Taking the Law Into Our Own Hands

Female Vigilantism in India and Mexico

Roxana Baldrich

Master's thesis supervised by Quentin Delpech, associate researcher at CEMCA and Carol Wise, Professor of International Relations at USC

Academic Year 2013/2014

The copyright of this Master's thesis remains the property of its author. No part of the content may be reproduced, published, distributed, copied or stored for public or private use without written permission of the author. All authorisation requests should be sent to vanessa.scherrer@sciencespo.fr
Contents

Acknowledgments ............................................................................................................................. 4

Introduction ...................................................................................................................................... 5

a) Violent Women: Mapping the current (theoretical) terrain ................................................................. 5

  1) Discourses of female violence: “The Beautiful Soul” ................................................................. 5
  2) Discourses of gender stereotypes: “Mothers, Monsters, Whores” ........................................... 6

b) Vigilantism: Issues and preliminary definitional elements ................................................................. 9

  1) “Diana the Huntress”, continued .................................................................................................. 9
  2) Preliminary definitional elements of vigilantism ........................................................................... 12
  3) Previous work on female vigilantism ............................................................................................ 15

c) Methodology, limitations, and structure of the paper ....................................................................... 17

I – Female vigilantism in India ...................................................................................................... 21

a) The Gulabi Gang, Bundelkhand ...................................................................................................... 22

  1) Main Sources ............................................................................................................................... 23
  2) Bundelkhand, one of the poorest regions in the world .................................................................. 24
  3) The birth of the world's largest female vigilante group ............................................................... 24
  4) Violence only as a last resort ........................................................................................................ 26
  5) The Gulabi Gang's manifold activities ......................................................................................... 28
  6) The media's over-emphasis on the gang's violence-proneness .................................................. 30
  7) Local support for the Gulabi Gang ............................................................................................... 31
  8) Conclusions .................................................................................................................................. 31

b) The Red Brigade, Lucknow ........................................................................................................... 32

  1) The birth of an unusual vigilante group ....................................................................................... 33
  2) Activities and violence-proneness ............................................................................................... 33
  3) Mixed reactions to the group's activities ...................................................................................... 36

II – Female vigilantism in Mexico ................................................................................................... 38

a) ¡Ni Una Más! - women's grassroots organizing in Ciudad Juárez .................................................. 40

  1) The longest epidemic of femicidal violence in modern history ................................................. 40
  2) The birth of the movement .......................................................................................................... 41
  3) The local all-female grassroots movement of Juárez ................................................................. 42
  4) Local Nongovernmental organizations ......................................................................................... 44
  5) Outcomes .................................................................................................................................... 45
  6) Where are the female vigilantes? ................................................................................................. 46

b) Women in the “autodefensas” of Guerrero and Michoacán ............................................. 49

1) The growing movement of self-defense groups in Mexico .............................. 49
2) The first all-female armed Citizen Police group ........................................ 50
3) Women's roles in mixed autodefensas and their stereotypical media representation ................................................................. 52
4) Conclusions ................................................................................................. 55

Conclusion – Female vigilantism conceptualized .................................................. 57

a) General observations on female vigilantism .................................................... 47

1) Female vigilantism as a constructive collective enterprise ............................... 57
2) Female vigilantism as distinct from male vigilantism ....................................... 57
3) Female vigilantism as a shifting concept ...................................................... 58

b) Violence-proneness of female vigilantes .......................................................... 59

c) Short-term impact ............................................................................................ 61

1) Creation of safer environments for women .................................................... 61
2) Giving women a voice .................................................................................. 62
3) Awareness-rising and exercise of pressure ..................................................... 63

d) Long-term impact ........................................................................................... 64

1) Negation of gender stereotypes .................................................................... 64
2) Changing perceptions of violent women ....................................................... 65

e) Limits .............................................................................................................. 66

f) Conclusion and directions for further research .................................................. 69

Sources ................................................................................................................. 72

a) Books ............................................................................................................. 72
b) Journal articles ............................................................................................... 73
c) Press article ................................................................................................... 74
d) Human Rights reports .................................................................................... 78
e) Websites and blogs ........................................................................................ 78
f) Videos .............................................................................................................. 79
Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisors Quentin Delpech and Prof. Carol Wise for their time and useful comments, engagement and support throughout the learning process of this master's thesis.

Besides my advisor, I would like to thank the rest of my thesis committee: Hélène Combes for introducing me to the topic of social movements and for her enthusiasm, with which she raised my interest in the subject area; and Michelle Reddy for her encouragement, support and help throughout the application process from my study abroad semester at USC as well as during the production of this thesis.

Furthermore, I would like to thank Christina Grey for her insightful comments and guidance. I am deeply grateful to her for the long discussions that helped me organize my many ideas for this thesis.

I would like to express my heart-felt gratitude to my immediate family members, to whom this dissertation is dedicated, for their emotional and financial support throughout my studies.
Introduction

a) Violent Women: Mapping the current (theoretical) terrain

1) Discourses of female violence: “The Beautiful Soul”

Women, constrained to nonviolence, are precluded from claiming a self, a world. The moral imperative established by heterosexual virtue that women are to be nonviolent, establish[es] a male-defined goof that is beneficial to men and harmful to women.


On August 28, 2013, at approximately 7:45 am, an unidentified woman boarded a bus in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. She approached the driver, Jose Roberto Flores Carrera, 45, took out a pistol, and shot him. The next day, at almost the same hour, a similar scene took place on the same bus route, which serves main thoroughfares and downtown Ciudad Juárez. This time, Fredy Zarate Morales, 32, was killed. According to witnesses, both men died from bullets to the head, fired off by a middle-aged woman wearing a sun visor, black clothes and a blond wig, or possibly dyed hair (Chavez, 2013; El Diario, 2013b; Sanchez & Wilkinson, 2013; the Guardian, 2013; Rafael Romo, 2013; Tuckman, 2013b). According to CNN Senior Latin American Affairs Editor Rafael Romo (2013), local media reports, citing official sources, explain that “authorities know the perpetrator is a woman because she yelled at the second victim before shooting him: ‘You guys think you're real bad, don't you?’” As will be discussed in more detail later in this introduction, the two men were supposedly killed to avenge years of sexual violence on Juárez's buses. Therefore, the murders of August 28 and 29, 2013 have been described as vigilante justice by several journalists and observers (Chavez, 2013; Kilpatrick, 2013; NBC News, 2013).

Information on the above incidents as well as on the investigations into the murders of the two bus drivers was published in numerous newspapers in Mexico and abroad. There is probably not one person in Ciudad Juárez today who does not know “Diana, the Huntress of bus drivers”, the alleged perpetrator of the crimes. One might wonder why, in a region where the ongoing Mexican “War on Drugs” has created an atmosphere of everyday violence, chaos, and impunity, the murder of two ordinary men raises the interest of so many people. But the answer is simple: it mainly lies in the sex of the assassin. In fact, most people are deeply shocked at the image of a woman approaching a man to shoot him at close range. Certainly more so than if the murderer was a man. This is because lethal violence perpetrated by women is in conflict with common gender expectations and assumptions according to which women are to be non-violent.
This phenomenon was described by Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry in “Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics” (2007). In their work, the authors point to research by Osborn (2005, 597), Eisenstein (2004) and Ehrenreich (2005) which demonstrates that there are “inherited perceptions of women as maternal, emotional, and peace-loving” (Sjoberg and Gentry, 2007, 1). They then go on to say that the image of violent women, who recently started hitting the front pages of major international newspapers, runs counter to these perceptions (Ibid.). This disruption of common assumptions about female characteristics is especially important because it concerns different schools of thought at once. As Sjoberg and Gentry explain:

“Women's violence is often discussed in terms of violent women's gender: women are not supposed to be violent. This is one tenet on which various understandings of gender seem to converge. A conservative interpretation of gender sees women as peaceful and apolitical, a liberal view understands women as pacifying influence on politics, and feminists who study global politics often critique the masculine violence of interstate relations. Women's violence falls outside of these ideal-typical understandings of what it means to be a woman” (Ibid., 2).

One important historical source of the still prevalent stereotype of peaceful women is the narrative of “Beautiful Souls”. Since this narrative is often-cited in studies on violent women, it is useful to include it here in quite some detail. Sjoberg and Gentry provide us with an excellent summary of the narrative as described by different scholars:

Elshtain argues that women are characterized in narratives justifying the making and fighting of wars as 'Beautiful Souls', innocent of the war but the thing that warriors are responsible for defending (1987b). Women, in these discourses, become at once the victims and the causes of the war (Elstain 1987a; Hegel 1977). [...] They are 'frugal, self-sacrificing, and, at times, delicate' and work to 'preserve the purity of the heart' by fleeing 'from contact with the actual world' when violence erupts (Elsttain 1992a, Peach 1994). A Beautiful Soul is fragile, removed from reality, and in need of protection in a way that the protector receives substantial honor for success (Sjoberg 2006, Elshtain 1992a, 1992b). The Beautiful Soul/woman is expected to be against war and violence, but to cooperate with wars fought to protect her innocence and virginity. In this way, states perpetuate a gendered 'protection racket' which marginalizes women while appearing to foreground their interests (Peterson 1977; Stichm 1982; Blanchard 2003). The stereotype of women's victimization holds fast largely because it is not entirely untrue; the impacts of war are often gender oppressive” (Ibid., 4).

2) Discourses of gender stereotypes: “Mothers, Monsters, Whores”

In the minds of many men, female aggression remains shrouded in mystery - capricious, irrational, arbitrary. If it cannot be explained in “rational” instrumental terms, then it cannot be explained at all; violent women must be either trying to be men or just crazy.

– Campbell, 1993, 144

Discourses that describe women as non-violent, peaceful, or pacifying, amongst others, are based on the assumption that there are fundamental differences between what women and what men can
do and how they should behave. Indeed, ideal-typical understandings of what it means to be a
woman are embedded in a construct in which they are directly opposed to understandings of what it
means to be a man. These understandings are reflected in gender discourses that can vary depending
on the societal and cultural environment in which a woman lives, but are relatively homogenous
across countries when it comes to describing her violence. According to Sjoberg and Gentry (2007)
“gender discourses dominate today's increasing recognition of and concern for women's violence”
thus setting up deviant women “in opposition to idealized gender stereotypes” (7). According to the
authors, “the treatment of women's violence in global politics demonstrates that traditional gender
norms remain intact and thriving” since “people weigh individuals’ actions through expectations of
gendered behaviour” (Ibid.).

Sjoberg and Gentry point out that the problem of gender subordination related to women's violence
is that it “excludes women's agency in that violence”, violent women not being described “as
women with particular characteristics, but as less than woman and as less than human” (Ibid., 10).
This is to say that when women perpetrate violence, their actions are portrayed in ways that
emphasize their singularity and deny their agency in their own violence. In fact, “few researchers
actually depict violent women as rational actors, even though scholars often characterize violent
men as acting rationally or logically motivated” (Ibid., 13). Instead of looking at the complex
underlying reasons and motivations for women's violence, violent women are simply “portrayed
either as 'mothers', women who are fulfilling their biological destinies; as 'monsters', women who
are pathologically damaged and are therefore drawn to violence (Gentry 2006); or as 'whores',
women whose violence is inspired by sexual dependence and depravity” (Ibid., 12). The authors
conclude by saying that these narratives have fully othered and isolated violent women, who cannot
be held responsible for their violent acts, thus enabling us to maintain our image of “real” women as
being peaceful, fragile and pure (Ibid., 13).

Paula Ruth Gilbert, in “Discourses of Female Violence and Societal Gender Stereotypes” (2002),
provides us with a different but not less persuasive reason why analysis of gender subordination
related to women's violence matters. She points out that,

“The way that we, as a society, talk about women and their use of violence and force has grave
implications for social policy and women's experiences in the criminal justice system. In other words,
society’s cultural stereotypes about women and gender color the way professionals in law enforcement,
the legal system, the courts, and social policy agencies treat women who commit violent acts of
aggression” (1271).

In her paper, the author persuasively explains how “gender stereotypes that continue to permeate
our society create the very cultural discourses that people in positions of power and in the population at large use to talk about women and violence” (Ibid). More specifically, she holds that “Society’s stereotypical views of what a woman should be and how she should act help create the very discourses that in turn continue these simplistic and yet dangerous stereotypes” (Ibid., 1272-73). It is important to be aware of these stereotypes and discourses because they “often play into how such women are viewed, treated, and ultimately dealt with by the institutions that affect their lives” (Ibid., 1272). Therefore, “we, as a society, cannot be satisfied with a unitary and thus potentially biased discourse about women and violence” (Ibid., 1273), but “need a multilayered discourse of violence to explain the complexities arising from society’s perception of gender and of women in particular” (Ibid., 1272). According to the author, what is missing today in discourses about male and female violence is “the attempt to understand that aggression and violence are often manifested differently in women and in men and stem from different causes (Ibid., 1274). Gilbert then refers to the book “Men, women, and aggression” by Anne Campbell (1993), who “wrote convincingly of what she sees as the 'double standard of aggression' between men and women” (Ibid., 1275). According to Campbell,

“both sexes see an intimate connection between aggression and control, but for women aggression is the failure of self-control, while for men it is the imposing of control over others. Women’s aggression emerges from their inability to check the disruptive and frightening force of their own anger. For men, it is a legitimate means of assuming authority over the disruptive and frightening forces in the world around them” (1993, 1).

Finally, and very similarly to Sjoberg and Gentry, Gilbert concludes that,

“our reluctance to criminalize women betrays our fears of the falling apart of our social fabric. According to our rigid cultural gender polarity (see Kramer, 1997), violent women are seen neither as sane nor as women. Society needs to see violent women as different - either as mad or bad - because otherwise, we would need new discourses to understand that both men and women can be violent (Ballinger, 1996; Grindstaff & McCaughey, 1996)” (2002, 1282).

In “Behind the Mask: Destruction and Creativity in Women’s Aggression” (2001), Dana Crowley Jack pursues a similar line of thought, though she formulates her ideas more poignantly. According to her, “If women are overtly aggressive, then gender, as our society has defined it, will no longer exist” (Jack, 2001, 30). This is because the possibility of female aggression refutes gender dualisms, that is, attributes that we have assigned to men and women in a mutually exclusive way: “active/passive, warlike/peaceful, competitive/cooperative, separate/connected and more” (Ibid.). It also disproves ideas of stereotypical feminine behavior such as sweetness, silence, and passivity (Ibid., 236). The author claims that because we attach so much importance to keeping these stereotypes alive,
“Throughout history, women have been punished for obvious displays of aggression; they have been forced to camouflage their intent to hurt others, their opposition, and even their positive forcefulness, to deliver their aggression in culturally sanctioned but more hidden ways” (Ibid., 4).

However, putting these stereotypical ideas about female aggression in question, Jack concludes that, “Women do hurt others, at times with clear vision and at other times blindly. Though their aggression differs from men’s in socially constructed ways and is often less physical, it causes harm” (Ibid., 112).

Violent crimes such as the murders of two bus drivers in Ciudad Juárez raise the public's interest more than other murder cases do because they were planned and executed by a woman with a clear intention. This disrupts stereotypes which portray women's violence as capricious, irrational, or arbitrary (Campbell, 1993, 144), especially because the assassinations of August 2013 have been described by many as vigilant justice. Moreover, many female passengers on Juárez's buses empathize with the bus drivers' murderer (Tuckman, 2013b) which makes it even harder to dismiss these acts of violence as isolated cases committed by a “crazy” woman. However, it remains to be seen whether or not journalists and scholars are ready to adopt the new multilayered discourse of women's violence that Gilbert (2002) proposes. This paper will thus explore recent press articles and scholarly work on female vigilantes in order to assess if violent women are still being portrayed as “either mad or bad” (Gilbert, 2002, 1282; Fitzroy, 2001, 11), or if the recent rise of female vigilantism has triggered more nuanced discourses.

b) Vigilantism: Issues and preliminary definitional elements

1) “Diana the Huntress”, continued

On the weekend following the assassinations of August 28 and 29, 2013, an e-mail “caught the attention of authorities because it contained certain details about the crimes that had yet to be publicly disclosed” (BBC, 2013a). In allusion to a famous Mexico City statue of the Roman goddess of hunting, of which Juárez owns a replica, it was signed “Diana Huntress of bus drivers” (Diana Cazadora de choferes). It contained the following message:

“Creen que porque somos mujeres somos débiles y puede ser que sí, solo hasta cierto punto, pues aunque no contamos con quien nos pueda defender y tenemos la necesidad de trabajar hasta altas horas de la noche para mantener a nuestras familias, ya no podemos callar estos actos que nos llenan de rabia, mis compañeras y yo sufrimos en silencio pero ya no podemos callar más, fuimos víctimas de violencia sexual por choferes que cubrían el turno de noche de las maquilas aquí en Juárez y aunque mucha gente sabe lo que sufrimos nadie nos defiende ni hacen nada por protegernos [...] por eso yo soy un instrumento que vengará a varias mujeres que al parecer somos débiles para la sociedad, pero no lo somos en realidad, somos valientes y si no nos respetan nos daremos a respetar por nuestra propia mano, las mujeres...
The claims voiced by “Diana the Huntress”, and subsequently published in numerous newspapers, “echoed deeply in Ciudad Juárez, which has a grim history of sexual violence against women aboard buses“ (Chavez, 2013). Indeed, Juárez has gained international notoriety due to its deplorable situation of violence against women and impunity of the perpetrators of the crimes. According to authors Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Georgina Guzmán, who have worked extensively on the subject, “Since May 1993, over five hundred women and girls have been found brutally murdered on the El Paso/Juárez border and thousands more have been reported missing and remain unaccounted for” (2010, 1). As denounced by “Diana”, “Many of the women murdered [...] in the 1990s and early 2000s disappeared after boarding buses“ (Chavez, 2013), in most cases on their way to or from work, when they had been assigned late evening, night or early morning shifts. However, “Municipal and state police demonstrated little interest in finding the killers, solving the crimes, or preventing future violence” (Staudt, 2009, 107-108), and the crimes have gone unpunished and unresolved by Mexican authorities, thus creating “the longest epidemic of femicidal violence in modern history” (Gaspar de Alba & Guzmán, 2010, 1-3). Although, “Several bus drivers were arrested in connection with those killings”, there has not been one definite conviction so far (Chavez, 2013).

