

CIVIC JOURNALISM NARRATING VIOLENCE IN MEXICO. INTERVIEW WITH MARCELA TURATI

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Titolo: Il giornalismo civico e la narrazione della violenza in Messico. Intervista a Marcela Turati

Abstract

The paper, reporting the interview with Mexican journalist Marcela Turati, deals with issues related to the spread of extreme violence in Mexico since 2006 and the related institutional narration; the development of innovative forms of journalism as a reaction to the spreading of violence; and, finally, the engagement of local women journalists in defending human rights, as well as the feminist network sheltering them.

Keywords: civic journalism; Mexico; organized crime; Marcela Turati; human rights.

Attraverso un'intervista alla giornalista messicana Marcela Turati, l'articolo affronta i temi della diffusione della violenza estrema in Messico a partire dal 2006 e della relativa narrazione istituzionale; dello sviluppo di forme innovative di giornalismo come reazione alla diffusione della violenza; infine, dell'impegno profuso dalle giornaliste locali nella difesa dei diritti umani, nonché della rete femminista che le protegge.

Parole chiave: giornalismo civico; Messico; criminalità organizzata; Marcela Turati; diritti umani.

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1. Introduction

Marcela Turati is a journalist committed to defending human rights in Mexico, a country profoundly marked by violence especially since 2006, when Felipe Calderón – President of the nation from 2006 to 2012 – declared war against drug cartels¹. She has witnessed violence by narrating horrific crimes against civilians perpetuated by narcos, as well as by paramilitaries, and also by militaries. Her commitment in defence of human rights has been huge and endless, as is shown not only by her impressive work, including articles and books, but also by the fact that she has co-founded innovative projects and associations aimed at supporting journalists, in order to make their work safer, and helping desaparecidos' relatives to search for their loved ones.

I met Marcela Turati in March 2024 in Milan, when she came to Italy for the ceremony of book prize Inge Feltrinelli, that she won with her reporting work “*Los Vuelos de Alicia*”². Marcela was extremely kind with me and willing to be interviewed. However, I did not want to bother her since the time she spent in Italy was short, and thus I suggested that we meet online, when she was back in Mexico. Thus, after two weeks, we met online for an interview³. I asked if we could communicate in English, in order to avoid interrupting our conversation with the intervention of a translator.

A few months later, in November, we met online again for an update of the situation in Mexico after the presidential elections held in June, and the assassinations of journalist Mauricio Solís and Father Marcelo Pérez in late October 2024.

I used the method of “qualitative interview”; more specifically, I merged “free interview” and “semi-structured interview” techniques. During our encounter I proposed her some themes and I left her to talk about them, without interrupting the discourse and posing only a few specific questions. Following Douglas Ezzy’s approach, I understood the interview’s rapport in terms of *communion* rather than in terms of *conquer*⁴. Indeed, listening her words

¹ Felipe Calderón governed Mexico from 2006 to 2012. Obrador governed Mexico from 2018 to 2024.

² Marcela Turati, *Los Vuelos de Alicia*, in “Revista Anfibia”, 22 June 2023, <https://www.revistaanfibia.com/los-vuelos-de-alicia/>.

³ Online interviews are obviously different from personal interviews. However, they present some advantages. Here, we do not have the space to deal with the methodological issues related to online interviews. On this topic see Jamie O’Quinn, Erika Slaymaker, Jess Goldstein-Kral, Kathleen Broussard, *Sociology from a Distance: Remote Interviews and Feminist Methods*, in “Qualitative Sociology”, 2024, v. 47, pp. 43-67.

⁴ Douglas Ezzy, *Qualitative Interviewing as an Embodied Emotional Performance*, in “Qualitative Inquiry”, 2010, v. 16, n. 3, pp. 163-170.

was a gift for me, since she shared with me not only her opinions and experiences about violence and journalism in Mexico, but also her feelings and emotions.

The articulation of this paper will follow the topics I suggested to her during the interview she gave me in April: the spread of extreme violence in Mexico and the institutional narration; the development of innovative forms of journalism as a reaction to the widespread violence; and the engagement of women journalists in defending human rights. In the conclusion, the article presents the reflections Marcela shared with me during the second online meeting we organized in early November, in which she emphasised the current tendency of normalizing the killing and disappearance of journalists.

The interview's colloquial style has not been modified, in order to bring Marcela's words closer to readers and to maintain the "feeling" of oral communication. Marcela's narration will be introduced by a brief contextualization, in order to facilitate the reading.

