

TALKING WITH US REP JAN SCHAKOWSKY

Shining a Spotlight on Ciudad Juarez

By Jacqueline Fitzgerald - Chicago Tribune

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Justice has been a long time coming in a series of brutal slayings in a Mexican border town.

Over the past 10 years, more than 300 young women have been abducted, sexually assaulted and slain in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico; others are still missing. Some of the women worked in maquiladoras, largely American-owned factories, and were attacked on their way to or from work.

Steps have been taken toward solving the crimes. For example, the Mexican government recently appointed a special prosecutor to investigate the slayings and last year U.S. Rep. Hilda Solis (D-Calif.) introduced a House resolution urging the president and secretary of state to request that investigative and preventive efforts become part of the bilateral agenda between the Mexican and United States governments.

Anti-violence advocates also are taking action to maintain a voice for the victims. To that end, U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.) took part in a march in Ciudad Juarez on Saturday organized by Amnesty International and V-Day, an activism group founded by "The Vagina Monologues" playwright Eve Ensler. WN talked to Schakowsky last week.

Q. It's almost unbelievable that so little has been done for such a long time ...

A. Part of it is an attitude of machismo in the culture and some of it just the economic conditions that expose women to exploitation and in some cases violence. Some of the women are so poor they end up living in the packing crates they are manufacturing.

Q. Both the U.S. and Mexican governments have to play a role in rectifying the situation?

A. Someone is going to have to be held accountable. The attitude of 'women dead in the desert, oh well,' is not going to be a sufficient response. ... It's not acceptable [to argue] that's there's no pattern ... The responsibility goes not only to the government and the perpetrators but also to what's going on that puts these women at risk: Is violence against women being tolerated? Is there an atmosphere of tolerance that would give space to those who might perpetrate these acts? We have to say no, we as women have zero-tolerance for violence against women and violence going unpunished. We're not going to allow it to be sloughed off. We're going to insist it be a focus for the governments of Mexico and the U.S. We want to tell this to women from Ciudad Juarez, and Mexico and the world.

Q. Why was it important to you to make this trip?

A. As a member of Congress, and as a feminist and an activist, I feel a real sense of responsibility toward women in the Third World and a responsibility to shine a light on their plight and address it.

Being women who are empowered, because of the resources we have, we have to do that.

Q. What were you communicating to Mexican women with this visit?

A. There has been some movement ... but you have to keep the action going and keep pressing the point. ... [Women] are not alone. We stand with them. We're not going there to shake our fingers at Mexicans, we're approaching this as a sisterhood, for all of us to feel the sense of our power ... It's about fighting back.

Q. What can women in Chicago do?

A. There are a lot of immigrant women in Chicago from Mexico. It's very good for them to report back to family and friends in Mexico on what's happening and what the U.S. is doing. Also, women should continue to communicate [to the Mexican and U.S. governments] that we want an answer. ... Mostly, a political will has to be established that this is important.