Interestingly, the two assassinations of August 2013 and “Diana's” claim to have carried out these killings in her role as an “instrument of vengeance for several women” have prompted diverse reactions. Writing for the L.A. Times, Tracy Wilkinson and Cecilia Sanchez underline in their description of the murderess that, “Like a character from a graphic novel, she dresses in black, has unusually blond hair — and kills bus drivers who sexually assault women” (2013). In the title of their newspaper article on the killings, the authors present Juárez as being gripped by a tale of a black-clad avenger and conclude that, “In a place like Ciudad Juarez, known for its years of brutal killings of women, the story has inexorable appeal” (Ibid.).

In addition to “avenger“ (Sanchez & Wilkinson, 2013; Agence France-Presse, 2013), “Diana the Huntress” has also been labeled “antihero” (El Diario, 2013a), “assassin” (El Diario, 2013b), and “vigilante” (Cavez, 2013; Kilpatrick, 2013; NBC News, 2013). Amongst the different reactions to the killings were a statement by women’s advocates that “they wouldn’t be surprised if someone

---

1 The actual number of murdered women differs widely according to the sources: 254 cases according to the Juárez rape crisis shelter, 370 for the period between 1993 and 2005 according to Amnesty International, over 500 for the period between 1993 and 2008 as claimed by Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán (2010, 2-3), 878 for the period between 1993 and 2010 according to El Diario de Juárez, and 978 for the period between 1993 and 2011, according to the Los Angeles Times.
finally had taken long denied justice into her own hands” (Sanchez & Wilkinson, 2013) and a reminder by Imelda Marrufo, coordinator of a network of women’s organizations, that “we are talking about a victim, someone who was raped and has probably lived with such a lack of justice that she has no hope that whoever did that to her will ever pay for the crime. Like so many women in Ciudad Juárez” (Ibid.).

Even if it is not clear, until this day, if there is any link between the e-mail sent under the name of “Diana the Huntress” and the actual killer, or killers, of the bus drivers, “Arturo Sandoval, spokesman for the Chihuahua state prosecutor's office, said the vigilante claim was considered one of the working hypotheses in the crimes [since there was no apparent robbery]“ (Chavez, 2013) - “Nor did she use a weapon normally favored by gang members“ (BBC, 2013a). Juárez human rights activist Gustavo de la Rosa added to the debate, claiming that even if, “We cannot be sure that the e-mail corresponds exactly to those who committed the killings, [...] in the city’s imagination, that is definitely what’s happening“ (Sanchez & Wilkinson, 2013).

De la Rosa's description of the situation seems to be confirmed by the countless readers who have commented on newspaper articles on “Diana the Huntress” that were published online. For the most part these readers, whether or not they believed in Diana's existence, found the bus drivers' assassinations to be justified, or at least to be worth closer analysis – as opposed to immediately condemning them. For instance, the readers of “La Polaka”, an online news site which had received Diana's message claiming responsibility for the murders, wrote comments congratulating the unidentified murderess (Kilpatrick, 2013). A more skeptical comment came from John P. Sullivan, a career police officer and researcher currently serving as a lieutenant with the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department. He commented on an article published on the website of El Diario de Juárez: "Is 'Diana Cazadora' a hoax? Urban Legend? Or is this denial? An e-mail from El Paso does not rule anything out. There were murders and a history of femicide. Vigilantes are a reality too. Either way; even if 'Diana Cazadora' is a construct, she is a powerful social artifact that demands attention.”

In more general terms, comments by internet users evolved around the questions of whether or not violence and murder are ever acceptable, whether or not the assassinations would lead to better living conditions for women in Juárez or on the contrary, and whether “Diana” took revenge on the perpetrators of heinous crimes or rather killed two innocent men who happened to work on the same bus line as the alleged perpetrators.

2 http://diario.mx/Local/2013-09-07_c3a9657c/fiscalia-duda-de-existencia-de-diana-la-cazadora-especialistas-critican-manejo-de-investigacion-
This paper will explore the questions raised by journalists, scholars, and the public with regard to the murders committed by “Diana”: In a place like Juárez, which is infamous for its deplorable situation of violence against women and impunity of the perpetrators of the crimes, is it admissible that women take justice into their own hands? How is “Diana the Huntress” best to be described? Is she an avenger, an antihero, an assassin, a vigilante, or maybe several of these things at the same time? Most importantly, this paper is an attempt to define the concept of female vigilantism, a relatively new phenomenon on which almost no research has been conducted so far. Indeed, Ray Abrahams, who has published a book and several papers on the nature of vigilantism and its significance as a commonly illegal form of crime control, acknowledges that, “The variable place of gender within vigilantism has been relatively neglected” by anthropologists and other social scientists (Abrahams, 2007, 437). However, there is a recent global trend of outcries against violence against women, especially against rape, which has been accompanied by the forming of more and more all-female self-defense and vigilante groups. This phenomenon makes it necessary to conceptualize female vigilantism independently, that is, as a concept that is distinct from male vigilantism.

In addition to conceptualizing female vigilantism, another question that will be explored in this paper concerns the potential short and long-term impact that women vigilantes may have on their respective societies. More specifically, this paper will test the hypothesis brought forward by Alison Graham-Bertolini in her book on “Vigilante Women in Contemporary American Fiction” that, “Transformative and aggressive acts of female vigilantism do not have a secure place in our current model of femininity, so their effect on the social order is radical and change inducing” (2011, 3). We will explore the question of whether or not the same conclusion holds for non-fictional female vigilantes, and if so, whether or not the transformations which they trigger are beneficial for their respective societies, in particular for women. Exploring this question will help illuminate social problems that are related to the distribution of gender roles in our contemporary societies and carve out ways to overcome these.

2) Preliminary definitional elements of vigilantism

Before attempting to answer to these research questions, it is useful to provide the reader with an overview of current work on vigilantism, as well as of the few existing attempts to define female vigilantism. In “Some thoughts on the comparative study of vigilantism” (2007), Ray Abrahams, who has done extensive research on the nature and significance of vigilantism as a commonly illegal form of crime control, provides us with some valuable definitional elements of
the term vigilantism. Moreover, Abrahams' reflections on the comparative study of vigilantism will be particularly helpful for our understanding of the different case studies that will be presented in the main body of this paper. The first remark that Abrahams (2007) makes sure to include in his paper before attempting to define vigilantism in a more structured way is that

“Vigilantism […] is for several reasons intrinsically difficult to pin down. It is commonly unstable, exhibiting a labile quality encouraged by its typical position as part of the 'informal' legal and political sector and the absence of strong well-established pressures to retain its character and form. It occupies an awkward borderland between law and illegality, and the veil of secrecy that cloaks much vigilante activity also provides cover for deception, so that it is by no means always what it seems or claims to be. Again, it is a phenomenon that commonly generates strong emotions and conflicting opinions” (421-22).

Because it is so hard to formulate a clear-cut definition of vigilantism, Abrahams proposes to approach the problem in a different way. Referring to Max Weber – according to him “the most sensitive of our social science ancestors to the difficult relation between words we use and the often 'messy' real life phenomena to which we attach them” – he proposes to use a “strategy of 'ideal' and 'pure' types sets out to provide a measure rather than a simple picture of reality” (Ibid., 423). According to Abrahams, the advantage of such a definition is that, whatever its particular content or focus, “we need not necessarily be too worried or surprised if one or more real cases fail to fit it” (Ibid.). Instead of a rigid definition, this approach will “provide us with the possibility of an illuminating comparison between our formulation and the complex and by no means always stable reality of what people say and do” (Ibid.). Using this general framework and approach, Abrahams then attempts to provide us with the most important definitional elements of 'vigilantism' and 'vigilante'. These terms, to him,

“have seemed […] 'ideally' to involve an organized attempt by a group of 'ordinary citizens' to enforce norms and maintain law and order on behalf of their communities, often by resort to violence, in the perceived absence of effective official state action through the police and courts. [...] Vigilantism is typically more critical of the state's actual performance than of the state itself (vs anarchy). At the same time, its wide distribution warns us not to underestimate the force of popular concern for law and order” (Ibid., 423-24).

Abrahams them goes on to describe the different contexts in which vigilantism is most likely to occur. He summarizes:

“Vigilantes are commonly described as stepping in to uphold law and order when the state fails to do so. Thus if the state is unable to enforce the laws aimed at the protection of its citizens' property and security, vigilantes classically 'take the law into their own hands'. In such circumstances, there is not argument between the parties as to what the law is, or where the rights to legislate and, normally, to jurisdiction, lie. [...] There are, however, many situations, in a wide range of 'old' and 'new' states, where vigilantes are engaged in rather more than this by trying to enforce behavior patterns and punishing 'offenses' that the law itself does not demand or prohibit. [...] In other contexts, [...] there are radical differences between the state's enthusiastic adoption of international Human Rights legislation and the attitudes of rural and some
other citizens to the basic features of family law and the law of persons. This is especially clear with regard to basic assumptions about the rights of women vis-à-vis their husbands” (Ibid., 424-26).

This last remark will be of particular importance with regards to this paper, since the realization by Indian and Mexican women that their husbands' behavior is not in line with international Human Rights legislation has significantly contributed to the formation of female self-help and vigilante groups. Finally, Abrahams completes his definitional sketch of vigilantism by pointing to its possible implications and consequences. He points out that,

It is clear that in its many many guises and configurations, vigilantism commonly has very serious real world implications – often of life and death – both for its targets and for its practitioners. It also poses well-known difficulties for the governance of the state. At the same time, it illustrates some puzzling qualities of local-level social life. It claims to uphold law and order and morality by typically violent and illegal means, and it often displays confusing combinations of opposing elements – sectional and common interests, elitist and populist values, and intolerance and caring decency. It is not surprising that, with such a heady and manipulable mixture, vigilantism tends to provoke conflicting responses within and between individuals and groups, and that rhetoric and labeling play a significant role in the arguments it generates (mob, squad vs. punishment group, punishment vs. brutal intimidation, victim vs. perpetrator...)” (Ibid., 429-430).

Based on this definitional sketch and similar to Atreyee Sen and David Pratten in “Global vigilantes: perspectives on justice and violence” (2007), I expect that my comparative analysis of female vigilante groups will “illustrate[] the need to confront [the ambiguities of female vigilantism] with all their conflations and elisions” (Pratten and Sen, 2007, 18-19), rather than helping us carve out a clear-cut definition of the term. Likewise Sen and Pratten, I share Abrahams' “resistance to refocusing any definition onto those frequently recurring features of vigilante activity” (Ibid., 19), since I expect that this paper will illustrate that “vigilantism is a shifting concept that articulates to ever-changing social realities” (Ibid.).

In addition to defending and adopting Abrahams' definitional sketch of vigilantism, Pratten and Sen (2007) explain that “long historical trajectories, and particular cultural repertoires, are the proximate and pressing imperatives behind vigilante violence” (5). Therefore, it is possible to “move beyond an argument that vigilantism is straightforwardly a popular response to the vacuum left by state collapse, failure or instrumentalized disorder” (Ibid., 6). In fact, the authors' aim is to present vigilantism from “an alternative perspective, one that sees vigilantism from within localized cultural and historical frameworks, and in which vigilantes are seen within a range of longstanding ethics and practices concerned with the protection of their communities' (Leach 2004)” (Ibid.). One important reason why it is so important to refer to particular cultural and historical frameworks when analyzing vigilante behavior is that this approach helps us understand the reasoning of different vigilante groups in terms of moral codes and aesthetics. As Pratten and Sen persuasively
explain:

“Diffused in crowds and mobs and concentrated in groups and gangs, 'popular' violence tends to obey moral imperatives and is often structured in terms of 'legitimate' targets and appropriate punishments. It is important to account for the different moral and aesthetic evaluations people in different contexts make of their actions on the bodies of others (Spencer, 2003). These various moral communities produce notions of justice and law with different kinds of imaginaries from those available in the official sites and representations of justice and law. […] the complexity of lived experiences inflects both past and imagined futures into an ambiguous, dynamic and very powerful notion of the moral order and of the routines by which it should be upheld” (Ibid., 7).

3) Previous work on female vigilantism

In “Vigilante Women in Contemporary American Fiction” (2011), Alison Graham-Bertolini explains the importance of distinguishing between male and female vigilantes as follows:

“Female vigilantism is most often a recuperative act that addresses systematic flaws in the American system of justice. Contemporary heroines commit illegal, extralegal, and at times, deadly, acts in their quest for justice, including the destruction of property, banditry, robbery, armed combat, and/or even murder. However, because the women who commit these acts do so for ethical reasons and to establish or protect their own right to full personhood, their actions assume a significance that manifests as an equitable view of individuality. The importance of this study, then, is to pinpoint the androcentric notion of vigilantism, eschew its appropriation into its binary opposition of a female version, and focus instead on the transformative and dynamic properties of vigilantism that support and empower the potential for equitable and viable female agency” (4).

Even though Graham-Bertolini focuses in her study on fictional accounts of female vigilantes in the United States, I hypothesize that my research will show her main argument to be applicable to female vigilantes at large. Concerning the main difference between male and female vigilantism, it is helpful to cite some important elements as carved out by Graham-Bertolini:

“The main difference between traditional male vigilantism and female vigilantism that is articulated in this project is that male characters typically turn to vigilantism for abstract reasons – reasons that at first glance appear universal but, in fact, reflect a male image dominated by ego. As a result, the prevailing stereotype of the indomitable male is reinforced in fiction. On the contrary, in vigilante fiction written by women, heroines are characterized in a way that is much more fluid. The specific triggers for female vigilantism shift from abstract values concerning the law to the much more concrete and determinable, such as the casting away of an abusive spouse. In stories of female vigilante justice, women reach beyond prescribed social roles to take action, sometimes for their own protection, sometimes for the protection of others, sometimes for a moral ideal. Such stories are shocking because the laying aside of typical 'womanly' behavior reveals the 'assumedness' of femininity. Within such acts, the heroines of these fictions demonstrate their ability to act in a 'masculine' manner when necessary, thus exploding gender myths of what constitutes 'masculine' and 'feminine' conduct” (Ibid., 6).

Furthermore, Graham-Bertolini raises two very important questions: in what ways does female vigilantism respond to the “central question posited by feminists since the beginning of the feminist movement; that is, how is it possible for women to recognize and respond to their own exploitation when they are immersed within a wholly masculine order? (Irigaray 128)” (Ibid., 163). And: is
women's violent response to violence ever warranted? (Ibid., 164) Concerning this latter question, Graham-Bertolini gives a very good summary of the different opinions that have been expressed on the subject so far. According to her, the most prominent view in feminist studies is “that violence should never be an option, and that to engage in violence is to adopt the erroneous behavior of the oppressor” (Ibid., 164). This advocacy for passive resistance is based on a belief that “it is possible and necessary to work with and refine the practices of legal and welfare agencies and press for reform in procedures adopted by the police and the judiciary (qtd In Maynard 118)” (Ibid.). A second view on the topic is that “in some instances passive resistance is not effective in warding off predators or predatory behavior” (Ibid., 165). This view is held in particular for situations involving rape, where feminists such as Martindale have argued that passive resistance “does not work” (Ibid.). A third and more radical view, publicized by feminist scholars such as Jeffner Allen, is that “nonviolence is a patriarchal construct that has been assigned to women because it is ineffective and self-destructive (qtd In Martindale: 109)” (Ibid.) As such, it “keeps women powerless” and “in a persistent state of subservience” (Ibid.). Yet another view is that “the laws in place to protect women are not adequate”. Therefore, “the definition of self-defense needs to be expanded, so that it includes instances of violence used to protect oneself or ones loved ones” (Ibid.).

In “Justice by Any Means Necessary: Vigilantism among Indian Women” (2009), which I will draw on more extensively in part I of this paper, Aaronette White and Shagun Rastogi analyze the vigilantism of the Gulabi Gang and the Mahila Aghadi (India). The authors argue that ”women who engage in violent forms of justice-seeking require us to expand social psychological concepts of retributive and restorative models of justice, women’s agency, and community organizing“ (2009, 313). The line of argument that leads White and Rastogi to this conclusion requires them to provide some definitional elements of vigilantism and related terms that will prove valuable for this paper as well. To start, the authors summarize the definition of vigilantism that they will then base the rest of their line of argument on, that is:

“Most scholars agree that vigilantes often work in groups (Sen and Pratten, 2008). However, scholars disagree as to whether vigilantism is a social movement or mere social reaction, and whether it is always violent, extra-legal, organized, conservative, directed only towards crime, or a subcategory of political violence (Johnston, 1996). We use sociologist Les Johnston’s (1996) definition of vigilantism as a guide here to challenge media sensationalized representations. Johnston’s definition of vigilantism involves: (a) premeditation by participants; (b) private citizens whose engagement is voluntary; (c) a social movement acting without the state’s authority or support; (d) the use or threat of force; (e) an established order under threat from the transgression, the potential transgression or the imputed transgression of institutionalized norms; and, (f) an aim to control crime or other infractions by offering assurances of security to participants and others (Johnston, 1996)” (315).

However, the authors add, “violence, and its legitimacy, as well as notions of justice, can be defined
in a variety of ways (e.g., see Bufacchi, 2005; Hutchings, 2007)” (Ibid.), and therefore, they decided to

“adopt a feminist definition of violence to distinguish ethical practices of violence – that involve proportionate punishment in the context of failed or grossly compromised judiciaries that deny due process – from unethical practices of violence that involve murder (Hutchings, 2007). We also adopt a feminist definition of justice that includes retributive and restorative components. We argue what is deemed ethical and unethical violence must be judged on a case-by-case basis” (Ibid.).

Using these feminist definitions of violence and justice leads the authors to conclude that, “some forms of women’s vigilantism are legitimate acts of violence in specific political contexts where local judiciaries fail to protect women against gross human rights abuses” (Ibid., 316). According to the authors, this is especially true in India. They explain:

“Given the multiple, patriarchal injustices poor women face in India because of their gender, caste, ethnicity and the ineffective implementation and interpretation of national and international laws designed to protect lower-caste women (Gangoli, 2007), we argue that these women’s ‘vigilante’ violence can fall under ‘ethical’ use of violence” (Ibid.).