2. Violence and institutional narration

Mexico is a country in which violence dominates political, economic and social relationships. As several studies have amply analysed,⁵ violence has been produced by the presence of organized crime groups and the expansion of drug trafficking, as well as the ambiguous position and, in many instances, the complicity of state and government representatives⁶. We do not have sufficient space here to reconstruct the complex situation faced by Mexico in the last decades and the reasons behind the expansion of violence. We may simply recall two pivotal historical turning points that played a significant role in reinforcing criminal groups and increasing violence: the end of the so-called "mafia pax" between criminal groups and the corrupt states in the late 1980s, and the declaration of war against drug cartels launched by President Felipe Calderón in 2006⁷. At that time, cartels began to become more independent from politicians and the state, who were unable to control them, and also entered a process

⁵ Carlos Antonio Flores, *La crisis de seguridad y violencia en México: causas, efectos y dimensiones del problema*, CIESAS, Ciudad de México, 2018; Salvador Maldonado Aranda, "We are Men of War": *Self-defense Forces, Paramilitarism, and Organized Crime on the Mexican Periphery*, in "The Global South", v. 12, n. 2, 2018, pp. 148-165; Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera, Michelle Keck, José Nava, *Losing the Monopoly of Violence: The State, a Drug War and the Paramilitarization of Organized Crime in Mexico (2007–10)*, in "State Crime Journal", v. 4, n. 1 (Spring 2015), pp. 77-95.

⁶ Mexico is divided in 31 States, which are divided in municipalities.

⁷ Thomas Aureliani, *Vivi li rivogliamo! La mobilitazione dei familiari dei desaparecidos in Messico*, Meltemi, Sesto San Giovanni, 2022. For an interesting comparison between Italy and Mexico see Fabio Basile, Nando dalla Chiesa, *Messico: così lontano, così vicino*, in "Rivista di studi e ricerche sulla criminalità organizzata", 2022, v. 3, n. 3, pp. 6-20.

of fragmentation resulting in the eruption of many conflicts among them. In this new scenario, the state's representatives showed ambivalent attitudes and, in many circumstances, were involved in criminal acts or in supporting criminals by neglecting the problem or guaranteeing impunity⁸. Since December 2006, violence became omnipresent and produced a profound trauma in Mexican citizens. Violence took on numerous forms, as Marcella Turati describes in her books and articles. The most atrocious one is linked to the phenomenon of “enforced disappearance” (*desapariciones forzadas*)⁹, which occurs when – as written in the Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance –:

persons are arrested, detained or abducted against their will or otherwise deprived of their liberty by officials of different branches or levels of Government, or by organized groups or private individuals acting on behalf of, or with the support, direct or indirect, consent or acquiescence of the Government, followed by a refusal to disclose the fate or whereabouts of the persons concerned or a refusal to acknowledge the deprivation of their liberty, which places such persons outside the protection of the law¹⁰.

Officially defined as an “offence to human dignity”¹¹, the act of “enforced disappearance” affects not only victims, but also their families and their community, thus compromising the fabric of society for a very long time.

At the beginning of the interview, Marcela told me about the fact that extreme violence, which erupted as a result of the “war against drug cartels” launched by President Felipe Calderón, still was present at the time of our interview, in April 2024, even under the government of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

With the strategy of Felipe Calderón the violence arose and now we have many different cities, places, States who have been disputed among the drug cartels, also by sometimes – or helped by – corrupted army or marines or different power, you know? The government of the states or of the municipalities. So, we have now one hundred thousand people disappeared, and... many people killed, a lot of people displaced or exiled. I don't know... Still... we have the army like fighting these drug cartels sometimes. The violence is changing from

⁸ Alejandro Anaya-Muñoz, Patricia Cruz-Marín, James Cavallaro, *More than Lack of Capacity: Active Impunity in Mexico*, in “Journal of Human Rights Practice,” V. 16, N. Issue 1, 2024, pp. 374–396.

⁹ As Marcella Turati explained me: “in Mexico the government uses also another category: ‘*desapariciones cometidas por particulares*’, referring to those who are not civil servants or officials, as narcos... At the end, however, because the authorities neglect investigation, the authorities became complicities, and this is, also, can be defined as ‘enforced disappearance’”.

¹⁰ Article 1, 47/133 Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, ONU, 1992.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

one place to another place, to another... We can say that we still have to count mass graves, clandestine mass graves, we have to count different massacres still. I don't know... Even if it has happened during three different governments (PAN, PRI and Morena federal administration), regional and federal administration, the situation is not under control and there is not peace. Still there is not peace in Mexico. A lot of journalists were killed or disappeared. Since Calderon one hundred and forty-five journalists were killed¹² and more than thirty disappeared in this period of violence.

This new government, not new... in 2018... Andres Manuel Obrador said that his strategy was "Abrazos, no balazos", namely "Hugs, no bullets". For many years civil society more focused on human rights ask different things, for example changes in the Prosecutor way to operate, and also asked that the municipal, estate and federal police were more trained, funded and equipped. The military retires from the street and go to the quarters. What Obrador said is that he invented a new police, that is the Guardia Nacional, but 80% of the people of this police are from the military. It is like... he tried to sell "ok this is the police". But this is not the police, they are the same military or marines, with the same training, doing the same and now this guard. ... they go to different places to control. They don't chase as before the drug cartel, the capos of the mafia, they don't chase these capos, but they are still on the territory controlling... Now they are more focus on migration, to stop the migration of people. They are used for that... They control ports, airports, they are looking for drugs, but the violence is still present... It's like they were only witnesses of the violence, but they don't intervene. They don't do nothing. Also, they are now new businessmen, because the government gave them the control of many mega-projects, even an airline company. So, this "abrazos, no balazos" is a kind... Violence is still the same.

