s grave over and over.”

to find out what I already knew.”

She tells me about Brenda. “She was a very happy girl. She told a lot of jokes. She spoke loud. She used to cheer me up. She used to stand behind her brother and sisters and make faces.”

Esther’s memory of her daughter is still as fresh as her desire for answers. “They gave me a body to bury, but they didn’t tell me who did this to my daughter,” Esther explains. “I want them to investigate. I think [the murderers] are very powerful people to rape these girls and sell their organs. They must look good, respectable, to gain the confidence of the girls. Brenda didn’t trust people.”

We sit in silence. I ask Esther if she has been to Brenda’s grave since she buried her. She tells me that no buses go there. It is in the desert. I tell her I will take her there. It is the first time I see her look happy.

The next day Esther, her 7-year-old son Jesus, and I drive out into the desert. It is hot, dusty, lonely. In the parking lot of San Rafael cemetery, they sell flowers and wreaths. Esther knows exactly what she wants for her daughter’s grave: white flowers, because they are pure, and a wreath with a guardian angel. “My children always pray to the guardian angel that takes care of children whenever they are in trouble,” she says.

The graveyard stretches out for miles. Esther has a tiny piece of worn paper with primitive directions to Brenda’s

grave: a series of crosses, +++++, and then one cross, +, with a circle around it and the name “Brendita.” We spread out, searching for the grave of Brenda Luna. Even now, Esther cannot find her daughter. Miraculously, one of us comes upon Brenda’s grave. Her name has been almost fully bleached off the white wooden cross that marks it.

Esther Luna, this quiet, introverted woman, makes a beeline for the grave and throws herself facedown on her daughter’s desert mound. She covers Brenda’s body with her body. She lies there, her arms pulling at the sand in a swimming motion, her hands gathering back the dirt on the grave as if she were reassembling her daughter’s mutilated body. “Those dogs, those dogs who ripped you apart, my Brenda.” She sobs, wails, calls out to the Virgin Mary, whom she knows knows her suffering, having lost her only child, also.

Esther kisses the grave over and over. Then, after some time, she gets up and ritualistically decorates the grave with flowers and wreaths as if she were dressing her daughter for her *quinceañera*. She asks her son to collect stones to make a circle around the grave. She lays the stones like jewels.

She waters the grave with her hands, dipping into a bucket and carefully covering every inch of the dry grave as if she were lotioning her daughter’s parched skin. She pays the men who work in the graveyard 100 pesos to paint her daughter’s name, Brenda Luna, and her age, 15 *años*, in black on her cross.

Esther has honored Brenda’s grave, but she knows that she will not honor Brenda’s life until there are answers, until there is justice, until she can guarantee that all the Brendas are safe and free in Juárez. □