Concerning the aforementioned aspect of the moral codes of vigilante groups, White and Rastogi point out that,

“anthropologists and sociologists have found that vigilante groups obey moral imperatives and define who the legitimate targets are and what should be the appropriate punishments (Sen and Pratten, 2008). Retaliatory aggression is seen as a form of self-defence and is viewed as justifiable and necessary in order to preserve one’s image and honour (Miller, 2001). Moreover, moral convictions (and the emotions that accompany them) are central to people’s sense of identity and their perception of justice (Clayton and Opotow, 2003; Miller, 2001; Sen, 2008). People affirm their sense of self by possessing moral convictions consistent with their personal and group values, and when one is identifying oneself as part of a collective, the overall sense of justice in that collective is more important than one’s individual perception (Clayton and Opotow, 2003). The violation of a community member represents an insult to the integrity of the entire community and can provoke both moralistic anger (righteous indignation) and the urge to punish the offender (Miller, 2001). [...] Retaliation against the offender serves to restore the group’s collective image as well as the victim’s individual self-image: it communicates that the offender – not the victim – deserves contempt, and it aims to educate the offender about the general unacceptability of his/her behaviour, not merely its unacceptability vis-à-vis the victim (Miller, 2001)” (Ibid., 322).

c) Methodology, limitations, and structure of the paper

This paper will analyze female vigilantism by borrowing conceptual and theoretical frameworks from the area of gender studies, especially the frameworks mentioned above which were created in order to describe discourses of female violence as well as of societal gender stereotypes. Probably the most important aspect of these frameworks with regard to this paper is the use of “gendered lenses”, a method used by Sjoberg and Gentry (2007) throughout their research. This approach will also be adopted in this paper, as it will help us understand why female
vigilantism is different from male vigilantism and thus needs to be conceptualized independently. As Sjoberg and Gentry explain, they “approach the issue of the narratives of women's prescribed violence in global politics through an explicitly feminist outlook, using gendered lenses” (2007, 11). The authors specify that they borrowed this method from Jill Steans, who summarized it in the following way:

“To look at the world with gendered lenses is to focus on gender as a particular kind of power relation, or to trace out the ways in which gender is central to understanding international processes. Gender lenses also focus on the everyday experiences of women as women and highlight the consequences of their unequal social position (1998, 5)” (Ibid.).

Moreover, I will adopt Graham-Bertolini's (2011) approach to “focus [...] on the transformative and dynamic properties of vigilantism that support and empower the potential for equitable and viable female agency” (4). Focusing on this aspect of vigilantism will ensure that a newly found definition of female vigilantism will not simply change existing male-centered notions of vigilantism into their binary opposition. This approach bears a resemblance to the use of “gendered lenses” in that it allows us to focus on the everyday experiences of women as women, to highlight the consequences of their unequal social position, and to demonstrate how their vigilantism might help them change this position. Even though my research does not focus on a distinction or comparison between male and female vigilantism, but looks at female vigilantism as a separate phenomenon, I hypothesize that the claims made by Graham-Bertolini (2011, 6) concerning the difference between male and female vigilantism are applicable to the female vigilantes in my case studies. In fact, I hope to be able to demonstrate that the motivational factors of the vigilante groups that will be presented in this paper range from abstract values (law, justice, equality etc.) to much more concrete and determinable reasons (abusive spouses, rapists, harassers, corrupt officials, thieves etc.), and that the women presented in the case studies reach beyond prescribed social roles to take action, sometimes for their own protection, sometimes for the protection of others (their children, family, community etc.), sometimes for a moral ideal. I also hope to show that their actions help exploding gender myths of what constitutes 'masculine' and 'feminine' conduct, thereby changing their respective societies in the long run, and with it, the roles that are assigned to women within them.

Most importantly though, methodology will be focused on an examination of the “theoretical nature, everyday popular uses, public discourses and empirical reality of vigilantism”. This approach is borrowed from the aforementioned work by Pratten and Sen (2007), in which vigilantism is explored “as a practice rather than as an object of analysis with clear-cut conceptual
and empirical boundaries” (Ibid)³. I consider this to be the approach which will most likely lead to a successful conceptualization of female vigilantism because “long historical trajectories, and particular cultural repertoires, are the proximate and pressing imperatives behind vigilante violence” (Pratten and Sen, 2007, 5). As a result, evaluating female vigilantism on a case-by-case basis while looking for common patterns will most likely enable us to define the concept as a whole. Therefore, this paper will be structured around case studies of female vigilante groups in India and Mexico - two countries with different cultural, societal, and religious contexts which both saw a recent rise in female vigilantism. I hypothesize that these case studies will demonstrate that vigilantism “cannot be reduced to either expressions of the mob or to mere antidotes to formal law” (Buur and Jensen, 2004, 140) and that “police resourcing and corruption contribute materially to the emergence and continuing legitimacy of vigilantes” (Pratten and Sen, 2007, 6). Moreover, the case studies will enable us to “move beyond an argument that vigilantism is straightforwardly a popular response to the vacuum left by state collapse, failure or instrumentalized disorder” (Ibid.).

The regions in which the analyzed vigilante groups operate are largely undeveloped and/or crime ridden. Therefore, field research and face-to-face interviews with the vigilantes would be difficult and involve security risks. However, the case studies were chosen based on the availability of anthropological and media sources. Indeed, the activities of the vigilante groups that will be analyzed in this paper have been sufficiently documented by ethnographers and journalists for us to be able to draw meaningful and valid conclusions from the available sources. I had initially planned on conducting field research in Ciudad Juárez. However, a former policeman and now activist from Ciudad Juárez that I interviewed in Paris, my professors at the University of Southern California, as well as the many Mexican nationals that I talked to in Europe and Mexico City all urged me not to go there because of the danger to my safety that this would represent. In the case of India, conducting interviews with female vigilantes would be very difficult due to language barriers (e.g. my inability to speak or understand Hindu or other Indian dialects, and their inability to speak or understand English). Ultimately, I do not think that this lack of field research will render the conclusions drawn in this paper less true or relevant since, as mentioned above, there already is extensive information available on the case studies that I will present in this paper. I do not think that paying a translator and/or traveling to Ciudad Juárez in spite of security risks would have substantially changed the outcomes of my research. This belief is due to the fact that I was able to find numerous reliable sources on the case studies described in this paper, some of which included interviews with female vigilantes conducted by scholars and journalists. The authors Fontanella-

³ Pratten and Sen, in turn, borrowed the approach from Buur and Jensen, 2004, 140.
Khan (2013) and Sen (2012), for instance, conducted extensive field research on female vigilantes in India and included numerous direct quotations of the women's accounts in their publications. Staudt (2008, 2009a and b, Gaspar de Alba (2010), and Peña (2007), on the other hand, conducted extensive field research on femicide and female social activism in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. Furthermore, I was able to find numerous news stories on the vigilante groups described in this paper which also included interviews of the women. I consider these articles to be reliable sources since they were written by professional journalists working for world-renowned news outlets such as the BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera and Agence France-Presse, or for reputable newspapers such as the Guardian, the Observer and the New York Times. In addition to this, I overwhelmingly used articles published by journalists who had themselves traveled to, or where based in, the city or region they were reporting on. Finally, I also used numerous publications by Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and the United Nations that corroborated with, or complemented, the scholarly and journalistic research. Since these organizations are known for their thorough investigations and only include facts in their reports of which they found hard evidence, these reports are valuable sources for scholarly research.

This introduction has provided us with the necessary context and theoretical framework on which the conceptualization of female vigilantism will be based. The main body of this paper, that is, part I) and II), will now turn to the aforementioned case studies of female vigilante groups in India – the Gulabi Gang, I a), and the Red Brigade, I b) – and Mexico – female activists in Ciudad Juárez, II a), and female members of “autodefensas” in Guerrero and Michoacán, II b). A conclusive part will then contrast and combine the findings of the case studies in order to carve out the most important components of the concept of female vigilantism, as well as to assess its short and long-term impact. The main ambition of the author is to conceptualize female vigilantism as a phenomenon that is different from male vigilantism and whose emergence can be traced back to much more than just a popular response to the vacuum left by state collapse, failure or instrumentalized disorder. In order to demonstrate this, we will explore the everyday popular uses, public discourses and empirical reality of female vigilantism in India and Mexico, as well as the historical trajectories and the cultural and societal contexts in which this vigilantism has emerged. Another important research question that will lead the author's line of reasoning throughout this paper is how the everyday experiences of women as women and their unequal social position have influenced their decision to resort to vigilantism and shaped their activism.
I – Female vigilantism in India

According to the Human Rights Watch (HRW) “World Report 2014”, “The Indian government’s inability to protect women and children from rape and sexual violence undermines its commitment to uphold the rights of all Indians” (2014a). Although the Indian constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex, and India has strong legislation to protect rights, entrenched corruption and lack of accountability foster human rights violations, and the position of women remains unequal (HRW, 2014a; Xu, 2013). According to the Indian Council on Global Relations, most women in India have stories of sexual harassment and abuse on public transportation or on the streets (Armstrong, 2013). In between 1971 and 2011, the number of reported rapes has increased dramatically in India, from 2,487 to 24,206, and these are only the official figures. The actual number of rape cases must be much higher, since India is one of those countries “where a cultural stigma keeps many victims from reporting the crime” (Ibid.), so that many rape cases remain unreported. A common claim now is that there is one rape every twenty-two minutes in India (BBC, 2014a).

In December 2012, the gang-rape and death of a female student in New Delhi triggered widespread protests and “drew international and domestic attention to the need for institutional reforms to ensure human rights protections in India” (HRW, 2014b, 334). According to the Council on Foreign Relations, the incident

“sparked nationwide furor over Indian authorities' lax treatment of sexual violence. After other such incidents surfaced [...] critics began scrutinizing aspects of Indian society that many claim have perpetuated violence and discrimination against women. The high-profile cases called attention to the broader issue of women's rights in India, a nation which ranks eighty-fourth out of 113 countries on the 'Economist's' rankings of women's economic opportunity (Xu, 2013).

Even though the Indian government responded to the tragic incident “by enacting long-overdue reforms to India’s criminal laws to better address gender-based violence” (HRW, 2014b, 334), there remains a “wide gap between laws on the books and their implementation” (Ibid.) in India. Indeed,

“Rape is now the fastest growing crime in the country. In the past four decades, the number of reported rapes has shot up by 792 percent. Conviction rates, however, are dropping. A similar story is found in domestic violence, which has climbed by thirty percent in the same time period. Across the board, crimes against women have been increasing” (Fontanella-Khan, 2013, 264).

In August 2013, the gang rape of a journalist in Mumbai triggered new protests (HRW, 2014b, 334), and in January 2014 yet another shocking incident made international headlines: the public gang-rape of a twenty-year-old woman by as many as twelve men on the orders of tribal elders in a
As a result of the continuing failure of the Indian state to ensure basic women's rights, along with India's vibrant civil society, India is particularly prone to the emergence of self-help and vigilante groups. In this chapter, the activities of two Indian all-female vigilante groups will be analyzed in order to gain insights into the particularities of female vigilantism. The first group that will be analyzed is the “Gulabi Gang”, or “Pink Sari Gang”. Originally from Bundelkhand, Uttar Pradesh, the “gang” has been expanding its activities and has been operating across North India as of 2010 (a). We will then look at the activities of the “Red Brigade”, a group focusing on self-defense techniques whose young members are active in Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh (b).

\[a\] **The Gulabi Gang, Bundelkhand**

*C'mon take your clothes off (chal kapde utaar), my rapist barked at me. He was a high caste man, he followed me into the field. [...] If I tried to run barefoot it would be like running over a field of spikes, the bottom of my feet would have been lacerated... I tried to run on the mud path and not through the field. But the man caught up with me and slammed my head against a tree and then he took me. After he was finished, he spat on me. I was only eighteen. I went to the police, the politicians. Everyone said I had asked for it, going into the fields by myself. I wept a lot and didn't want to go near the pastures again and yet it was our only source of sustenance. My husband finally left me, and he took our boys. I was left with nothing at a young age. [...] Yes, I do go around beating men who attack village girls. You asked me why I joined the Gulabi Gang? So that women after me can walk through the fields with long, fearless strides.\*

– Personal interview with Gulabi Gang member Banwari Devi, 52 (Sen, 2012, 2)

This part of the paper will analyze the activities, strategies, and successes of a group of Indian women vigilantes and activists originally from Bundelkhand, Uttar Pradesh, but reported to be active across North India as of 2010. Because the women wear pink nylon saris for easy recognition, the international press usually refers to them as “Pink Vigilantes”. In India, the group is more often referred to as the “Gulabi Gang” (hereafter “the gang”), gulabi meaning pink in Hindu. Similarly to White and Rastogi, I will argue that media reports about the Gulabi Gang often deliver but superficial representations of the group, which “sensationalize, distort and trivialize their fight for justice” (White and Rastogi, 2009, 324-25). Furthermore, I will demonstrate that he Gulabi Gang, rather than being a group of violence-prone, irrational vigilantes, is best described as a women’s movement “whose participants are expressing their moral and political convictions and protecting their collective sense of integrity by striking back at criminal perpetrators” (Ibid. 318).
Moreover, these women use violence only as a last resort, when more diplomatic means of justice seeking such as mediation and (judicial) counseling have proven ineffective. Finally, they also provide a whole range of other social services to women, and also to men, within their communities that the media mostly maintains silence about.

1) Main sources

I will demonstrate the veracity of these claims by using three recent detailed studies on the Gulabi Gang. In one of these studies, Atreyee Sen, a social anthropologist at the University of Manchester specialized in contemporary urban violence and slum cultures in South Asia, argues that “women's squads operating outside the legal system eventually take recourse to the language of politics and pacifism to gain validity and sustainability as a social movement”. By drawing on the oral testimonies of Gulabi Gang members, her study “highlights how female vigilantism, in most deprived societies, procures a legitimate space when viewed and examined through the model of ethical violence, and related understandings of proportionate punishment for crimes against women” (Sen, 2012, 3).

The second study, which Sen also largely drew on for her analysis, is by Aaronette White, an African American feminist psychologist and women’s rights activist living in the USA, and Shagun Rastogi, an Indian feminist and independent filmmaker living in New Delhi. Through an analysis of news reports and documentary footage on the Gulabi Gang, they “illustrate how women who engage in violent forms of justice-seeking require us to expand social psychological concepts of retributive and restorative models of justice, women’s agency, and community organizing”. Their grassroots feminist analysis is based, like Sen's, on feminist definitions of punishment and ethical violence. In addition, they also include findings of research on perceptions of justice and moral convictions. Finally, they demonstrate that the feminist and liberatory roles of women’s movements play an important part in the reorganization and recovery of individual and community values (White and Rastogi, 2009, 313).

The third and most important source I will use in this sub-chapter is the book “Pink Sari Revolution: A Tale of Women and Power in the Badlands of India“ by Amana Fontanella-Khan (2013). Although it reads more like a novel than an ethnographic study, this book is the result of two years (August 2010 - August 2012) of thorough field research conducted by the author, according to whom, “The version I recount is based on countless interviews, newspaper articles, and press statements”. And, “Much of the dialogue in this book comes from the best recollections of
participants, whom I almost always quote in verbatim” (xi). During her field trips to Bundelkhand, the author spent two months, in August and December 2011, living with the leader of the Gulabi Gang, Sampat Devi Pal, at her family house in Badausa (xiii).

2) Bundelkhand, one of the poorest regions in the world

The region in which the Gulabi Gang operates is Bundelkhand, a blighted area located in the southwestern frontier of Uttar Pradesh, India's largest state, and one of it's most populous ones. According to Fontanella-Khan, few parts of India are “as badly in need of justice as hardscrabble Bundelkhand. [...] If it were a country, it would be the fifth most populous one in the world. But it would also be the poorest; food scarcity there is more severe than in Sub-Saharan Africa” (2013, 12). The author adds that Bundelkhand is “one of the most crime-ridden areas of Uttar-Pradesh”, home to some of the country's most notorious bandits, and has been declared, by the Indian government, to be “lawless” in most of its parts, and among the most “backward” places in the country (Ibid.). What is more, according to Sen, Uttar Pradesh registered one of the highest rates of dowry demands and deaths, and of domestic and sexual violence against village women of all castes over the past few years. Moreover, “the area is also reputed for continuing the practices of child marriage, female infanticide, and son preference; and for the mortality rate of its young brides during childbirth” (Sen, 2012, 3).

The unofficial headquarters of the Gulabi Gang are located in Atarra, “a haphazardly arranged town with a population of 10,700 which is still largely undeveloped” (Fontanella-Khan, 2013, 7). Atarra is one of the six-hundred villages that make up Banda, a district at the heart of the Bundelkhand region of Uttar Pradesh where over twenty percent of the population of 1.6 million belong to the low-caste groups known as Dalits (or untouchables). According to Sen (2012), despite the Indian Constitution prohibiting any form of discrimination against them, high-caste members continue to repress Dalit communities and it is especially rural women who “bear the brunt of poverty, illiteracy, and discrimination in Banda's highly feudalistic society” (3).

3) The birth of the world's largest female vigilante group

The members of the Gulabi Gang, which was founded in this region, confirm this observation made by Sen. According to them, government corruption in the distribution of resources is discriminatory against people considered lower-caste, and one of their aims is to change this (Rastogi and White, 2009, 318). However, the gang “did not emerge in 'political cadre-
land’, but as a response to the harsh needs of illiterate village women on the ground” (Sen, 2012, 3).

Its founder Sampat Pal Devi, a simple woman who, “like most people in Bundelkhand, speaks no English and communicates in Hindi or Bundelkhandi” (Fontanella-Khan, 2013, 16) moved into her Attara office in 2005 in her function as a small-time social worker. With the support of her closest collaborator Jai Prakash Shivare, called Babuji, she organized “self-help groups, a government-sponsored scheme whereby women pool small amounts of money in order to qualify for a government loan” (Ibid., 12). In order to be able to work as a facilitator for this government program, Sampat had founded an NGO, the Tribal Women Upliftment and Empowerment of Women Organization, in 2003 (Ibid.). Sampat eventually “transform[ed] one of her many self-help groups into what would become a nascent vigilante organization” (Ibid.). In fact, Sampat's most committed members, five women from the hamlet of Uraiya Rurva, became the first members of the Gulabi Gang (Ibid., 13-14). According to Sampat's official website, the gang came into being after she had seen a man mercilessly beating his wife, but when she had pleaded with him to stop, he had abused her as well. She decided not to let him get away with this and returned, the next day, with a bamboo stick and the five members of her most dedicated self-help group from Uraiya Rurva. Again according to her website, the news of this incident “spread like wild fire and soon women started approaching Sampat Pal Devi in droves requesting similar interventions. Many women came forward to join her team and in the year 2006 she decided that the sisterhood needed a uniform and a name.”