Before 2006 we have different places with violence, for example Tiquana in the borders, in the Northern Ciudad Juárez. There were different places in the border that had problems before this, because they had their local drug cartels controlling the territory. And they had their own dynamic of violence. But when Felipe Calderón arrived and sent the military to fight against narcotraffic – so he sent to those main cities in the borders and in different places, that he said they were taken by drug cartels ..., this brought violence, the people go outside... they started fighting in the avenues, daylight, whenever, among cartels and with militaries that they found. Those were things that we were not used to see in all Mexico, especially in big cities, as in

¹² From 2000 to 2024, 164 journalists were assassinated (156 men and 12 women). See: *Periodistas asesinados en México en posible relación con su labor periodística*, in "articulo19.org", <https://articulo19.org/periodistasasesinados/>, and 32 are missing. See Siria Gastelum Felix, *Journalism still deadly in Mexico*, in "globalinitiative.net", <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/journalism-still-deadly-in-mexico/>.

Monterrey, in industrial cities, Guadalajara, big cities. My first book “Fuego cruzado: las víctimas atrapadas en la guerra del narco” is about victims in these places¹³.

Marcela explained to me that, despite this violence, President Obrador proposed to public opinion a narrative intended to show that in Mexico there was peace. As she told me, the government did not like journalists who criticised it and reported violent events across the country.

It was a moment that the government said that the media were opposite to the government, because journalists give bad image of the country, affecting tourism. In the administration led by Enrique Peña Nieto they tried to... they signed with many media, an acuerdo, a dealing to protect the peace, that it was to silence journalists, to silence violence from the news. And in this government also they gave another narrative, they always say “this is from the past, this is not occurring anymore, military are not killing people, are only isolated things”. So... but this is a narrative...and actually many people think that the massacre stopped because the President said this. But this is not the true, we have a lot of evidence that many things are happening. But now we have a President with a lot of popularity, he gives daily the news to citizens. He has his own tv programme for two hours, three hours daily. He comments all the news...he invites marines, secretary of defence, militaries, that they say ...He is always telling that journalists, who are critics, are against his government and enemies of the people. All these thinks, like Trump.

All the time people still disappear. In some cases, these are really public events, there are videos about these For example, like the Debanhi Escobar Case, or the one of five young people of Lagos de Moreno, who were captured by a group and filmed, or the 43 students from Ayotzinapa, attacked in front of the press. We have different scandals in different times and the government says most of the times: “ah, ok we will investigate”, or “oh, no, this is against our government, prepared by my enemies”. So, he always tries to downlow, to silence all this. The narrative does not focus on violence, on victims, but focuses more on the big things, progress and how the country is changing. There are a lot of problems. Also with the killing of journalists he said that there aren't any more under his government, or that these killings occurred to affect his government, as if he was the victim, but we have many killings. Last year there was one of the worst.... He always says that somebody wants to bring problems to his government, no? To cause problems. Always the government accused the victims and made them suspicious of what happened to them. The government always said: “se matan entre ellos” (they are killing among themselves), as if everybody was a criminal, or “en algo malo andaban”, as they did something wrong. In my book Fuego cruzado I dealt with this narrative.

¹³ Marcela Turati, *Fuego cruzado. Las víctimas atrapadas en la guerra del narco*, Grijalbo Mondadori, Barcellona, 2011. The book was translated in Italian: <https://www.forme-libere.it/libro/fuoco-incrociato-le-vittime-della-guerra-contro-i-narcos>.

The work of journalists who want to narrate a realistic representation of their country is quite hard, since they are not supported by mainstream media, which are affected – as stressed by international reports – by corruption and fear. As “Reporters Without Borders” puts it, in Mexico “media independence and transparency is undermined by the very close connections between media and politicians”.¹⁴ According to a report produced by the “Ethical Journalism Network”, in Mexico “those journalists who risk their lives to tell stories that criminals and powerful people would like to keep secret (...) run – also – the gauntlet of a corrupt and politically compromised media landscape, in which media, hungry for lucrative government advertising, dance to the tune of its power elite”¹⁵.

3. Innovative forms of journalism. The training chain and the human rights model

The dramatic situation seen in Mexico since 2006 has brought about significant civic reactions at different levels¹⁶. The most significant initiatives include those carried out by the *desaparecidos*’ relatives – especially mothers –, who come together and organize themselves to search for their relatives and make society aware of the horrific phenomenon of enforced disappearance¹⁷, and by journalists who create collaborative networks, like those promoted by Marcela, “*Red de Periodistas de a Pie*” (2006), “*#Másde72*” (2011), “*Quinto Elemento Lab*” (2016) and “*A dónde van los desaparecidos*” (2018)¹⁸. Since 2006 the explosion of violence, even in places not traditionally characterized by extreme violence, prompted some journalists to write about criminal acts, organized crime and impunity, adopting a human rights perspective. For them, narrating what was occurring became extremely urgent. They understood that the centre-victim approach cannot be neglected.