Following its creation, it took only around five years until the gang had grown into what is now considered to be the world's largest existing women's vigilante group, with a membership of twenty thousand women aged between eighteen and sixty years and belonging to various low-caste groups. This achievement is mainly due to Sampat's successes in battling domestic violence and her travels from village to village where she recruited members by “belting out her repertoire of protest songs” (Prasad, 2008). The gang's members have by now “become folk heroes, winning public support for a series of Robin Hood-style operations” (Ibid.) whose targets are mainly corrupt officials and violent husbands. Sampat's home and the other local Gulabi Gang stations operate as meeting places where women can discuss their problems (Sen, 2012, 4). There are by now fourteen women, called district commanders, who head up district-level Gulabi Gang groups. They handle small cases where it is comparatively easy to come to an understanding, such as family disputes. However, “for the bigger cases where the gang might, for instance, confront senior members of district-level administration”, or “for advice on local cases they are handling”, the local commanders call Sampat (Fontanella-Khan, 2013, 114-15). Sampat, in turn, calls them to spread the word whenever she organizes a protest that gang members need to attend, for “the local

---

4 http://www.gulabigang.in/history.html
Pink Gang members meet only if there is a large protest that requires collaboration between the various branches; otherwise they stay in touch over the phone and operate as separate units” (Ibid., 114).

4) Violence only as a last resort

Nobody comes to our help in these parts. The officials and the police are corrupt and anti-poor. So sometimes we have to take the law in our hands. At other times, we prefer to shame the wrongdoers. [...] Village society in India is loaded against women. It refuses to educate them, marries them off too early, and barters them for money.

– Sampat Pal Devi (Biswas, 2007)

What has made Bundelkhand infamous more than anything else is banditry. In fact, “scores born out of feudalism and caste violence are settled by bullets [and i]t was here that Phoolan Devi, the Bandit Queen of India, used to lead her gang of robbers in vicious acts of retribution on rich, upper-caste villagers” (Prasad, 2008). Mob violence, too, has a long history in India and is a common occurrence in the nation today. Indeed, a well-known technique of protest, that has at times also been used by the Gulabi Gang, is called gherao. During gherao protests,

“the public, driven by a sense that they have no traditional recourse to justice, and no power on their side except their sheer numbers and anger, surround an offending government establishment – an electricity department, a police station, a university, or, in the case of labor disputes, an office or factory– to demand justice” (Fontanella-Khan, 2013, 46).

Gheraos sometimes lead to mob violence, as was the case for one of the most well-known women-led attacks which took place in August 2004 when

“a mob of around two hundred women yielding knives, stones, and chili powder brutally and fatally beat the serial rapist and murderer Akku Yadav in a district court. In a mere fifteen minutes, the mob stabbed Yadav seventeen times, and an alleged victim cut off his penis with a vegetable knife. The women were from a slum called Kasturba Nagar, where Yadav and his gang had allegedly gang-raped murdered, and tormented residents for over a decade, with full knowledge of the police, who residents claimed were working for the criminals. After the slaughter of Yadav, the women collectively declared their guilt in the murder, frustrating police efforts to charge anyone with the crime” (ibid. 46-47).

It is in this particularly violent environment that Gulabi Gang members, feeling that countering violence with violence was the only way they could protect themselves, began to train in techniques of counter-aggression, such as smearing abusive men with chili powder or the using of sticks, called lathis - “a baton usually carried by local policemen when out on patrol” (Sen, 2012, 4). Sampat does not make it a secret that, “To make sure we have the upper hand, we always go with sticks and axes to deal with someone” (Rastogi and White, 2009, 318). In order to justify this, she claims, “To face
down men in this part of the world, you have to use force” (Prasad, 2008). One of the main reasons Sampat and other gang members cite for using violent forms of justice seeking is the corruption of the Indian police, on whom they cannot count to protect them, on the contrary. As Fontanella-Khan (2013) explains:

“In India, the majority of complaints are made by traveling to a police station, as emergency helplines are barely functional or existent. Many ordinary citizens, especially women, enter police stations with a sense of dread and anxiety and often refuse to go after dark. Far too often, newspapers carry reports of sexual molestation, rape, and even murder carried out by officers in stations. One of the stories that recently hit national headlines told of a woman who alleges she was gang-raped by officers after they forced her to drink alcohol. She had gone to the station because she had been told, erroneously, that she had been offered a job” (37).

This shows that, paradoxically, most women in India view the police force as an entity that they need to be protected against, rather than a provider of protection. Deprived of what should be a substantial source of protection for them, and claiming that this is the only way for them to be taken seriously by their male aggressors and oppressors, Gulabi Gang members feel that their recourse to violence is the only option they have left to survive in this environment. According to Fontanella-Khan (2013), “despite their might, the police in Attara have a fearful respect for Sampat, this woman who barges into their station and demands explanations for their actions like a headmistress descending onto a misbehaving classroom” (36). As Sampat herself explains, “A woman on her own would be ineffective. Men would just laugh at her. But when we're in a group, men get nervous. […] Even the local criminals are scared of us” (Biswas, 2007). However, the Gulabi Gang always tries to settle disputes by mediation before they use violence as a last resort. As several members confirmed, when a complaint is lodged, the first thing they do is to jointly agree on a plan of action. The forty years old member Chamania explained why the gang often ends up using violent means to solve disputes, especially between women and their husbands. According to her,

“First we go to the police and beg them to do something. But the administration wont listen to poor people, so we end up taking matters into our own hands. In the case of a wife-beating, for example, should the police refuse to arbitrate, gang members first speak directly to the husband and demand he change his ways. If the man does not relent, gang members then invite his wife to join them in thrashing the husband” (Sen, 2012, 5).

Rastogi and White (2009) explain the problem in more general terms, claiming that

“The majority of the women […] are already excluded from the barely functioning aspects of the judicial systems in their localities. Men’s rights, in practice, supersede the rights of lower-caste women regardless of national and international laws, because of social norms that permit continued discrimination against poor women. Women presented here live under violent circumstances whether they fight back or not; multiple patriarchies inadvertently and repeatedly condone men’s violence against women. As a result, some women disrupt this power dynamic by relearning their propensity for violence” (318).
The very first action that was carried out by only a few dozen members in their pink saris and carrying pink painted sticks took place in 2006. Sampat and “a group of disgruntled women” had convened on Bisandi Road, which was still in a wretched state back then, and had blocked the traffic. The women's loud protest attracted the attention of many passersby so that at the arrival of the district magistrate, whom Sampat had called to show him the state of the roads, the man found himself under pressure to make a promise in front of the crowds that the road would be fixed – which it was (Fontanella-Khan, 2013, 9).

Soon after this first public appearance of the gang, Sampat “organized a dog rally in which she and her newly formed gang gathered dozens of dogs and marched with them down Bisanda Road towards the Atarra police station, where they proclaimed that since the police were corrupt and useless, they should be replaced by the dog police” (Fontanella-Khan, 2013, 227-28). In her quest for social justice, Sampat often employs humiliating tactics, especially when confronting the police against which the use of violent forms of protest would get the gang into too much trouble. For instance, they organize “thoo-thoo rallies”, a form of protest involving spitting, or they put up flyers that discredit police officers (Ibid.).

Also in 2006, the gang stormed an electrical utility company that had been withholding power from the community for more than two weeks, while the electric company kept sending bills to everyone. According to Rastogi and White (2009),

“The women knew that their electricity supply had been disconnected by corrupt officials, in order to extract bribes and sexual favors from them in exchange for restoring it. With no functioning law to fall back on, the members of the Gulabi Gang, on behalf of the local community, took matters into their own hands. With various weapons, mainly long sticks, the women surrounded the electricity company’s headquarters” (318).

“When the civil servants refused to turn the power back on, Sampat bolted their office shut from the outside and locked them in with a padlock” (Fontanella-Khan, 2013, 197). This led them to turn the power back on within an hour in exchange for the key.

In June 2007, Sampat organized an operation against corrupt rations distributors in Atarra who

“were illegally selling government grain, intended for people living below the poverty line, on the black market. [...] Along with other Pink Gang members, she not only collected information on the secret redirection of rationed grain from government warehouses to private ones, but also on two occasions halted trucks suspected of carrying stolen food and raided the home of a ration shop owner who was
hiding grain in his house” (Fontanella-Khan, 2013, 51).

“Armed with their evidence, the gang members pressured the local administration to seize the grain and hand over the shop owner to the police. But when local authorities refused to register the case, angry gang members assaulted one of the police officers. This incident immensely bolstered the Gulabi Gang's credibility in the region” (Sen, 2012, 6).

Another important concern of the gang involves love marriages, which “have become a highly contentious battleground on which some of the country's most pernicious practices play out: caste discrimination and the dowry system.” This is because “people falling in love and marrying outside of their caste threaten the entire system [and] undermine the dowry culture” (Fontanella-Khan, 2013, 125), since the bride's family does not have to pay anything in the case of a love marriage. One of the Gulabi Gang's most important actions consists of marrying young people who fall in love and mediating between their families. This is very important because,

“Couples whose love marriage is officiated by the Pink Gang stand better chances of having their union accepted in society than those who do it alone. In India, it is communal acceptance that truly validates a marriage, and this is what the Pink Gang is able to offer couples whose parents and relatives have denied their right to marry: the Pink Gang publically stands by them during their nuptials, thereby backing their choice and dissuading people from harassing the newlyweds, as is often the case” (Fontanella-Khan, 2013, 126).

However, “Even though a majority of the gang's cases concern marital violence, dowry demands, and (or) abusive in-laws, they also address land disputes, resolve neighborhood skirmishes, and help poor women procure socio-economic benefits, ranging from school admissions to acquiring food cards” (Sen 2012, 5). These activities suggest that violent protests fill only a small part of the gang's agenda. Rather, it “offers all-round support to both rural men and women, looking after the latter's basic needs while helping them regain a sense of security in their everyday lives” (Ibid.). This claim is further supported by the fact that the gang has many “unofficial lawyers”, who have helped Sampat fight countless battles on a pro bono basis. Thanks to this, the gang is able to provide poor people with judicial counseling and to accompany them in court if necessary (Fontanella-Khan, 2013, 188). As Fontanella-Khan underlines,

“Sampat made it a point to accompany women, and sometimes men, to meet with lawyers for legal aid, negotiating hard on their behalf to get the legal fees down, as most people who came to the Pink Gang for help lived below the poverty line. If the beneficiaries still could not pay the fees, then the Pink Gang members often pooled together money to help” (2013, 189-90).

One notorious example for this took place in January 2011, when the gang helped seventeen-year-old Sheelu Nishad, “who had been gang-raped by a group of men, including a member of the local legislature” (Sen, 2012, 6). When the victim went to file a case, she found out that “her attackers
had already called the police, accusing her of theft” (Ibid.) and was arrested. In response, the gang organized a campaign for Sheelu, part of which were demonstrations in front of the police station and the legislator's house. The gang's effective intervention ultimately led to the rapist's arrest, while Sheelu received broad public attention and monetary compensations from several political parties (Fontanella-Khan, 2013, 233-58; Sen, 2012, 6).

6) The media's over-emphasis on the gang's violence-proneness

All of this shows that “media reports of vigilante groups obscure the socio-historical and political complexities that underlie vigilante behavior, instead emphasizing only the violent acts, particularly the most extreme cases (Rastogi and White, 2009, 314). For instance, Sampat gets mentioned in local newspapers on a daily basis, but “Almost all of the articles feature a picture of Sampat, usually armed with a raised stick, her mouth open in a mid-protest shout, and with a large sea of women in pink behind her” (Fontanella-Khan, 2013, 181). However, as Sampat stated in a news interview, “We are not a gang in the usual sense of the term; we are a gang for justice” (Biswas, 2007). As we have seen, even though the gang is notorious for its “violent vigilantism [that] poses a direct challenge to state officials and the government machinery” (Sen, 2012, 6), violence is only one of their diverse means of action – but it is the one that is put forward by the media. More than that, the media's influence is the very reason why the group was labeled a “gang” in the first place. In fact, when Sonia Gandhi, the head of the Gandhi-Nehru political dynasty, asked Sampat why they used the word gang, her answer was: “We beat up a policeman and the media called us gang. Since then the name has stuck and cannot be changed” (Fontanella-Khan, 2013, 155). The discrepancy between the way in which the Gulabi Gang is portrayed by the media, and the way its members see themselves was summed up very well by Sen (2012) who explained:

“the gang's trust is formally called the Adivasi Mahila Utthan Gram Udyog Seva Sansthan (tribal-womens advancement and village-development service organization) and yet very few people (a) know the gang by any other official name and (b) refer to the women as providers of service or seva. [...] [The gang members say] they don't follow hierarchies, are treated as equals, pursue a common goal of removing corruption, and cannot be labeled anti-social. [...] [To them] it is imperative for the general public to understand the importance and vitality of operating as a collective; to increase the self-worth of rural women, while at the same time fighting off the backlash from incensed husbands and corrupt officials. [...] [Sampat] highlights the significance of mass violence perpetrated by poor women as a social necessity, and not as a whimsical expression of raw justice. Over time, she has attempted to distance the gang from being tagged as a contingent of crude male-bashers, and has fostered its status as a harbinger of social development. 'We don't use violence much anymore', she said. 'Now just our name and [the fact] that [they know] we are coming are enough' (6-7).

As a result of this effort to foster the gang's status as a harbinger of social development, “vernacular newspapers finally shied away from calling the Gulabis a crudely violent gang [...] which enabled
the vigilantes to move away from their image as deliverers of rough, illegal justice toward an image of them as rural women and precursors of social change” (Ibid., 7).

7) Local support for the Gulabi Gang

It is important to note, however, that the communities of Bundelkhand have hardly ever criticized the gang for choosing violent means of action, amongst others. Indeed, “Even though the gang carrie[s] out violence against abusive husbands and corrupt officials (usually men), they ha[ve] acquired the sympathy of most villagers” (Sen, 2012, 8), some of whom “have socially and financially benefited from gang activities [and] now openly support their Gulabi wives, sisters, mothers and grandmothers” (Ibid., 9). Fontanella-Khan (2013) confirms this claim, writing that,

"Instead of the public condemning Sampat, politicians, journalists, and large portions of civil society applauded her and the Pink Gang. The Hindustan Times, an English-language paper, wrote that her gang played a 'pivotal role in uplifting the status of women.' The most significant encouragement she received came from the powerful Indian National Congress, the political party that has been in government for most of India's post-independence era” (47-48).

The public's positive reaction to the gang's activities is important for two reasons. First, because a vigilante group that functions without any institutional backing needs to retain the sympathy of the common people in order to gain legitimacy. Second, because the public's decision to support the gang proves that it is being perceived as contributing to the improvement of the living conditions in those communities in which it operates. Furthermore, as Sen (2012) put it, “the popularity of the Gulabis […] suggests the limits of the women's capacity, however subjugated, to tolerate sexual violence and social classifications” (9) and the gang's “gamut of actions (and not just violent vigilantism) underline the long-term, collective vision of rural women to position and reposition themselves between various discourses of justice, and subsequently remain alive in public memory” (Ibid., 11).

8) Conclusions

To sum up, Sampat and the members of her “gang” have a deep concern for each other and the members of their communities. It is necessary for them to use violent means of action in order to gain credibility in a particularly violent environment, but these make up only a small part of their activities. In fact, they offer a range of services that is often ignored by sensationalized news reports. The women of the Gulabi Gang

“view their violence as a form of self-defense against disrespect for an individual woman, the entire moral
community of poor women and, by extension, poor people. Local citizens often trust the Gulabi Gang [...] because [it] assist[s] those who do not receive the same legal protection as upper-caste citizens” (Rastogi and White, 2009, 323).

I agree with Rastogi and White's (2009) conclusion that the Gulabi Gang, a so-called vigilante group, actually represents “women with grassroots feminist sensibilities, offering psychological, social and justice-related assistance to poor women who have been failed by the local state’s judiciary system” (314). The reasons that Gulabi Gang members cite for engaging in violent activities “reveal their decisions to be rational, community-oriented informed choices, despite the media’s inclination to portray them as irrational, spontaneous mob violence” (Ibid.). The gang's acts of violence are legitimate because they are carried out in a specific political context where local judiciaries fail to protect women against gross human rights abuses. The gang’s vigilante violence can therefore fall under the category of “ethical” use of violence (Ibid., 316).

I furthermore agree with Sen's (2012) conclusion that the Gulabi Gang's success is a proof of “the power of informal women's collectives to implement change without elite intervention or leadership” (10). And although “vigilantism may have been the immediate choice available to Banda women surviving violence-prone rural societies,” the gang members, through their public actions, also “received exposure to other possibilities and spaces for sustaining militant activism [...] finally occupying a number of other democratic spaces,” for instance by entering politics (Ibid.). It was indeed “important for the gang to partially distance itself from violence, use the secular language of human rights, and to accept the support of rural men in order to lend ethical legitimacy to their collective actions” (Ibid.).

**b) The Red Brigade, Lucknow**

*In a dusty, run-down neighborhood on the outskirts of Lucknow, the capital of one of India’s poorest and most conservative states, Uttar Pradesh, a vigilante group is making a name for itself.*

*But these are no ordinary vigilantes.*

*They're girls - mainly teenagers - who patrol their local streets protecting women and girls from sexual harassment. In their matching black and red black salwar kameez - the traditional garb worn by women across South Asia - they target offending males who have over-stepped the mark.*

– Armstrong, 2013

As this extract from an article by Paul Armstrong (CNN) points out, the thing that is most striking about the Red Brigade of Lucknow is how young its committed members are. Aged from fourteen to nineteen years, the group's core members claim they have trained three-thousand women...
in self-defense in the past year (Lakshmi, 2014). Due to their young age, the members of the Red Brigade are more familiar with, and attach more importance to, new information technologies and social media than other female vigilante groups. As a result, they have an up to date web page, blog, and Facebook account, which makes it easy to find information about their goals and recent activities.