Civic and investigative journalists have been essential for the movement of the *desaparecidos*’s relatives, not only because they offered a counter-narrative about the violent acts seen across

¹⁴ Elva Narcia, *Mexico: Journalism in the crosshairs of politics and corruption*, in “ethicaljournalismnetwork.org”, <https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/mexico-journalism-politics-corruption>.

¹⁵ Elva Narcia, *Journalism in the crosshairs of politics and corruption*, in *Untold stories. How corruption and conflicts of interest stalk the newsroom*, Adian White (ed.), Ethical Journalism Network, London, 2014., p. 41.

¹⁶ Thomas Aureliani, *Vivi li rivogliamo*, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ Thomas Aureliani, *La historia que necesitamos valorar: A 10 años de FUUNDEC – FUNDEM*, in “adondevanlosdesaparecidos.org”, 2019, <https://adondevanlosdesaparecidos.org/2019/12/19/la-historia-que-necesitamos-valorar-a-10-anos-de-fuundec-fundem>.

¹⁸ Thomas Aureliani, *Tra narcos e Stato. Le forme della resistenza civile in Messico*, in “Rivista di Studi e Ricerche sulla criminalità organizzata”, v. 2, n. 1, 2016, pp. 61-95.

the country, but also because they started to support the victims' relatives in asking for justice and in searching for their relatives, their "treasures", as they call them¹⁹.

The emergency, the explosion of disappearances, mass graves and "*madres buscadoras*", and the forensic crisis, generated by the drug war, impunity, and the lack of institutional capacity and willingness to respond to the demand for justice made by the victims' relatives, pushed journalists to activate and to increase their professional skills. In this context, the work done by journalists required new abilities, especially those linked to taking care of the victims interviewed and also their own safety, managing stress coming from the risk situation in which they were compelled to work, dealing with testimonies' profound grief, and finally learning investigation techniques, in order to join the search of desaparecidos.

As Marcela explained to me, at first some journalists, including herself, started to organize their training by asking for support from different international agencies and colleagues from countries traditionally affected by organized crime and political violence. This was the initial nucleus of a training process involving many journalists located in different places in Mexico, which eventually resulted in a sort of training chain, through which journalists developed practices of collaboration and solidarity, and eventually contributed to creating an innovative approach to the profession.

The people in the North, the journalists in the border, were used to deal with violence, especially those who covered police. Yet, since 2006 there was an explosion of violence. So journalists, who were not used to cover this, like me – for example I covered poverty, indigenous movements, other things, environment issues... –, started to cover also this, because it was part of the agenda. Many mothers looking for disappeared children went to the newsroom to ask for help. They wanted articles... A lot of mothers started to ask me, because at the beginning was surprising, massacres, mass graves, every year was more horrible and horrible. In 2010 when I wrote my book, Fuego cruzado, it was not still the worst in this period and, however, even many people did not believe what I wrote, because I covered a lot in the North of the country... But later in 2011 a big movement started, people started to protest. El Movimiento por la Paz con Justicia y Dignidad was its name. This movement organized caravans all around Mexico and one in U.S. They went walking crossing Mexico, thousands of people. So that gave visibility to the victims. But before it was not in their agenda. So, some journalists came together... we started training in human rights, focusing more on victims. For these trainings we asked help to Colombian journalists, we asked them to teach us how to cover this. What was important about this? We were women from many different media. So, we started with this

¹⁹ Marcela Turati, Claudio La Camera, *Una strage silenziosa. Il Messico insanguinato e la ricerca dei sepolti senza nome*, Solferino, Milano, 2024.

focus...giving visibility to the victims and their stories, because the government always said – and still says – that they are killed or disappeared, because “they did something”, that they were doing wrong things.

This kind of network that we created was replicated in some other places in Mexico. Women journalists started creating their own networks and their own organizations to train other journalists. So, we started to collaborate. And different news websites arose; they were created in this period to give different information. That was important. But in the main media, in the most massive, they always act like the government wants that they act. It is difficult to give another narrative respect the one given by the government... At the beginning we created this network called “Periodista de a pie”. It was my idea, because I travelled two years in Latin America. Especially I spent time in Brazil, where I saw a network of women journalists covering poverty. When I returned to Mexico, I met colleagues... At the beginning we covered poverty, we trained ourselves. When the violence started that was at the same time we created it. Some of our colleagues came, journalists from different (Mexican) states, and they started telling us all the violence, how they were treated, how to do different things to not be killed. I was covering in Ciudad Juárez and a journalist I met (Armando Rodríguez²⁰) was killed. So, we needed to do something, we changed the mission of our network and we started to ask for training to the United Nations, to Colombia, to different journalists, looking for somebody who can explain us how to cover this, and so we started to give training asking for digital, safety, physical, and many years later psycho-emotional safety... yes... many different things... We started defending or asking for justice for some colleagues, who were killed or disappeared. So, people, who was in our workshop, created their own networks in their place, and their own media, their website. The Red de periodistas de Ciudad Juárez was the first one, coping our example. And so the training, many journalists were trained. We helped each other and we created different experiences, also how to investigate the killing of colleagues. It is a tiny, almost invisible effort, but it changed in many ways the perspective of journalism. We started to focus more on victims and more on human rights. We have journalists who try to organize their own colleagues in different places, with this “model of human rights”, also to protect one each other. That was very interesting for journalism in Mexico. Different media in different places arose. Each collective has its own people. We trained many women journalists for different medias – even medias that were enemies among them, that compete –... We asked to our bosses that we would like to cover victims of the narcoviolence, and human rights, to humanize this information, to give a human face to the tragedy, to question the use of the Army.