1) The birth of an unusual vigilante group

According to its official website, the Red Brigade was formed “out of necessity” in the northern Indian city of Lucknow, three-hundred miles south-east of Delhi. Its founder, Usha Vishwakarma, created the group in November 2010, when she could not bare the deplorable situation of violence against women and impunity of the perpetrators in her community anymore. Working as a teacher, she was only eighteen years old when she was sexually assaulted by a colleague (Chamberlain, 2013). Although she managed to fight the aggressor off, she was shocked by the fact that, when she tried to report the incident, “no one seemed to care”, not even the local police (Armstrong, 2013). “This really upset me. It really affected me – I would see any man in the street and would get upset and angry,” she told CNN (Ibid.). Her anger then turned into the urge to take long-overdue action against this situation when she learned that „all of her students had experienced some form of abuse – from lewd comments and cat-calls, to molestation and rape [and m]any of the girls said they were afraid to go out alone for fear of being groped or worse“ (Ibid.). This “was threatening to wreck the chances of her young female students” (Chamberlain, 2013), since their parents told them to stay at home instead of going to school where boys would cause them trouble. Once founded, the Red Brigade quickly grew popular with many of the city's young girls “who started pouring in with complaints” (Krishna, 2013). Most of them lived in Mediayon, the neighborhood where Vishwakarma's home and school are located, and the most dangerous part of Lucknow (Blume, 2013). As a result,

“From a core membership of fifteen [...] they now have more than one hundred members, intelligent and sassy and with a simple message for the men who have made their lives a misery: they will no longer tolerate being groped, gawped at and worse [...] They all have stories of abuse, attempted rapes and daily harassment” (Chamberlain, 2013).

2) Activities and violence-proneness

According to its leader Vishwakarma, the idea when the Red Brigade was formed was that its members “would not just complain”, but fight for themselves (Ibid.). So they bought red shirts

5 http://redbrigade-lucknow.com/home.html
and black trousers as a sign of recognition and started to get organized. They chose red and black because these colors stand for danger and for protest, respectively (Ibid.). However, it is important to note that the Brigade's “fighting back” against rape culture actually involves very little physical violence against men. The regular activities of the group involve demonstrations and self-defense classes – not beating up alleged perpetrators of violence against women. According to their blog, the Red Brigade organize protests on the twenty-ninth day of every month, in commemoration of Damini, the young girl who died in the Delhi bus rape on December 29th 2012. Every month, they choose one specific topic related to sexual violence for their protest, and they carry placards with slogans such as: “Stop rape” and “We want safety” written on them in English and Hindi. In addition to this, they participate in regular martial arts classes offered to them for free by a local Kung Fu instructor, who “drills them in several techniques, from punching and kicking, to breaking the hold of an attacker approaching from behind” (Armstrong, 2013). Again in response to the Delhi gang rape, the Brigade's members began offering self-defense training to other girls in 2013 (Lakshmi, 2014). On the occasion of the “One Billion Rising” on February 14th 2014, the group even scheduled a mega-class aimed at attracting hundreds of participants. According to Vishwakarma, the group trained about seven-hundred young women on this day, mostly students from Lucknow’s schools and colleges, who responded very enthusiastically to the lessons (Lakshmi, 2014).

According to its official website, the Red Brigade is “an organization dedicated to empowering women to stand against their attackers through the skillful use of marshal arts”. Its founder underlines that the Brigade's main goal is to teach their community about the devastating effects of violence against their daughters, sisters, and mothers through advocacy, demonstration, and education. In order to reach this aim, the group “presents self-defense demonstrations at colleges and public gatherings and participate[s] in seminars and conferences on sexual violence”. As a long-term goal, the group wants to build a center that will “provide a safe home for victims of sexual violence; hold workshops on gender discrimination, sexual violence and legal services; train women in the art of self-defense; and offer computer and general education classes for victims of sexual violence and impoverished children”. Until then, the Red Brigade already “provides a lot of support on gender issues, sexuality and health [and] even helps younger children to attend school” (Armstrong, 2013). They also support rape victims who dare to speak up and help them to fight

---

6 The “One Billion Rising” campaign is part of the “V-Day” movement that was established on Valentines Day 1998 by Eve Ensler with a group of female activists in New York City. The movement has since become global and demands an end to violence against women and girls. In 2012, the movement decided to organize a worldwide day of peaceful uprisings once per year on Valentines Day.

their cases in court (Bakshi and Banerjee, 2013). Another way in which the girls try to sensitize their community to gender issues such as boy preference is by performing theater plays (Blume, 2013).

Also according to their website, “The women of the Red Brigade walk the streets of their village in teams, taunting men who harass women”. This shows that, in addition to self-defense classes and demonstration, one way in which the Brigade tries to educate their community is indeed by confronting men who harass women. However, the focus here is on public humiliation, not physical violence. In fact, what the female members of the Red Brigade do is to form groups of four or five and to “approach males deemed to be harassing a girl and order them to stop [and if] the perpetrator refuses to heed their warning, they punish him by mocking him publicly” (Armstrong, 2013). This strategy, also used by the Gulabi Gang, is very effective in male-dominated societies such as India's. As Vishwakarma points out, “The whole idea is to humiliate [the perpetrators]. We are well within our rights – this is self-defense. The police are not supportive so we have to defend ourselves” (Ibid.).

However, the Red Brigade also admit to violent vigilantism. Indeed, Vishwakarma said that the girls have been forced to resort to violence on more than one occasion (Ibid.) and affirmed, “Yes, we believe in public thrashing of people who indulge in physical exploitation of women or sexual abuse with minor girls” (Bakshi and Banerjee, 2013). One such occasion was when “One local boy used to publicly boast that he could force any girl to have sex with him – whenever he wanted” (Krishna, 2013). When the girls' remonstrations went unheeded, they “lifted him in the air for everyone to see and gave him the beating of his life” (Ibid.). Pooja, Vishwakarma's eighteen-year-old sister, recounted the situation: “We all stopped and turned round and we surrounded him and grabbed his arms and legs and he thought it was a joke, but we were not kidding and four of us lifted him in the air and the others started to hit him with their shoes and fists” (Chamberlain, 2013). As Vishwakarma explained,

“I tell people we don’t want to wait for society to reform, for male attitudes to change, for the police to arrive and act, and for our fathers, brothers and husbands to protect us. Instead we must focus our efforts on making ourselves physically and mentally strong to hit back” (Lakshmi, 2014).

To conclude, there clearly is a potential that members of the Red Brigade will continue to use physical violence against perpetrators of violence against them, either in self-defense, or in order to prevent future attacks.
3) Mixed reactions to the group's activities

The community's reaction to the creation of the Red Brigade is mixed and has changed over time. When the girls first “started walking around the neighborhood […]], pledging to protect women, men would mock them” (Lakshmi, 2014). Afreen Khan, a seventeen-year-old high-school student and member of the group pointed out that “Some neighbors say all this fighting, kicking and wrestling is men’s work” (Ibid.). Vishwakarma's mother, too, admitted that she had reservations when Vishwakarma and her two other daughters, Afreen and Pooja, decided to fight back against male aggression. She said: “I was scared initially […]]. There was also a lot of pressure from within the neighborhood that [Vishwakarma] should not be doing what she was. Because she would hold meetings late at night, people would say 'your daughter is not coming back home until late at night, which is not good’” (Ibid.). When Afreen experienced an attempted rape and wanted to report it to the police, her mother discouraged her from doing so, scared that this could destroy her daughter's reputation and career (Blume, 2013). Although some of the members' parents are supportive, others are convinced that the young girls “are wasting their lives” (Chamberlain, 2013). As the sixteen-year-old member Simpi Diwari complained, “The attitude of my parents is very demoralizing. I want to be like Usha, fighting against the cruel things, I want to be a teacher and a motivator too, but I am fighting with my parents just to be allowed out of the house” (Ibid.).

However, as a news report by the CNN⁷ points out, “The group has faced opposition from the community when it was formed […]], but much has changed in India since the deadly gang-rape of a student in New-Delhi” (2013). As Vishwakarma explains in the short documentary, “That incident has brought about a landmark change in the women here. Those who would normally go into hiding whenever such an incident happened are now coming out to protest.” Another news report by Al Jazeera⁸ confirms this. As the moderator points out, “Over the past few months, [the Red Brigade's] popularity and reputation have grown well beyond the slum area they live in. People in nearby villages are now asking for their help in dealing with not only harassment but also more serious sexual crime”. The example that Al Jazeera gives for the form of help that people are now asking for is assistance in rape victims' court cases. But even just registering a rape case is often a problem in low-caste communities, so the Red Brigade's leader has to step in when the police refuses to register a case. “The group is now being seen by many in their community as heroic”, according to Al Jazeera.

⁸ http://www.aljazeera.com/video/asia/2013/05/2013517142713612575.html
The claim that more and more members of the community are now supportive of the Red Brigade's activities was proven by the presence of hundreds of girls and women at the event organized by the group on February 14th this year. Vishwakarma's mother, too, has changed her mind about her daughters' activities. She said that some community members encouraged her to let Vishwakarma do what she felt was right and that she “now feel[s] what they are doing is good and helping to bring a lot of change - many boys who used to harass girls no longer do so because they are scared” (Lakshmi, 2014). In addition to the nation-wide protests triggered by the Delhi bus rape, an important factor that led to the social acceptance of the girls' – sometimes violent – actions was most probably the national and international attention that the group received during the past two years. In fact, well-known newspapers and magazines such as the Times of India, Outlook, and the Hindustan Times in India, as well as the Guardian, the Washington Post, the German TAZ and others printed detailed articles on the Red Brigade, while TV channels such as the CNN, Al Jazeera, the German ARD, and the Australian ABC included reports on the group in their news programs. It is very likely that people in Lucknow were impressed with the fact that these young girls attracted so much attention and that international journalists visited the community in order to interview them.

Even if some of their protests might not attract very many people, for Vishwakarma, the Red Brigade is definitely making a difference. According to her, “Those who were voiceless before – the girls – now have a voice. Now they speak for themselves and are emboldened” (Armstrong, 2013). Most of the journalists who have reported on the Red Brigade so far agree with this conclusion, that is, that the impact of the Red Brigade's vigilantism on women in the region is one of empowerment. In fact, Chamberlain (2013) concludes that “Their activities are a lesson in empowerment”, while Krishna (2013) comments:

“Such vigilantism has helped banish some of the powerlessness that grips victims of sexual violence, filling the girls of [the] Red Brigade with a greater sense of confidence. Now, emboldened by their success, they want to start similar movements in every ward in Lucknow. Through workshops on legal rights, sexuality and martial arts, [the] Red Brigade is spreading its message of empowerment - one woman at a time”.
II – Female vigilantism in Mexico

According to Amnesty International's “The State of the World's Human Rights” report's section on Mexico:

“Violence against women and girls, including beatings, rape, abduction and murder, was widespread in many states. Legislation to prevent and punish violence was not enforced effectively and the training of officials on dealing appropriately with gender-based crimes was not adequately monitored to ensure compliance. Despite commitments to improve investigation of gender-based violence, new police investigation protocols were not introduced during the year and perpetrators usually evaded justice. Protection orders remained inoperative in many states and victims faced continued threats. The government's public security policy and high levels of criminal violence reportedly led some authorities to pay less attention to gender-based violence. Some states introduced the crime of “feminicide” (gender-based killing of women), but much state level legislation continued to be inconsistent with international human rights obligations” (2013a, 180).

The deplorable situation of violence against women and impunity of the perpetrators of the crimes described above is largely facilitated by the ongoing Mexican “War on Drugs”, which has created an atmosphere of everyday violence, chaos, and impunity in large parts of Mexico. In fact, in addition to drug trafficking and abuse itself, it is mainly the drug control policies Mexico has adopted that have deteriorated the human rights situation in the country. A growing number of scholars, such as Marianna Olinger, a researcher associated with Observatório das Metrópoles in Rio De Janeiro, argue “that the scale of armed violence in Latin America warrant[s] consideration as a humanitarian issue” (OCHA, 2012). She underlines that while situations in countries such as Mexico “[a]re not classified as armed conflicts under international law, the impacts [a]re similar resulting in displacement, sexual violence, and other issues of humanitarian concern” (Ibid.).

The Human Rights Watch “World Report 2014”, too, expresses concern about the Human Rights abuses caused by the War on Drugs. It states:

“Upon taking office in December 2012, President Enrique Peña Nieto acknowledged that the 'war on drugs' launched by predecessor Felipe Calderon had led to serious abuses by the security forces. In early 2013, the administration said that more than 26,000 people had been reported disappeared or missing since 2007—a problem it called a 'humanitarian crisis' — and promulgated broad legislation aimed at ensuring victims’ rights” (2014b, 265).

However, despite the new legislation, the Mexican criminal justice system “routinely fails to provide justice to victims of violent crimes and human rights violations” (Ibid., 268), which is due to “corruption, inadequate training and resources, and the complicity of prosecutors and public defenders” (Ibid.), amongst other things. Moreover, HRW investigations confirm Amnesty International's (2013a) finding that Mexican women and girls are not adequately protected against
sexual and domestic violence. Particularly, HRW criticizes “provisions that make the severity of punishments for some sexual offenses contingent on the 'chastity' of the victim” (2014b, 269), which contradicts international standards. More generally, HRW reports that women and girls who have suffered domestic or sexual violence in most cases do not report such incidents to authorities, and when they do, “generally face suspicion, apathy, and disrespect” (Ibid., 269-70).

In Mexico, violence against women and the way in which its victims and officials react to it are strongly related to cultural norms regarding gender roles. According to Katherine Pantaleo, “a number of sociocultural factors created an environment conducive to violence against women” (2010, 351) in Mexico. She further explains:

“Under the view of patriarchy, two expressions are commonly used in Mexico to show the difference in status of males and females; these expressions are machismo and marianismo. Male power and aggression is symbolized by [machismo], whereas the domestic and inferior nature of women is symbolized by marianismo. […] Marianismo is important because it “promotes self-sacrifice for family” (Fuller, 2004) and is a key part of a woman’s role and her femininity. The symbolism associated with the female role requires that women become self-sacrificing martyrs who accept violence and abuse from men because of their inferiority to them (Dreby, 2006)” (Ibid.).

In response to the years of violence, disappearances, killings, and impunity, more and more Mexicans have come together in a broad-based movement which aims to end the War on Drugs. They are now hundreds of thousands of Mexicans, many of whom have lost family members or friends. However, the failure of law enforcement by Mexican authorities has contributed not only to the creation of this large grassroots movement, but also to the emergence of new armed citizen self-defense groups, known as “autodefensas”, in some parts of the country (HRW, 2004 b, 268). Most of the members of these groups are vigilantes who claim that they are doing the job that Mexican authorities have failed to do for years, and often perpetrate violent acts of retribution against members of organized crime groups. At least one of these vigilante groups is an all-female group and will be presented in more detail in part b) of this chapter.

In this context, it is important to note that the depiction of female fighters in Mexico is influenced by the country's history of inequality between men and women. Due to the machismo/marianismo duality described above, the status of women fighters has never had a secure place in Mexican society. A good illustration of this can be found in the depiction of women in the Mexican Revolution. As Delia Fernández (2009) demonstrates in her work “From Soldadera to Adelita: The Depiction of Women in the Mexican Revolution”:

“The idea of participating in the Revolution was liberating in itself because it meant the women were not
forced to stay at home in their traditional gendered roles. Although some women performed the same
tasks on the battlefield as they did in the home, it was by their choice. Soldaderas also fought valiantly
alongside the men in every rank of both the Federal Army and the revolutionary forces. They became
feared soldiers and advanced through the ranks, some even becoming generals. Though many women
 gained acclaim for their accomplishments on the battlefield, their efforts were soon forgotten or
misrepresented after the Revolution. Women's actions on the battlefield were framed in such a way so
that they fit with societal expectations. As soldaderas, women posed a threat to the male’s dominant
position in society. Assertiveness, bravery, and violence were male attributes, and their presence in
women made many men uncomfortable. Thus, men began to portray soldaderas in a non-threatening way
by emphasizing the female soldiers’ beauty and depicting them as objects of desire. The image of the
strong women fighters was neutralized in such a way that coincided with males’ expectations of women”
(62).

In this part of the paper, we will first look at a female grassroots movement that formed in Ciudad
Juárez long before the War on Drugs was announced by the Mexican government, but grew stronger
with the beginning of that “war” (a). We will then take a closer look at women in the armed citizen
self-defense and police groups that recently formed in Guerrero and Michoacán in response to drug
cartel violence (b).

a) ¡Ni Una Más! - women's grassroots organizing in Ciudad Juárez

1) The longest epidemic of femicidal violence in modern history

As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, over five hundred women and girls have been
found brutally murdered on the El Paso/Juárez border since May 1993, and thousands more have
been reported missing and remain unaccounted for. Approximately one third of the murdered
women fit what became the femicide formatted profile: in their teens, poor, thin with long hair, and
exhibiting grotesque signs of torture before death. However, “[m]unicipal and state police
demonstrated little interest in finding the killers, solving the crimes, or preventing future violence”
(Staudt, 2009a, 107-8), and the crimes have gone unpunished and unresolved by Mexican
authorities, thus creating “the longest epidemic of femicidal violence in modern history” on an
increasingly globalized U.S.-Mexico border (Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán, 2010, 1-3). What is
worse, there are signs that this “epidemic” is spreading rather than being brought under control.
Indeed, according to Amnesty International's “The State of the World's Human Rights” report of
2013:

“In the first three months of 2012, at least 13 bodies of young women and girls were discovered in the
Valle de Juárez district outside Ciudad Juárez. Seven bodies were reportedly identified as those of girls
aged between 15 and 17 who had been abducted in central Ciudad Juárez (2013a, 180).

Most scholars describe the ongoing series of murders of women that is taking place in Juárez as
falling under the category of “femicides”. According to the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women femicide involves

“All the violent deaths of women which implied intention in the execution of these acts [including] serial sexual murders, deaths due to domestic violence or family violence, deaths framed within the scope of actions of the organized crime, prostitution, drug trafficking, women trafficking, sexual exploitation of children” (Meza Tananta, 2008, 1).

According to Radford and Russell (1992), “femicide is the killing of women qua women, often condoned by, if not sponsored, by the state and/or by religious institutions”. In this definition, the murder of women clearly implies a sense of superiority and empowerment over women. In order to understand why these crimes continue to happen, one must attend, amongst others, to the impact of drug traffic and the ongoing War on Drugs. In fact, according to Campbell and Staudt (2008), “[a]ny explanation for the femicides must take into account [...] the corrupting effects of drug trafficking/drug abuse on the political system and everyday life”. The most important effect with regards to the murder of women is probably that of the condition of impunity which has been created by the pervasive influence of drug cartels (Mueller, Hansen and Qualtire, 2009, 128).

In addition to the influence of drug cartels on law enforcement, most observers of the femicides in Juárez cite the free trade zone with its maquilas that hire young women from the economically threatened interior of Mexico as one of the main underlying causes for the situation in Juárez (Ibid., 127). However, my concern in this part of the paper is not with the causes of femicide, but with the efforts by civil society and vigilante groups to bring it to an end.

2) The birth of the movement

There are at least two, if not more, stories about femicide in Ciudad Juárez. One is about the victims: the tragic deaths of hundreds of women. The other story is about civil society activism, an energy that is vital to deepening democracy and creating accountable governments.

– Campbell and Staudt, 2008

As of 1993, the shocking situation in the El Paso/Juárez border region has led to the “formation of grassroots movements and activist groups designed to put pressure on authorities to take action and/or empower women to help themselves in the face of official incompetence, indifference, or corruption” (Messmer, 2012). As Kathleen Staudt underlines (2009b), the formation of this evolving social movement is closely related to “[b]order residents' fatigue with the persistent neglect of gender-based violence [that] is now evident everywhere, as the gruesome femicides of Ciudad Juárez stimulated awareness of misogyny and everyday ineffective law enforcement.
institutions that are hardly touched by border security wars” (1).

The social movement in Juárez first came to life thanks to the organizing and networking of the mothers of victims of femicide and other local grassroots activists affected by the crimes. Thanks to their efforts, the Juárez femicides have not only started to make national and international headlines in Mexico, the United States and around the world, but they have also “prompted a wide range of cultural and media responses on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border” (Gaspar de Alba and Guzmán, 2010, 3). As Marietta Messmer (2012) shows in her analysis of these sources, several of them “regard the femicides not merely as a Mexican problem but as a structural and highly significant transborder issue that has its roots in the region’s current political and economic developments, as well as its pervasive social and cultural changes”.

However, in spite of journalists, activists, artists and celebrities desperately trying to raise awareness of the issue, the situation in Juárez seems to be worsening while attention to it keeps declining. Since 1993, mothers of the victims who organized to seek justice have been followed by more and more human rights, feminist and other grassroots activists from Mexico, the United States, local and national NGOs, and international NGOs and Organizations, with names as well reputed as Amnesty International, V-Day International, Oxfam, and Human Rights Watch supporting smaller activist groups, but their efforts do not seem to have changed much about the situation on the ground.

3) The local all-female grassroots movement of Juárez

*We are humble women who live in the colonias of Chihuahua [...]. We are mothers of young women who have disappeared. Some of us have finally found our daughters: raped, murdered, and disposed of anywhere. Others of us are still looking for our daughters. We are united today in our suffering, suffering loss of a daughter or the terrible anxiety of not knowing where our daughters are [...]. Along with our desperation, our pain, and our anxiety at having lost a daughter; or of not knowing what has happened to her, we have to add the mistreatment we have incurred at the hands of investigating officials.*

– Simmons, 2006, 517

This is an extract from an open letter by members of “Justicia Para Nuestras Hijas”, a group of mothers of girls who either disappeared or were murdered in Juárez. It provides a good summary of the main characteristics and concerns of grassroots women’s movements in Juárez: they are lower and middle-class women who network and organize to press for police action on locating and stopping the killers of young women in Juárez and who denounce and draw attention to the prevailing impunity of the perpetrators of these crimes. In the early 1990s, when disturbing trends
in women-killing emerged, academic and middle-class activists began building an evidence base for subsequent dissemination, while mourning mothers began to form groups in order to find either their daughters or their murderers, as well as to “share personal stories about their daughters' tragic deaths and their own experiences with the police: sent from office to office; asked for bribes to pursue cases; told that evidence was lost or misplaced; and worse yet, threatened” (Staudt, 2008, 81).

The way in which victims' mothers started to organize and network in Juárez bears a striking resemblance to that of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, since in both cases, mothers of disappeared young women (and men in Argentina) came to recognize and know each other as they tried to get official help in locating their missing children. “On their rounds from one police station to another, [they] gradually came to realize that their concerns were not isolated but part of a more general pattern of oppression” (Mueller, Hansen & Qualtire, 2009, 128), and they eventually became internationally famous for their tireless and courageous efforts, and especially for opposing an oppressive political system that has attempted to thwart these efforts (Ibid.). Even though victims' mothers' groups in Juárez have their own names\(^9\), identities, strategies, and styles, they all engage in similar activities, such as conducting their own investigations, putting up flyers of the missing, publishing lists of murder victims, organizing rallies and protests, seeking audiences with state and national officials, marching to police headquarters and to the state attorney general's office in order to demand more aggressive investigations, holding vigils, searching the desert and fields and ditches for evidence, and, among those with internet access, using electronic mail in web-based organizing. As a result of these activities,

“symbols, slogans, and sharp discourse began to emerge. ¡Ni Una Más! became a rallying cry at marches and on signs. 'Femicide' became the language of choice to refer to female murders, evoking more emotional response than the word 'homocide' [...] [and a] quiet public presence that reminded Juarenses of police infamy and impunity popped up on telephone poles, main arterial streets, and walls all over the city: quasi-religious icons of pink and black crucifixes, which ultimately became movement colors” (Staudt, 2008, 82).

In addition to this, mothers also “reached out to unions and human rights and feminist groups in Juárez and Mexico” (Mueller, Hansen & Qualtire, 2009, 128), as a result of which middle-class activists submitted legal complaints on law enforcement neglect, incompetence, and intimidation to Mexico's Comisión Nacional para los Derechos Humanos (Staudt, 2008, 84). However, it is important to note that even if much of the local activism in Ciudad Juárez focuses on the murders of border women in the Juárez desert, middle-class women's organizations also attach a lot of

\(^9\) Voces sin Eco, Mujeres de Negro, Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa, Mujeres por Juárez among others.

importance to showing the border to be an economically and politically exploited community (Peña, 2007, 4), as well as to bringing broader meaning to the victimization of border women. Indeed, activists highlight that “violence against border women reveals a deeper interplay between economic explanations, racism, and sexism” (Ibid., 95), and they regard femicides and other instances of violence against women as symptoms of larger problems. By linking the murders to broader border and women's issues, women's groups challenge the notion that social life can be divided into public and private realms (Ibid., 95-96). As a result of this, they focus on issues that are intrinsic to the border, call for government intervention and more women's shelters, and rally women around the root causes of violence against them.

4) Local Nongovernmental organizations

According to Milagros Peña (2007), there are two basic types of NGOs:

“those that channel resources and administer projects funded and shaped by the strategies of organizations like [USAID] and those who are supported by nongovernmental actors like philanthropic foundations and are more committed to grassroots organizations. These more 'nongovernmental' NGOs, which are more likely to have evolved from protest or resistance groups, are the ones that tend to link themselves to and become part of women's movements (6).”

In the case of Ciudad Juárez, the second type of NGOs described by Peña prevails, and the emergence of disturbing trends in women-killing led not only to a shift in the topics that these NGOs were working on, but also to the founding of several new NGOs when women's groups became more organized. Because of their close link and cooperation, most of the activities and strategies of these NGOs are similar to those of local women's groups described above. The main activities of local NGOs are aimed at drawing attention to the situation in Juárez by organizing protests, conducting petition drives, and raising money for the victims' families (Simmons, 2006, 493). Moreover, local NGOs in Juárez have carried over and deepened the slogan “the personal is political” coined by feminists and particularly relevant in the case of the Juárez femicide because:

“families who have lost loved ones to violence in the Juárez desert are met with NGOs who see their cause as a community crisis. In making these connections grassroots women have transformed the women's movement. [...] For border Latinas, violence against women is not just a women's personal matter; it is a matter for all women. [...] If women's issues were simply viewed as personal matters, it would cripple our capacity to analyze women's status in the family and in civil society, impeding our global understanding of the root causes of inequality and victimization” (Peña, 2007, 96-97).

Because NGOs in Juárez view violence against women as a symptom of larger problems, they address multiple issues that are of importance to women in the area including
“the marginalization of women by a patriarchal system of dominance; the increasing number of single women who head households and raise families while under- or unemployed; abuse of low-income workers that affects women in particular ways; and health, environmental, and other issues that link women to larger human-rights concerns” (Ibid., 25).

In order to address these issues, most of the NGOs in Juárez have adopted strategies that involve building self-esteem in women and contributing to empowering women in the area, for example through specific workshops or by calling them to community organizing. Thereby, they “nurture spaces where the personal and political awaken not only gender consciousness but also commitment to social activism, and where coalitions and alliances can be forged through organizing” (Ibid., 20).

In addition to this, by linking violence against women to broader societal problems, NGOs justify their call for government intervention. Another strategy that some local NGOs in Juárez pursue is to focus on service and judicial support. For example, Esther Chávez Cano, a well-renowned activist in the feminist “March 8/ 8 de Marzo” group, opened the private nonprofit counseling center “Casa Amiga” in 1999. Ever since, it serves hundreds annually and stays open with extensive private fund-raising. In 2005, Casa Amiga even opened a small shelter for battered women, which remains the lone shelter of its kind in Mexico's fifth-largest city (Staudt, 2008, 83-84).

5) Outcomes

The successes of the women's movement in Juárez are multiple. Not only has it spurred the creation of a special commission on the murders in Mexico's Congress and the appointment of a special state prosecutor, but it has also prevented the passing of a new state law in Chihuahua that would have reduced sentences from four years to one for rapists who could convince a court that their victims had “provoked” them. In fact, when hundreds of women mobilized to scuttle the law, Mexico's Congress finally threatened to intervene if Chihuahua legislators did not repeal it (Nieves, 2002). Moreover, grassroots women in Juárez have taken the personal and made it political, which in itself can be a measure of success, given that for some it is the first step toward self-empowerment (Peña, 2007, 4). Finally, the continuous calls by the victims' families and local NGOs for the crimes to be clarified have succeeded in attracting national and international attention. This became especially clear when President Vicente Fox sent federal investigators to Juárez in order to look into the cases or when the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Women from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) visited Juárez and published a report on the situation of women in the city (Amnesty International, 2003). In addition to this, Mexico's federal government has acknowledged femicide in multiple cities along with widespread domestic violence, and femicide was also an issue in the 2006 presidential campaign (Staudt, 2009a, 123). Finally,
activism in Juárez spread nationwide, so that in 2001, more than three-hundred Mexican civil society organizations formed an umbrella group to address the issue and collectively launched the campaign “Alto a la impunidad, ni una muerta más”.

As a result, international media, NGOs and organizations became aware of the situation in Juárez. This national and international attention was particularly important for local activists because in spite of their actions, female murders continued, and officials continued to dismiss them. In addition to this, Mexican activists, learning from experience and living in a society where most citizens distrust public authorities, tend to be cynical about and wary of government rhetoric and co-optation and therefore interact less with government institutions and mainstream political campaigns (Staudt, 2008, 21). Therefore, in order to increase pressure on the Mexican government and foster dialogue with Mexican authorities, local and national activists called for support by international NGOs.

6) Where are the female vigilantes?

At this point of the chapter, the reader might think that a lengthy description of grassroots activism in Ciudad Juárez has no place in a paper on female vigilantism. I argue that female activists in Juárez are vigilantes, even if their activism might not match with the most well-known definitions of the term. Rather than conforming with these common definitions, activism in Juárez can be analyzed using an approach developed by Les Johnston in his attempt to establish a criminological definition of vigilantism (1996, 220-236). This approach “is distinct from attempts to define vigilantism as mere ‘establishment violence’ and neither assumes vigilante engagement to be extra-legal nor to involve the necessary imposition of punishment on victims” (Ibid. 220). Also, as discussed in the first part of this paper, even though most scholars agree that vigilantes often work in groups, they “disagree as to whether vigilantism is a social movement or mere social reaction, and whether it is always violent, extra-legal, organized, directed only towards crime, or a subcategory of political violence” (Johnston, 1996 cited in Sen and Pratten, 2008). Therefore, the fact that female activists in Juárez neither use physical violence nor break the law in order to reach their goals does not necessarily mean that they cannot be described as vigilantes. In fact, “It is significant that although physical violence is sometimes a factor in female vigilantism, this is not always so. The two terms violence and vigilantism are not interchangeable” (Graham-Bertolini, 2011, 4) since female vigilantes desiring change can also “address the collective ills of society through small, yet disruptive […] actions” (Ibid.).

My claim that female activists in Juárez are indeed vigilantes is based on several observations: First,
the term vigilantism “involve[s] an organized attempt by a group of 'ordinary citizens' to enforce norms and maintain law and order on behalf of their communities, often [but not always] by resort to violence, in the perceived absence of effective official state action through the police and courts (Abrahams, 2008, 423). This definition describes exactly what female activists in Juárez do. Moreover, “Vigilantes are commonly described as stepping in to uphold law and order when the state fails to do so” (ibid. 425). I argue that activists in Juárez do indeed step in to uphold the law, even if they do not do so by violent means. Indeed, female activists in Juárez, especially victims' mothers groups, engage in activities such as conducting their own investigations, searching evidence, putting up flyers of the missing, and publishing lists of murder victims. These are clearly tasks that fall under the responsibility of the state and should be carried out by state police, investigators, attorneys etc. However, because the Mexican state fails to guarantee its citizens' right to security and justice, activists carry out duties that should be reserved to the state – often in spite of the objection of officials.

In addition to this, one could argue that female activists in Juárez do indeed break the law in order to reach their goals. This claim might appear far-fetched, but can be better understood by asking oneself one simple question: In a city that is often described as being “lawless”, what law are citizens supposed to obey? Due to “corruption, inadequate training and resources, and the complicity of prosecutors and public defenders” (HRW, 2014b, 268), the performance of the criminal justice system in Mexico is particularly poor. In a state like Chihuahua where several cartels instill fear not only into ordinary people, but also into local law enforcement and their respective rivals, citizens are usually more in fear of retaliation by cartels than of punishment as a result of law enforcement by Mexican officials. Understandably, citizens worried about their safety adapt to a particularly violent environment by abiding by those rules that are most likely to be enforced. Therefore, one can argue that female activists in Juárez might not break the official law of the Mexican state, but they do break the unofficial “law”, or at least the rules of behavior, that has been established by powerful cartels over the years. These rules include the expectation that women remain inactive in the face of violence and injustice, and silently accept the injustice and/or degrading treatment that they and/or their relatives and friends are suffering from. By protesting against beatings, rape, abuse, abduction and murder, female activists in Juárez actually put themselves in a much more precarious position than if they were breaking the official law of Chihuahua or Mexico.

Another observation that explains why female activists in Juárez are indeed vigilantes is that, “It is
clear that in its many many guises and configurations, vigilantism commonly has very serious real
world implications – often of life and death – both for its targets and for its practitioners”
(Abrahams, 2008, 429). In the case of activism in Ciudad Juárez, it is not the targets of vigilantism
that need to fear violent retribution and death, but its practitioners. In fact, Human Rights defenders
and activists in Mexico suffer harassment and attacks (HRW, 2014b, 271), and this is particularly
true in Ciudad Juárez - although it is not always clear who perpetrates these attacks.

Probably the most well-known example of this is the murder of Susana Chavez, who coined the
phrase ¡Ni una (muerta) más! In January 2011, the thirty-six-year-old poet and activist who had led
protests against the unsolved killings in Juárez “was found strangled and with one hand cut off in
Ciudad Juárez” (BBC, 2011). Although “Officials say her murder was not related to her activism”
(Ibid.), the version of events stated by officials lacks any clear motive for the killing, and “is
sketchy to those who knew and loved Chavez” (King, 2011). Whatever the true motive of Chavez’
murder, Amnesty International is right to underline that even if her murder was not related to her
activism, it is “another sign that violence against women was again on the rise in Ciudad Juarez” in
2011 (BBC, 2011).

Another activist, fifty-two-year old Marisela Escobedo Ortiz, was killed shortly before Chavez. Her
case is a particularly shocking example of repression against activists by the very people who
commit the crimes that they are protesting against. Ever since her daughter Rubi's dismembered and
burned body was found dumped in Ciudad Juárez in 2008, Escobedo Ortiz had been campaignin
for justice for her murdered seventeen-year-old daughter (BBC, 2010). In December 2010, she “had
been protesting against the release of the man accused of murdering her daughter” when she was
“shot in the head at close range by one of three masked gunmen” outside the state governor's office
in Chihuahua where she was protesting (Ibid.). The suspect had been released although he had
confessed, accepted guilt, and revealed where the remains of Rubi's body could be found. However,
judges released him due to an alleged lack of evidence to convict him. The man had then joined the
Zetas drug cartel after his release and “Governor Cesar Duarte said he had no doubt the killing was
an act of revenge by the alleged murderer” (Ibid.).

What is more, the murders of Chavez and Escobedo Ortiz cannot be downplayed as being isolated
cases. Indeed, as activist Debbie Nathan explains:

“I’ve had my agenda for a long time: political and cultural activism in Juárez. But it’s become so much
more difficult—we have to go to funerals now, of fellow activists, of rap artists even, who were killed
trying to do political work. Like everyone, I’m constantly imagining things are going to happen to the

Another example of the violent repression of activists in Juárez is Norma Esther Andrade's case. She founded “Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa”, an organization seeking investigation into the rape, abduction and murder of women in Ciudad Juárez. Andrade is regularly being threatened and attacked in her hometown Ciudad Juárez. She was attacked for the first time in December 2011, when “she was shot several times by a group of armed men as she was leaving work” (Pandit, 2011). In January 2013, when she was viciously attacked for the second time in just three months, Amnesty International decided to launch a petition calling on Mexican authorities to provide protection for her and to initiate an investigation into attacks on her and her colleagues. According to Amnesty International,

“Only two months before this recent attack, Norma was shot at five times outside her previous home in Ciudad Juárez. She was treated in hospital for her injuries for several days. The hospital discharged her after staff received anonymous threats that they would be killed if they continued to provide treatment. Norma and her family sought refuge by going into hiding in faraway Mexico City. Authorities promised to provide protection. Yet her life is still in danger. This new attack appears to be part of a targeted campaign against Norma and her efforts to investigate the deaths of hundreds of women and girls in Ciudad Juárez over the past two decades” (2013b).