²⁰ Journalist Armando Rodríguez was assassinated on 13 November 2008. Lucia Capuzzi, *Messico. Il mattatoio dei narcos*, in “Avvenire”, 14 febbraio 2013.

4. Female gaze and feminist shelter

The protagonists of these new forms of journalism, based on the “chain of training” and focussing on human rights breaches, were women. In order to understand this female involvement, it is crucial to recall the impact of the violent context on the profession’s gender composition. According to Marcela’s testimony, since the war on drugs began, the number of women journalists dealing with crime has risen. As occurred in the Second World War in Europe, women started to fill the vacancies left by men. Indeed, women journalists, took the place of their male colleagues who were killed.

Women journalists, dealing with crime news, started to give great attention to human rights and the victims’ perspective. They became part of the Mexican movement in defence of human rights, which was characterized by a large amount of women activists²¹. Collaborative and solidaristic traits characterized the female journalists’ bottom-up training and solidarity.

Before this drug war, the most famous and visible journalists were men. The violence changed many things. Many journalists who covered police, topics related to safety and politicians were men, but some, actually many, were killed. They were killed and so... the women started to take this...and say: “I can cover police”. It was not normal, because it was male job... In Ciudad Juárez, for example, when Armando Rodríguez who covered police and the daily killing was killed, a group of women started covering the police information, la “nota roja” and also investigating Rodríguez’s killing and covering the massacres and the crime in the city. Also they created their own network, “Red de Periodistas de Juárez” – the one I mentioned before – to train and take care of others. Now they have created a website, which has become a really important media in Juárez. In different places, it occurred like this. A male journalist was killed and the female colleagues and friends say “ok we have to continue doing journalism and asking for help from different other networks, please give training so we can start”. Basically, they create websites to cover the news in places, where somebody was silent.

Many people asked me “Why don’t you invite men?” And I said “Yes, we invite men, but the men were already occupied, full”. Of course, also we, women, were occupied. But they ... I always say that (with few exceptions) men are all focused on writing their own books, but not in organizing to protect one to each other. We, women, were, I don’t know, scared and tried to protect people and other colleagues ...and so in all the

²¹ On female presence – and also on the violence affecting women – within the social movement in Mexico, see the interesting work by Ana Laura Ramírez Vázquez, Luis Rubén Díaz Cepeda, *Fronterizas, Resistance: Feminist Demands within Social Movements Organizations*, Essays in Philosophy, v. 19, n. 1 (Latin American Feminist Philosophy: Theory, Meets Practices, Article 7). On the role of women in the activism against militarization, see Dawn Marie Paley, *On the importance of feminist responses to militarization*, in “Ojalá”, 7 December 2023, <https://www.ojala.mx/en/ojala-en/on-the-renewal-of-feminist-approaches-to-militarization>.

States there were women who arise, and we were in different places in ... Morelos, in Chihuahua, in Oaxaca, Puebla, Veracruz, Ciudad de México, Chiapas. All these different collectives were created by women, when the violence came and exploded everything, in Guerrero, I don't know, we dedicate time to the organization, to the capacitation, and to continue asking for justice. We report news and at the same time investigate.

I think now the landscape in Mexico is interesting, because among journalists the most famous are women investigative journalists. When some ask who the most famous journalist in Mexico is, they would say ... would bring name of women, women's names. It is very interesting what's happened.

According to Marcela, the journalism “human rights model” is more typical of women’s gaze than men’s.

Many of the men do not have this human rights perspective. It is really different how they covered news related to violence and we tried to do different things and to protect all the journalists around.

I wrote an article name “The war makes me feminist”²². I never considered myself before as feminist, but when I started covering with the feminist view, I started think that the women... It was really important the answer of the women in Mexico, no? The mothers who searched their disappeared children, lawyers, anthropologists, the human rights defenders, the psychologists, many different professions, but we always see a lot of women in all these movements and networks, no? It was impactful.

The core of Marcela’s last initiative, the project-website “*A dónde vas los desaparecidos*”, is also made up of women.

In 2015 I called many colleagues around the country and asked them if we can do something about the mass graves, the clandestine mass graves. So, we started an investigation that we published two and a half years later, in 2018. We counted 2000 mass graves since the drug war strategy was inaugurated²³. It was really important in Mexico. So we didn't have a platform where we can publish the articles or the interactive maps by municipalities and the number of corps, the mass graves along ten years ... We worked with on the final

²²Marcela Turati, *La guerra me hizo feminista*, in “Altair Magazine”, <https://www.altairmagazine.com/voces/la-guerra-me-hizo-feminista/>. The author highlights the role of women, who face pain and injustice, often without the support of men, showing how they organize in groups to search for their missing loved ones and support one another. She emphasises the gender difference in language: women express deep emotions and emotional bonds, while men focus only on facts and data. She speaks about her personal experience, joining networks of women working for justice and solidarity, which led her to recognize herself as part of the feminist movement, aware of the power to create collective change. In August 2016 the article was published in Lydia Cacho *et al.*, *The sorrows of Mexico. An indictment of their country's failures by 7 exceptional writers*, London, MacLehose Press, 2016.