These examples show that female activists in Juárez are working in a particularly violent environment where they constantly have to fear for their safety and for their life. They can therefore be described as vigilantes in the sense that, due to their activism, they are the targets of violence and always need to be prepared and ready to defend themselves, if necessary by violent means.

Finally, the case of “Diana the Huntress” described in the introduction to this paper shows that there clearly is a potential for violent, if not deadly, activism in Ciudad Juárez. Considering that “international attention [about the situation in Juárez] moved on, but the killings have continued” (Cave, 2012), it would not come as a big surprise if more women decided to follow the example of Diana and resort to more violent means in their desperate quest for security and justice.

b) Women in the “autodefensas” of Guerrero and Michoacán

1) The growing movement of self-defense groups in Mexico

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the failure of law enforcement by Mexican authorities has contributed to the formation of volunteer police or self-defense groups, so-called “autodefensas” in some parts of the country (HRW, 2014b, 268). As Jo Tuckman reported in October 2013 (a),
“Over the past year, vigilante groups [...] have sprung up in towns and villages across Mexico, especially in the Pacific coast states of Guerrero and Michoacán. They make no pretense to be interrupting drug trafficking itself but they do claim to have restored a degree of tranquility to daily life”.

The BBC (2013b) sees this “growing movement of self-defense groups” as a result of the presence of “violent criminal gangs” in these areas as well as of “the failure of police to guarantee security”. The vigilante movement that has unquestionably attracted most of the media's attention is the one that formed with the goal of chasing the “Knights Templar” drug cartel from an area known as Tierra Caliente, encompassing parts of Guerrero and Michoacán. These vigilantes tote guns as they patrol the streets (Shoichet, 2014) and “say they have taken matters into their own hands as the Mexican government has failed to guarantee the security of their families” (BBC, 2014b). Michoacán is a state in western Mexico that has been especially hard hit by drug trafficking related violence, and the Knights Templar is a cartel that “controls much of the methamphetamine and marijuana trade in western Mexico”, carries out killings and kidnappings, and extorts money from local people (BBC, 2014b). There are concerns, however, that some of the members of those vigilante groups that fight against the Knights Templar cartel might actually “contain some criminals from rival gangs who are using them as a means to win more territory” (Shoichet, 2014). It is especially because of the vigilantes' heavy guns and trucks that some have become suspicious and warned that “they may be allied or supported by a drug gang that is a rival to the Knights Templar, but the self-defense groups' leaders have repeatedly denied that” (Malkin and Villegasjan, 2014).

2) The first all-female armed Citizen Police group

As mentioned above, the growing movement of so-called self-defense and police groups is particularly strong in the Southern Mexican state of Guerrero. Here, the movement is “officially organized as the Policía Ciudadana, also known as UPOEG\textsuperscript{10} or the Policía Comunitaria, also known as the CRAC” (Orlinsky, 2013). In Xaltianguis, located appropriately fifty kilometers from Acapulco, the largest all-female armed Citizen Police group of Mexico was formed in the summer of 2013. The group's creation caused great enthusiasm amongst the female population of Xaltianguis, so that in August 2013, the then one-hundred-two members said they hoped to be able to gather around three hundred more members during the next two months (Milenio, 2013). The group was created in response to the fact that Xaltianguis had been “at the mercy of organized crime for years, and by 2010 it had transformed into a mecca for murder, kidnapping and extortion” (Orlinsky, 2013). It is composed “of mostly middle-aged housewives, mothers and grandmothers”, many of

\textsuperscript{10} Unión de Pueblos Organizados del Estado de Guerrero/ Union of Peoples and Organizations of Guerrero State

whom “have lost loved ones to violence, or were victims of crime themselves” (Ibid.). They claim that taking up arms in order to fight crime was the only alternative that the government had left to them in order to defend their lives and dignity, and to reestablish peace (Contreras, 2013). In order to reach these aims,

“In addition to going through weapons training and brushing up on police tactics such as patrols, vehicle searches and arrests (mostly of female criminals), the women have been traveling throughout the region to convince more women to form their own vigilante police forces. The women carry unloaded, rusty rifles that they often do not know how to use, and their uniforms consist of t-shirts and hats. Sometimes they bring their toddlers with them on patrol, or have to leave duty to pick their children up from school. The female Citizen Police of Xaltianguis are like an armed community watch—searching vehicles, looking through backpacks before and after school, having one ear to the ground and knowing who’s who and who’s doing what. Xaltianguis residents say they feel safer than ever” (Orlinsky, 2013).

One big advantage of all-female vigilante groups is that by their very composition, they alleviate concerns regarding their possible cooperation with criminals or cartels. Since, “If the Citizen Police are really narcos, then why is your next-door neighbour’s mom one of them?” (Ibid.). However, it is important to highlight that the group's commander is a man, Miguel Angel Jiménez, and that the women who volunteered to be part of the group had to sign up with UPOEG (Huffington Post, 2013). This means that they did not form the group on their own initiative, nor without male intervention. According to Jiménez, the female group was split in nine sub-groups, with each one made up of twelve women, in August 2013. These groups then started taking turns working the day-shifts in the neighborhoods of Xaltianguis (Ibid.). However, at this time, the Citizen Police force also included ninety-six male members, some of which were charged with teaching the female groups how to use their firearms (Milenio, 2013). Since the group owns no more than around eighty firearms, members have to rotate them among each other (Huffington Post, 2013), and as of August 2013, only two of the twelve female groups had been taught how to use them (Milenion, 2013). This was not a big problem according to Jiménez, who said he expected that people would donate more firearms “once they kn[e]w that the women [we]re participating” in the Citizen Police force (Huffington Post, 2013). In addition to believing that women's membership would improve the reputation of the group within the community, Jiménez also pointed out that “Women were among the biggest supporters when the community self-defense forces were being formed, telling men that 'either you join or I join’” (Ibid.). He also underlined that these women asked to be armed and to be taught how to use their weapons on their own initiate (Milenio, 2013). According to Silvia Hipolito, a member of the group and a mother of two, “Women are brave and we are capable of defending our town […] The women will learn how to use firearms and work schedules that allow them to continue taking care of their homes” (Ibid.). What this last comment shows, however, is that those
women who decided to join the self-defense groups of Xaltianguis do not intend to reverse the position that is assigned to them within their community. Yes, they want to protect their loved ones, if necessary using violent means, and therefore they want to learn how to use firearms. But they still make sure to organize their shifts in the self-defense groups in a way that allows them to perform their tasks at home in the same way that they did before they decided to join these groups.

3) Women's roles in mixed autodefensas and their stereotypical media representation

In the region of Tierra Caliente, Mexican authorities do not protect women who regularly fall prey to organized crime groups, whose members consider them as loan or barter objects (Márquez, 2014). In the summer of 2013, criminals started snatching women and girls away from their homes in several communities in Michoacán and Guerrero, in order to rape them. It was in response to this cruelty that community members decided to arm themselves and form self-defense groups (Ibid.). According to Circe López Riofrio, director of the organization “Humanas sin Violencia”, the sexual exploitation and selling of women is an important source of income for the organized crime groups of Tierra Caliente. As a result of the violence against them, she adds, “some women decided to arm themselves and they assured that they would murder anyone who tried to attack them or their daughters; they knew that reporting an attack was a waste of time”\textsuperscript{11} (Ibid.). As Riofrio points out, women in the region are caught in the middle of the conflict, sometimes providing support to self-defense groups, and sometimes even actively fighting with them. Those who integrate the groups often come from other parts of Mexico and live by themselves, so they do not count on the support of the community (Ibid.).

One of the first occasions on which female vigilantes were given attention by the international mainstream media was when, in January 2014, the Spanish newspaper El País published an article on the recent advances of self-defense groups in Michoacán. This article by Verónica Calderón with the title “Los justicieros de Tierra Caliente“ included a picture of a young woman who smiles into the camera holding a rifle in her right hand. She seems to be standing in the entrance hall of a Knights Templar leader's house that the vigilantes managed to occupy. The caption under this picture quotes “Comandante Cinco: 'We want women to be at the very front. As you know the Templar Knights go after them’”\textsuperscript{12}. However, the clothes of the young woman on the picture (short tight pants and a tight tank top) do not suggest that she really just fought “at the very front”. It is

\textsuperscript{11} Translation from Spanish by the author.
\textsuperscript{12} Translation from Spanish by the author.
much more likely that she held the rifle merely on one occasion – to pose for this picture. Due to this contradiction, the picture has triggered mocking comments on social media (Rivera, 2014). As a conclusion, it seems that women did not participate in combat activities during the fights between vigilantes and members of the Knights Templar cartel. This assumption is confirmed by the fact that, in spite of the article being long and detailed, it only contains two other short comments that acknowledge the presence of women in the vigilante movement. The first of these two comments is on María Mariscal Magaña, from Buenavista Tomatlán, the administrative center of the municipality of Buenavista in Michoacán. She is quoted to have said “We are at war. And I say we are because I am with the autodefensas and I am, with my village, at war against them”\(^{13}\). María Mariscal Magaña is described as having been petite, brunette and with big eyes. Her discourse shows that most people who live in areas that used to be under the control of the Knights Templar cartel now think in two categories only: us and them. She disappeared on the 10\(^{th}\) of December 2013, after having been threatened by a serial killer who accused her of having a Facebook account that displayed connections with the autodefensas. However, there is no indication in the article that she played anything more than a supportive role in the autodefensas – if she had participated in combat activities against the Templar Knights, it would probably be mentioned in the article. The second comment that acknowledges the presence of women on the “battlefield” of Michoacán is when a scene in an three-hundred square meter mansion that the vigilantes managed to occupy is described. In this scene, men as well as women are present, all bragging and laughing, being proud to belong to the group. Then, Commandant Cinco gives money to one of the women and tells her: “Go buy things to clean the floor”\(^{14}\). Not exactly an instruction that would lead us to think that women play a very active role in the autodefensas, and even less one that involves violence.

In January 2014, the Mexican newspaper “El Universal” published one of the very rare articles that deal exclusively with female vigilantes and their role in the fight against the Knights Templars. The title of this article by Lydiette Carrión is “Mujeres en la ‘guerra’ de Michoacán”. It is preceded by a picture of of a young woman wearing a holster on her right hip and holding a big rifle in her left hand. The description of this picture reads “BATTLE. La ‘Comandanta Bonita’, with a R-15 in her hand, was at the front on the day when the autodefesas chased the Templar Knights from Nueva Italia”\(^{15}\) (Carrión, 2014). In its main text, the article by Carrión describes the roles of three women who decided to join the autodefensas of Michoacán. However, the first paragraph of the article points out that they are in absolute minority, a handful amongst hundreds of men. It also states that

\(^{13}\) Translation from Spanish by the author.

\(^{14}\) Translation from Spanish by the author.

\(^{15}\) Translation from Spanish by the author.
not all of them use firearms, that most of them decided to support the movement from their homes, and that they do not have much of a voice or decision-making power within the movement. Proof of this it that a “consejo ciudadano” was formed that is composed of thirty representatives from the municipalities that decided to fight against the Knights Templar cartel – and only three of them are women. This first paragraph of the article ends with the comment that it is not easy for those women who have decided to join the fight, the hardest thing being to have to fight against people's prejudices against them.

The first woman who is portrayed in the article is “La Comandanta Bonita”. Thirty-one years old and mother of two daughters, she grew up in the United States but decided to move back to her birthplace, Michoacán. Living there, she was shocked to constantly hear about people being murdered and children disappeared, so she decided to join the autodefensas. The author underlines that she was the one and only woman who fought at the front amongst hundreds of men on the morning of the 12th of January 2014 when Nueva Italia, a city in the center of Michoacán, was wrested away from the Templar Knights at gunpoint. The author then describes Comandanta Bonita in detail: “T-shirt, tight jeans and sports shoes. Impeccable make-up. Short, delicately chiseled features, a hard look in doll-like eyes”\(^{16}\). In addition to her physical features, the reader learns that “La Bonita” does not get scared in situations of combat which is due, according to her, either to her strong personality or to the fact that she got used to them. She had already used a gun to scare off an aggressor when she was fifteen, and by now, she has spent nearly a year fighting battles as the escort of “El Americano”, the leader of Buenavista's autodefensa. This is the group whose members almost always fight at the front, and “La Bonita” with them. Regarding the relation between male and female vigilantes, the author quotes “La Bonita's” comrades as having said that a lot of women join the group with their boyfriends, but not so “La Bonita”. She herself underlines that she is not seeing anyone in the force, but that most people think that because she is a woman, she must be seeing the leader or some other member. When asked if she has ever killed anyone, “La Bonita's” answer is that she does not know, she just shoots. The author concludes that being female, young, and beautiful in the midst of a little army requires to be able to stand one's ground.

The second woman who is portrayed in the article is Idalia, who is twenty-two years old and used to cut lemons before she joined the autodefensas. However, we do not learn much about Idalia, merely how she came to join the autodefensas – she approached “El Americano” partly because a Templar Knight stalked and pressured her to leave with her – and that her first job was at the main

---

\(^{16}\) Translation from Spanish by the author.
barricades, where she had to note the numbers on the license plates of passing taxis. Now, six months later, she carries a gun and knows how to use it, but she usually never shoots. As the author comments, Idalia has to suffer from all the inconveniences that come with traveling from village to village, guarding the barricades, and fulfilling other tasks – the proof of this being her elaborated manicure which is now chipped, as well as the dirty feet inside her feminine sandals. In spite of having joined the fight, she continues to be feminine, the author adds. She is wearing a glamorous metallic blue mascara that highlights her black eyes; the features of her beautiful dark face are eye-catching but blemished by poverty; and her delicate lips are shiny, but draw attention to her destroyed teeth, the result of a lack of dental hygiene since her childhood. The author concludes this portrait by saying that Idalia is unable to see her daughter of four years, who lives with her grandparents. This is because she cannot return to her village ever since a girl uploaded a picture of her with members of the vigilante movement on Facebook and tagged a member of the Knights Templar cartel so that he would recognize her.

The third woman who is portrayed in this article is “Dulcinea”. Dulcinea joined the autodefensas in Buenavista together with her brother, at the age of fourteen. Dulcinea recounts her story smiling, with a childlike face, and wearing make-up, the author describes. She has the body of a model and the smile of a little girl, she adds. The author finds it deeply moving to see her on the battlefield amidst grown-up men. Dulcinea points out that almost no women in the movement carry or use firearms. They help with other things. Dulcinea sometimes washes her companions' clothes, or accompanies her brother to the barricades. She only fired a weapon once, because she had no choice – she had gotten into a shooting with Templar Knights. Because she is a woman and very young, Dulcinea has suffered peoples' moral condemnation for joining the vigilante movement, the author says. The portrait concludes with the comment that Dulcinea is now in love with a young male vigilante. He gave her a plush cat that she takes with her to the different camps.

4) Conclusions

It is very hard to find information on how actively involved women are in the autodefensas of Michoacán and Guerrero. The female vigilantes of Xaltianguis play a very important role in their community, as they make up more than half of the Citizen Police group that was formed in this town. However, one source suggests that they “carry unloaded, rusty rifles that they often do not know how to use”, while another source points to the fact that the group does not own enough weapons for all of its members, and it is mostly men who carry them. But even so, the female vigilantes of Xaltianguis use the threat of force in order to protect their community, and this seems
to have worked quite well so far. Female vigilantes in mixed autodefensas do not seem to use violent means of resistance very often either. Except for “Comandante Bonita”, there are no media reports of women being involved in combat actions of the vigilante movement. Some female vigilantes do carry guns, but do not seem to want to use them unless they have no other choice. Most of them seem to carry out traditional domestic work, such as doing the men's laundry and cleaning. However, similar to the description of women in the Mexican Revolution, one could argue that the participation in the vigilante movement is in itself liberating for these women, as they deliberately choose to carry out these tasks and do so in a dangerous environment, putting their security at risk in order to support the movement.

In more general terms, it is impossible to ignore the fact that all media reports on female members of autodefensas include more or less detailed descriptions of what these women look like, what kind of clothes and make-up they wear, how many children they have, and whether or not they are in a relationship with a male member of their group. Whether these women wear make-up, nail polish and feminine clothes because they want to or because it is expected of them, we do not know. What we can conclude from this, however, is that media reports do not depict them as equals with their male counterparts. Articles on male members of the autodefensas do not include detailed descriptions of their facial features or information on whether or not they have children, or girlfriends who joined the movement. Female vigilantes, however, are compared against social expectations related to femininity and motherhood. In addition to this, the nick names of some of these female vigilantes might be indicative of the role that they play within the movement. In fact, names such as “La Bonita” and “Dulcinea”, a name taken from Don Quixote, evoke assumptions of these women serving more as male objects of desire than as fighters. From the few media reports that exist on women who joined the autodefensas, one has thus to conclude that they do not seriously challenge traditional assumptions about women's roles in Mexican society, neither within the vigilante movement, nor in the eyes of observers.

However, this is much less true for the all-female vigilante groups of Xaltianguis. Even if one article mentions that some of the women wear heels, gel nails and beautiful make-up (Flores and Trujillo, 2013), most journalists put emphasis on the fact that it is their values and determination that unite them (Ibid.) and that they act out of a desire to defend their community, if necessary by violent means. As a conclusion of this, it seems as though women's violence is taken much more seriously when they form all-female groups, while in mixed groups, it is downplayed and stereotypical views of women's roles within society are emphasized.
Conclusion – Female vigilantism conceptualized

When comparing and contrasting the four case studies that are described in this paper, what is striking is that even though the cultural, social and religious background of a woman living in India is very different from that of a Mexican woman, the female vigilantes in this paper all share numerous concerns, strategies and long-term goals. In this last part of the paper, we will look at some specific aspects of the concept of female vigilantism: the violence-proneness of female vigilantes (b), the short-term (c) and long-term impact (d) of female vigilantism, as well as its limits (e). However, before doing so, it is of interest to point to some general observations (a).

a) General observations on female vigilantism

1) Female vigilantism as a constructive collective enterprise

Each of the case studies in this paper demonstrate that the main motivation of female vigilantes – be it young girls from Lucknow engaging in self-defense techniques or Mexican women joining autodefensas to fight against drug cartels – seems to stem from a “collective desire for social change” (Graham-Bertolini, 2011, 5). Therefore, their vigilantism can be described as a “constructive collective enterprise” (William C. Culberson cited in Graham-Bertolini, 2011, 6) even if they engage in violent activities at times. Vigilantes in our case studies are mainly grassroots activists eager to contribute to the improvement of women's living conditions in their respective communities, resorting to violence only when all other means of resistance have proved ineffective. Constructive grassroots activism is not in contradiction with vigilantism since, “Historically, the term 'vigilante' has been invoked to describe people involved in violent, destructive behavior as well as acts of good citizenship” (Ibid., 5). Nowadays, vigilantes are more often than not described as violent, law-breaking individuals who engage in destructive activities that are detrimental to the well-being and functioning of society. However, the female vigilante groups presented in this paper operate in communities that are already hardly functioning, and consequently, the well-being of their members is at stake. Vigilantes, in these cases, can be described as “good citizens” because they put their personal well-being and security on the line out of a desire to change their societies for the better.