²³ Alejandra Guillén, Mago Torres, Marcela Turati, *2,000 clandestine graves: How a decade of the drug war turned Mexico into a burial ground*, 13 December 2018, <https://theintercept.com/2018/12/13/mexico-drug-war-mass-graves/>

part with Quinto Elemento Lab, and at the same time we invented this... We have to set in one place and then we thought that... we can buy a website and publish there. And we have to put some names. Then when we published the maps of mass graves we say: "ok, we have this space, we have to dedicate" ... because we were women who cover disappearances of people, the network we have created, the people who I called were women who cover disappearances in different States. So, we published that, and I started publish things ... Yes, we started publishing and the website alone. Many people started to send things, their reports from all States of Mexico. Then I linked this project to the organization that I co-funded, Quinto Elemento Lab, and found a grant for paying the investigations. And we continued in this website. We did investigation on forensic crisis, that is really important, or when Mexico has counted officially one hundred thousand people disappeared, we have a big, big investigation on how we go to one hundred thousand and then we started... Always it was the website, but at the same time we talked about capacitation, no? Training people throughout the country, how to cover disappearances, how to investigate, how to narrate and how to protect ourselves, and also do not expose the victims that we interview.

Women journalists are supported and protected by feminist networks already active in protecting defenders of human rights.

Feminists, and the network of feminists who take care of human right defenders, women right defenders, started to see women journalists as human rights defenders, because we are in the frontline. Feminists are always closed to us, trying to give support and also teaching how to protect us, what alternative we have when we receive threats. Even if there are organizations dedicated to journalists, like "Article 19", "Reporters without borders", "Committed to Protect Journalists", the network of women is really important. I could see this in different cases, and also in my own case. When I was in real trouble – under surveillance or threatened – the activists, the feminists were the one who took me outside and gave me a place to rest, and a strategy based on analysis of risk. They provide this support for me and other journalists. When they see that we are in trouble, they help us. We, many of us, are in risk ... we do not have a big company behind us, we are alone, we are freelance or just with our own websites, that are very small. So, they are the one who teach us more about safety. They have a network to help us that they can activate in the first response, if something happens. Feminist networks are the one who rescue us.

By feminist I mean different things, like organizations, like the "International women media foundation", they give you funds for emergency, or like the "Iniciativa Mesoamericana de Defensoras de Derechos Humanos", the "Red Mexicana de defensoras derecho humanos", they consider journalists women

human rights defenders. For human rights defenders they have developed the project Feminist Holistic Protection which is the pact of caring each other as defenders, to protect all defenders from the violence²⁴.

They monitor how we are, and they help us. But also in Chihuahua, in Tijuana there are human rights organizations dedicated to women, who bring journalists therapists, or who give them money when they have to run. Or make some public statement defending one journalist. That is some of the help. The Iniciativa Mesoamericana has a place where you can rest. And they teach you how be in contact with yourselves, or with your medical staff. You can be for a while there. Also, sometimes I was helped by organizations as "Aluna Psicosocial" or "Técnicas Rudas", they give you risk analysis, or therapists. Many time they give us therapists to continue our work. They are dedicated to save women, so they have experts. They deal with cases of different human rights defenders women, so they have experts on risk who monitor what is happening and thus are able to give you advice, like for example how to take care of you, what you have to do, where you have to go. They do that. Many times, they help us when if there is no NGO or something else to defend journalists, they always give us people monitoring what is happening.

We have learned a lot from them. We have also developed our own way to monitor one to each other, to help ourselves, among journalists, when there is a crisis, to know who to ask for help, and we organize many training with experts and we learned about digital or physical safety, but also one moment we said "ok we need more". We needed another kind of training, because we go to mass graves, we talk about people who are massacred, we spent many time with "familias buscadoras", and all these sad things, we have to learn how to deal with this.

What I have learned with the feminists, defensoras and psychosocial terapeutas and sanadoras (healers), they are really, really...they know a lot and so they teach me a lot about rituals, to work with your own guilt, what you need, what you don't need, ...for example "don't investigate something because you are afraid". They teach you to work with your fear, to believe on your feelings – if you feel something, for example that you have to stop, stop – Things like that... I learned with the time...And now during the workshops that I give in different places in Mexico about covering victims or covering grief, I teach the same, like for example how to deal with our grief, when doing this kind of work²⁵.

²⁴ As it is written on the website the main pillars of the Feminist Holistic Protection activism are: 1) Care is at the center of our activism. 2. Defiance; 3. Context Analysis; 4. Networks Save Lives!

²⁵ In the website of "Global Investigative Journalism Network" there are some articles by Marcela Turati in which she offers her colleagues some advice, like for example about how to approach victims of tragedy, witnesses and survivors, and webinars on about investigating organized crime and missing people. Marcela Turati, *Tips for Interviewing Victims of Tragedy, Witnesses, and Survivors*, 16 March 2021, in "gijn.org", <https://gijn.org/stories/tips-for-interviewing-victims-of-tragedy-witnesses-and-survivors/>; Marcela Turati, Glenda Gloria, *Digging into Disappearances: Organized Crime and Missing People*, Global Investigative Journalism Network, in "youtube.com", 8 September 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bviXXS9ocLg>.

5. Keep reporting, to contrast the normalization of violence

On 1 October 2024, President Claudia Sheinbaum, elected in June, started her mandate. On the website *A dónde van los desaparecidos* journalist Carlos Manuel Juárez wrote: “A month after taking office, Claudia Sheinbaum has not presented a plan to address the crisis of disappearances, nor has she received the families of the victims who have requested a dialogue to agree on a search policy and address the forensic crisis in each region of Mexico”²⁶. This is not surprising, given the fact that her national project, “one hundred steps towards transformation”, includes the issue of disappearance at the end of the list (point 97: “Through coordination between authorities at different levels we will continue and follow up on the protocols for the search for missing persons”)²⁷.

I met Marcela online in early November. In this second meeting, she was highly worried about some reforms introduced by López Obrador in the last period of his mandate, and about the continuity with the past administration shown by the new President. In particular, she was concerned about the decrease in government measures for protecting journalists, the dissolution of the INAI, *Instituto Nacional de Transparencia, Acceso a la Información y Protección de Datos Personales* (“Institute for the access to public information”), and the judicial reform which changed the system for appointing judges (the selection, that theoretically previously based on meritocratic criteria, now involves popular election). In the first month of Sheinbaum’s mandate, two journalists were killed, and also a priest.

Killings of journalists do not have space in the news anymore, they are really normalised. Mauricio’s killing went in the news, because it was the first in the first month of the new administration. Because it was the first, it was like... symbolic, but the next days there was another killing, a woman journalist Patricia. (...) We didn’t see any declaration... like “we will stop this”. It is just the daily account of crimes of journalists. We know that the last government tried to reduce the mechanism to protect journalists. And they tried to reorganize this, the federal mechanism: every State protects its own journalists. They say that there is no more money... They could not close that. Many journalists who are on risk protested ... all the time they – the government – are informing journalists, who are under protection, that they will finish the protection soon, and we don’t

²⁶ Carlos Manuel Juárez, *Sheinbaum mantiene ‘censo’ de personas desaparecidas y elude diálogo con buscadoras*, 1 November 2024, in “adondevanlosdesaparecidos.org”, <https://adondevanlosdesaparecidos.org/2024/11/01/sheinbaum-mantiene-censo-de-personas-desaparecidas-y-elude-dialogo-con-buscadoras/>

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

know what is going to happen. Therefore, there are some journalists who called me and told me if I know how to ask for asylum or if they can be protected witnesses in USA. Because they want to escape. They want more protection, and they don't want to return in the places where they were threatened and were they lived before. So that this is one of the things that we.... It is messy in this moment, because of the changes. Many things are happening this week. Next week they will close the office INAI, the Institute for Access to Public Information, an autonomous institute that protects public information. This is better the USA's FOIA, it is much better. Now the federal governments will rule the office of transparency. They will assume the functions, the same federal government, and we don't know how it is gone a be...

In my organization "Quinto Elemento Lab", we help journalists to investigate big things and one of our main tools is this governmental information that we declassified, and with our own reporting, we revealed many corruptions or wrongdoing. With this tool we did our mass graves maps or our investigation about forensic crisis, or my book about the massacres of migrants. But now we will lose this valuable information instrument. We are imagining new ways to get information.

This week, this month, a lot of things happened. The supreme court now, all the judges and ministers court will be voted by people. They will do campaign. because they will be elected by popular vote. So, the Supreme court resigned, and they put a law that says the national constitution you cannot make an appellation. This week was crazy. For this reason, also things about journalists are not on the news, they do not have much space. There other news taking space: migration, Trump...

Mauricio was killed after he interviewed the major of the city. So even the major was almost there. In the video during the interview, he seemed as he was looking for ..., moving his eyes to watch around.... like he was really scared, not save. In another transmission he said that he was on risk, he said he was transmitting in the centre of the city, I am here. He did this interview, but he was kind of nervous, and then they killed him at the same moment. He said about his risk... he was father of a small child. His colleagues protested and they did many manifestations in Michoacán. Michoacán is a place that is really dangerous, the state of Michoacán. The journalists there protested, but five minute they left the protest, the police came, and they threw away all the posters, everything. About Patricia we only know that she was a reporter covering entertainment. I saw that "Reporters without borders" who came to Mexico City this month... They came last week and tried to speak with the President, and they left a list of journalists kicked this year, but I saw they didn't count Patricia, I asked the correspondents, and they said that they were still investigating if the killing was related with her profession or not. Because in the list they add only names of journalists whose killing is related with their profession. They said that the main reasons of her killing probably was extortion, because she run a business, a restaurant, and they think that it might be extortion that she did not pay, or something. The killing occurred in Colima State.

Despite these difficult times during the end of Lopez Obrador's administration and the beginning of Sheinbaum's, Marcela has kept following her vocation for reporting the truth. She has continued to foster collaboration among journalists, in order to investigate, protect each other and carry out collaborative training.

Now we have created a network of journalists who trained journalists in investigating the disappearance of people. And we have in our chat group 80 journalists from different places ... They are located more in the Center, but then when we go to the North, or to Guadalajara to give trainings, they invite other people from Veracruz... There are journalists who receive this training or collaborate. Different journalists, in different places have their own websites, collaborate, because we have the same focus on justice and victims of violence. So, we are a network of journalists who cover disappearances (...). We are more specialised in human rights. And now this year we have changed the approach, ... the name is "territories, violence and business". We want to see the disappearance massacres, enforced displacement, extortion and whatever... how we can investigate territories, how we can see the business behind these crimes. (...) We do always an annual meeting, an annual training and also we give different trainings in presence. Always our meeting is in October or November in presence, because we want to continue training people around Mexico. And to cover this, and to create a network.

Two weeks ago, we have finished the first of our new training. The first one was to understand what is the territory, what is happening, how to map, the cartography and also take care of ourselves and protect us during the investigations; the second one, next year, we will continue to train about criminal governance, macro-criminalidad networks and we will talk about mafia. Then we want that people learn how to investigate business... Since last year we have started investigating extractivism, mines and disappearance. And also we investigated...we were the first to investigate about human rights defenders who were disappeared and what kind of megaprojects they were against, why they were killed...²⁸ That is important. You don't have to count only the killings, but you have to count also disappearances, because we think it is really effective the disappearance and there are not index that count disappeared people... the same with journalists. We never said we have in Mexico... disappeared journalists. The organizations only count those killed, but we say: "the disappeared are really important." The government is really focus on showing how the violence is shrinking by the name of murders. In many places we see that killings are decreasing, but the disappearances are increasing. And those are not official number. They never present to us. But we know that many people

²⁸ Mongabay Latam, Quinto Elemento Lab y A dónde van los desaparecidos, *Especial: Defensores desaparecidos*, in "quintoelab.org", 2 October 2023, <https://quintoelab.org/project/especial-defensores-territorio-ambiente-desaparecidos>.

disappear in many places. With Lopez Obrador we count one people disappeared every hour, average. So, for us it is really important. And the other thing is that we know that many times, when you make people disappear, the terror is total and brutal (...).

So, if you have a mega project and the drug cartel, that is the new ally of the businessmen, you disappear the one who is really important in the community. With disappearance you will have big effects. So, for us it is important, because with this kind of terror you silence all the people if you disappear one. So, for this reason we are really focus on this, on the disappearances.

We also, with my team, in different projects we also have investigated the people who are slaved by the cartels. The disappeared people who are alive, but they are working in the land, they are slaved, and they cannot escape, they are cultivating ... amapola (heroin), marijuana, pop, whatever. So that this another investigation that we are now involved.

We publish our investigations in our website “A dónde van los desaparecidos” and in “Quinto Elemento Lab”, and we distribute it for free to many different independent media, or sometimes mainstream media. We give them and they publish for free, many people publish at the same time. Sometimes our reports are really really popular, many people publish. Sometimes we have few We always give it for free because it is part of our philosophy: don't stop telling stories about disappearances in Mexico, because we cannot normalize it.

Marcela's work, her understanding of her country and her commitment are a valuable and fundamental source of knowledge for journalists, researchers, scholars, activists and above all the victims' relatives. Her courageous and well documented investigative reporting give us access to an alternative narration about violence, human rights and protests in Mexico. Through her direct and, at the same time, poetic style, she provides precious information not only about the tragic phenomenon of “*narcofosas*”, “the clandestine cemeteries where drug traffickers buried their victims”²⁹, but also about “the pain (that) organizes itself”³⁰, i.e. the extraordinary civic reaction to violence organized by the victims' relatives that has occurred in the last decade. Along with her colleagues, Marcela has contributed to stimulating and fuelling journalists' involvement in the search for desaparecidos and offered them a useful instrument, the website “*A dónde van los desaparecidos*”. This effort has produced “an unprecedented, extraordinary form of journalism”³¹, the “journalism of *búsqueda*”³², as Nando dalla

²⁹Marcela Turati, *Fuego cruzado*, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

³⁰ *Ivi.*, p. 203.

³¹ Nando dalla Chiesa, *Introduzione*, in Claudio La Camera, Marcela Turati (eds), *Una strage silenziosa. Il Messico insanguinato e la ricerca dei sepolti senza nome*, Solferino, Milano, 2024, p. 17.

³² *Ivi.*, p. 20.

Chiesa has defined it, which serves to fill the institutional lack, by playing a “vicarious and compensatory role”³³.

In conclusion, it is relevant to stress that the precious work carried out by Marcela and her colleagues needs to be supported and known. Hopefully, this paper has given a contribution in this direction.

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