2) Female vigilantism as distinct from male vigilantism

The particularity of all-female vigilante groups is that their main concern is with improving
women's living conditions by protecting them from violence and discrimination as well as empowering them. This paper has demonstrated that female vigilantism has specific characteristics that are different from those of male vigilantism. This does not come as a surprise since women's activism must necessarily be based on different goals and strategies than that of men. This is because men, especially white men, are at the top of the hierarchy that is still in place in today's world, in spite of the tireless efforts of countless activists to establish equality between the sexes. Therefore, men in most cases do not need to resort to violence in order to have their rights respected, but rather engage in vigilantism for "reasons that reflect a male image dominated by ego" (Graham-Bertolini, 2001, 6). Of course, there are exceptions to this rule, as demonstrated for instance by the case of Mexican men in Tierra Caliente who claim that they decided to join the autodefensas in order to protect their wives and daughters from the sexual violence perpetrated by drug cartel members. But even this case shows that men most often do not need to resort to violence to protect themselves, but do so in order to protect women whom they think of as being incapable of protecting themselves. Women, on the other hand, have very different motivations for resorting to vigilantism. Mostly, they do so in order to protect themselves and their children from violence and discrimination as well as to have their basic rights respected so that they can enjoy decent living conditions. However, as we will see in part c) of this chapter, this motivation most often comes with the long-term goal of empowering women and changing the place that is assigned to them within their respective societies. As a conclusion, it seems as though female vigilantism is less versatile, arbitrary and manifold than male vigilantism. This is due to the fact that female vigilantism is in most cases directed against perpetrators of violence against women with the aim of protecting and empowering women.

3) Female vigilantism as a shifting concept

As the different case studies have demonstrated, the reason why women in some parts of India and Mexico choose vigilantism over other options as a means of protection and empowerment is due to "long historical trajectories and particular cultural repertoires" (Pratten and Sen, 2007, 5), but also to overwhelming structural conditions of injustice, an atmosphere of everyday violence in their respective societies, as well as the fact that individual experiences of criminal victimization are experienced collectively among these women (Rastogi and White, 2009, 314). This paper has shown the claim that "vigilantism is a shifting concept that articulates to ever-changing social realities" (Pratten and Sen, 2007, 19) to be true. However, all over the world, the social realities of women, especially of poor women, bear striking resemblances, and so does their vigilantism should
they decide to have resort to it.

**b) Violence-proneness of female vigilantes**

The prevailing reason why female vigilantes sometimes resort to violence is in order to protect themselves and their children from violence and discrimination as well as to have their basic rights respected. This immediate concern most often comes with the long-term goal of creating safe spaces and opportunities for women within their respective societies, so that they will no longer have to constantly fight for their rights – especially that of physical integrity. In fact, the female vigilantes in our case studies do not see violence as a long-term solution to their problems, but as a last resort to defend themselves against male aggression. In a nutshell, they meet violence with violence in self-defense, but do not perpetrate acts of aggression. As Vishwakarma, the leader of the Red Brigade, explained, they are tired of waiting for society to reform and male attitudes to change, for the police to arrive and act, and for their fathers, brothers and husbands to protect them. Instead, they decided to focus on making themselves physically and mentally strong to hit back (Lakshmi, 2014).

E. Valentine Daniel (1996), Professor of Anthropology at Columbia University, “has encouraged us to perceive violence not as an end point to be explained but as a productive starting point” (Pratten and Sen, 2007, 11). This idea applies to the activities of the female vigilante groups described in this paper. They use violence in order to counter aggression, in order to gain the respect and attract the attention of their respective communities, and in order to show that they are serious about the changes that they ask their communities to implement. However, they all claim that they do not like to use violent means in order to reach their goals and do it only in situations where they have no other choice. As soon as they have reached their goals and/or gained the respect, trust and support of their communities, they stop using violence to impose their demands. Instead, as soon as they have created an environment for themselves in which they can efficiently operate, vigilante groups such as the Gulabi Gang, the Red Brigade, and female activists in Ciudad Juárez focus on manifold activities aiming at empowering women. This might be less true for female vigilantes who use violence in order to reach one specific goal, such as chasing the Knights Templar cartel from Michoacán and Guerrero. However, it is likely that through their participation in this specific vigilante movement, they will get a sense of power, purpose, and control that might lead them to engage in other civil society movements in the future.

The idea of violence as a productive starting point can also be found in Rastogi and White's (2009)
study on the Gulabi Gang, in which they conclude that “the reasons women cite for engaging in violent activities reveal their decisions to be rational, community-oriented, informed choices” (314) – not “irrational spontaneous mob violence” (Ibid.). Sen (2012), too, supports this view by quoting Sampat, the leader of the Gulabi Gang, as having underlined that the group does not like using violence, but sometimes uses it because this is the only way they can get people to listen (7). According to Sen, Sampat “highlights the significance of mass violence perpetrated by poor women as a social necessity, and not as a whimsical expression of raw justice” (Ibid.).

Let us now turn to the important question of the legitimacy of female vigilantes' violence. As we have seen in the introduction to this paper, the question if women's violent response to violence is ever warranted has been answered very differently by different scholars, responses ranging from the view “that violence should never be an option” (Graham-Bertolini, 2011, 164) to the view that “nonviolence is a patriarchal construct that has been assigned to women because it is ineffective and self-destructive” (Ibid., 165). However, another view on the question of legitimacy better describes the violent acts perpetrated by the vigilante groups presented in this paper. This is the view that “the laws in place to protect women are not adequate” and therefore, “the definition of self-defense needs to be expanded, so that it includes instances of violence used to protect oneself or ones loved ones” (Ibid.). The applicability of this view is confirmed by the fact that female vigilante groups receive more and more public support in their respective societies, sometimes even by state actors, and more and more women join them. This shows that their actions, albeit sometimes violent, are perceived as being legitimate and necessary, if not long-overdue.

In addition to this, we have to keep in mind the particularly violent contexts in which these women live and which incite them to act violently. I support the view that “some forms of women’s vigilantism are legitimate acts of violence in specific political contexts where local judiciaries fail to protect women against gross human rights abuses” (Rastogi and White, 2009, 316). In these cases, vigilante violence can fall under the category of “ethical” use of violence (Ibid.). However, insights from feminist international relations theory should also be considered here. According to Sjoberg and Gentry (2007),

“feminist international relations has come to see people as relationally autonomous, rather than either reactively autonomous or dependent. In other words, people’s choices are neither completely independent of context (reactively autonomous) nor entirely involuntary (dependence), but somewhere in between, where they maintain identity independence but decide in a socially constrained world. This means that women’s violence can sometimes herald gender emancipation, at other times echo gender subordination, and at yet other times serve both functions at the same time, because no choice is completely independent either of its chooser or its context” (6).
In the case of the female vigilantes presented in this paper, their decision to use violent means of resistance is in large measure determined by the violent environments in which they live. However, they clearly do maintain identity independence. This is demonstrated by the fact that some members of these female vigilante groups have never used violence and do not intend to do so in the future. Another proof of them acting voluntarily in a socially constrained environment where women face aggression and discrimination is that they make “rational, community-oriented, informed choices” (Rastogi and White, 2009, 314) about when to use violence. In fact, as we have seen, they do not act violently most of the time, but only in situations where they feel that this is the only effective means of resistance.

As a final observation, I share Rastogi and White’s view that “what is deemed ethical and unethical violence must be judged on a case-by-case basis” (2009, 315). The violence perpetrated by the female vigilantes presented in this paper can fall under the category of ethical violence in most instances. However, the possibility remains that there might be exceptions to this general rule. In the case of the Gulabi Gang and the Red Brigade, these groups claim that they have never murdered anyone, and they do not use excessive violence against their “victims”. Therefore, it is likely that they do not perpetrate violence that is deemed unethical. The female activists of Ciudad Juárez do not resort to violence at all, with the exception of “Diana the Huntress”. However, depending on the definition used, it is questionable whether or not the murders she committed can fall under the category of vigilantism at all. This is because she seems to have acted on her own, as opposed to enjoying the support of a larger group, and it is not clear if her acts of violent retribution were directed against the actual perpetrators of crimes against women or against men who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Concerning the women who joined the autodefensas of Michoacán and Guerrero, there is no indication that the all-female vigilante groups of Xaltianguis have ever killed anyone, while some female members of the mixed autodefensas said that they had made use of their firearms in the past, but did not know whether any of their shots had killed anyone. However, even if they did, this does not necessarily fall under the category of unethical violence, since the women did not kill anyone in an intentional or calculated way, but in combat situations in a war-like environment.

c) Short-term impact

1) Creation of safer environments for women
The form of female vigilantism that has been explored in this paper – that is, a form where the recourse to violence is not the primary focus of the vigilantes and when they use it, they mostly use ethical violence – has a positive short and long-term impact on society and women's roles in it. The short-term impact of female vigilantism is pretty obvious. Female vigilantes' primary concern is their own protection, and sometimes the protection of others, most often their children. In all of the cases that are presented in this paper, women decided to take action because they were in serious fear for their safety and lives. In fact, all of them had either been attacked or sexually abused themselves, or had seen the same thing happening to the women and girls around them. Sexual harassment, rape, abduction and murder were part of their everyday lives until they decided that they could not bear the situation anymore. Examined from this angle, vigilantism had a positive short-term impact for these women, since almost all of them claim that they feel safer now than before. In the cases of the Gulabi Gang and the Red Brigade, their members say that men and boys around them do not dare to attack them anymore and even if they did, they would know how to protect themselves better than before; in the case of the vigilantes of Xaltianguis, they say that their community has never been safer; and in the case of the mixed autodefensas, they managed to chase the Templar Knights away from parts of Tierra Caliente. The only case were women have not seen a very tangible improvement of their safety through vigilantism is the case of the female activists of Ciudad Juárez. However, these women neither have recourse to physical violence, nor do they directly confront the perpetrators of violence against women in any other way. This could be seen as a proof of the claim that, in specific contexts, to meet violence with violence in self-defense is the only efficient strategy that is left to women.

2) Giving women a voice

Even if it is hard to say if the overall numbers of cases of rape and violence against women have gone down in the areas where female vigilantes started operating, the subjective feeling of women to be protected and safer than before allows them to engage in activities that they did not dare to engage in before. Therefore, we can conclude that their vigilantism has helped them to create spaces in which women can act more freely and independently of men than before. As a result, more and more women now dare to speak up when violence is done to them or when they are angry about social problems that they are facing. As the Red Brigade's leader Vishwakarma put it, “Those who were voiceless before [...] now have a voice. Now they speak for themselves and are emboldened” (Armstrong, 2013). Female vigilante groups help “banish some of the powerlessness that grips victims of sexual violence, filling [their members] with a greater sense of confidence”
Most of the women engaged in female vigilantism view violence against women as a symptom of larger problems. Therefore, they address multiple issues that are of importance to women in their communities and have adopted strategies that involve building self-esteem in women and empowering women, for example through specific workshops, self-defense classes, by calling them to community organizing, or by organizing demonstrations and theater plays. Thereby, they “nurture spaces where the personal and political awaken not only gender consciousness but also commitment to social activism, and where coalitions and alliances can be forged through organizing” (Peña, 2007, 20).

As a conclusion, even if it was impossible for me to find information on whether or not the actual numbers of crime against women decreased in a given area where a female vigilante group had been created, what is sure is that the members of the Gulabi Gang, the Red Brigade, and the Ni Una Más movement all “represent women with grassroots feminist sensibilities, offering psychological, social, and justice-related assistance to poor women who have been failed by the local state's judiciary system” (Rastogi and White, 2009, 314) thereby giving them a voice and the possibility to take action.

3) Awareness-rising and exercise of pressure

The activities of all of the female vigilantes described in this paper, including the violence perpetrated by them, has drawn international attention to social problems that would otherwise have been overlooked or ignored, and has forced those in power to recognize these problems. In fact, when female vigilantism occurs, it is almost sure to attract the attention of the media. This, in turn, often has the effect of national and/or international organizations and NGOs becoming aware of the intolerable situation that has led these women to believe that violence was the only option they had left to protect themselves. And this, in turn, forces officials to recognize their problems. In fact, the activities of all of the female vigilante groups described in this paper have been covered more or less extensively by the press, and the Gulabi Gang and Red Brigade have even been awarded for their dedication to women's causes.

We have already looked at the national and international attention that the Ni Una Más movement managed to attract, as well as at how this has forced Mexican politicians to react. Another example consists of the numerous press articles, TV reports and books that have been published on the Gulabi Gang. There are even two documentaries about the gang: “Pink Saris” (2010) by Kim Longinotto and the award-winning “Gulabi Gang” (2012) by Nishtha Jain. In 2012, the gang's
founder, Sampat Pal Devi, got invited to participate in season 6 of the Indian reality TV show “Big Boss”, which is similar to the more well-known “Big Brother” format, and decided to make use of this occasions in order to increase the public visibility of the gang. As a result of the overwhelming response to the group's activities, Sampat Pal Devi not only got invited to a private meeting with Sonia Gandhi (Fontanella-Khan, 2013, 152), but was also encouraged by politicians to participate in Assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh, and is regularly invited to national and international meetings, events and conferences on women's issues.

d) Long-term impact

1) Negation of gender stereotypes

The immediate concern of female vigilantes is with self-protection against male aggression, and this is why they do use violent means of self-defense in specific situations. However, even if the perceptions, strategies, and goals of the female vigilantes presented in this paper might be different from those of Western activists and feminists, it seems as if most of these vigilantes do pursue the long-term goal of empowering women and changing gender stereotypes. In fact, they are clearly trying to bring about a situation in which they can live in safety and dignity and where they can act self-determinedly and independently of men. This is what empowerment is, even if these vigilantes use violence as a last resort in order to achieve it, and some Western activists might not agree with this strategy. Whatever one's opinion on the legitimacy of violence as a means of empowerment, the question that will be explored in this sub-chapter is if, in the long run, female vigilantism is efficient in changing gender stereotypes and thereby empowering women.

Thanks to the large media coverage of their activities discussed above, female vigilantes “overturn the false assertions that nonviolence and passivity are feminine characteristics” (Graham-Bertolini, 2011, 9) not only in their communities but also in their home countries and abroad. In fact, through their activism, fearlessness and recourse to violence, these vigilantes slowly but surely change the historically assumed role allocation of men as either the perpetrators of crime or the protectors of “the weaker sex”, versus women as either the victims of male violence or as being rescued and protected by men. Their activism and violence – that is, their “laying aside of typical 'womanly' behavior”(Ibid., 6) – reveal “the 'assumedness' of femininity […], thus exploding gender myths of what constitutes 'masculine' and 'feminine' conduct” (Ibid.). Whether or not they manage to achieve all of their aims, the very existence of female vigilantes demonstrates that there are women who refuse to keep on living in a society where they are seen as weak and inferior to men, and refuse to
keep on relying on men for their protection and survival. It also “suggests the limits of the women's capacity, however subjugated, to tolerate sexual violence and social classifications” (Sen, 2009, 9). Instead, they take action. And since the female vigilantes presented in this paper are not isolated cases, but operate in groups, and sometimes in large numbers, their actions have forced men to react. Interestingly, ever since it has become impossible for men to ignore the demands of these vigilante groups, more and more of them have decided not to oppose but to support them. Indeed, in the cases that have been analyzed in this paper, the emerging role for men seems to be that of male advocates who help and support female vigilantes. From the self-defense teacher who gives free lessons to the Red Brigade's members to Sampat Devi Pal's closest collaborator Babuji, more and more men seem to be ready to not only accept but to actively support the activism and empowerment of the women around them.

2) Changing perceptions of violent women

In addition to negating assumed role allocations, the female vigilantes described here also change the ways in which violent women perceive themselves and are perceived by society. The “double standard of aggression” as described by Anne Campbell (1993) does not seem to hold any longer. For women, aggression is commonly equated with a failure of self-control, while for men, it represents the imposing of control over others (Gilbert, 2002, 1275) and “Many women who commit violence, including homicide, are alone with their victims, whereas saving face usually involves humiliation and the attempted prevention of it in front of others” (Ibid., 1276). Female vigilantes overturn these “rules”. They commit violence openly and in groups, but instead of being ashamed of their violent behavior, they use violence in order to publicly shame the perpetrators of violence against women. Violence, here, is not perceived as a failure of self-control, since female vigilantes make conscious and rational choices about when to resort to violence. While it has been argued that same-sex spectators remind a woman “of the norms about restraint shared by the community of women” (Ibid.), female vigilante groups create spaces where female onlookers can actually encourage female violence, a phenomenon usually associated with male behavior. The fact that more and more people, including men, voice support for the activities of female vigilantes suggests that violent women are not seen as “either mad or bad” (Ibid., 1282; Fitzroy, 2001, 11) anymore, but are perceived in more nuanced ways. In India and Mexico as well as internationally, most people do seem to realize that they are not engaging in spontaneous mob violence, but resort to ethical violence only in specific cases and with clearly defined goals. While Gilbert (2002) has pointed out that “Society needs to see violent women as different – either as mad or bad – because
otherwise, we would need new discourses to understand that both men and women can be violent” (1282), the female vigilantes presented in this paper seem to have encouraged many people to think about possible new discourses to understand their violence. It seems as though society might finally be ready to accept that women, too, can act violently without necessarily being mad or bad. In fact, Fitzroy (2001) has criticized that “The process of individualization [describing women as mad or bad] has failed to critically engage with the social, personal, or geo/political context which may have impacted upon or informed a woman’s choice to offend” (11). However, most newspaper articles, books and documentaries on female vigilantes do take into account the social, personal, or geo/political context in which these women decided to meet violence with violence.

**e) Limits**

To conclude this part of the paper, we will now look at some some reasons why the long term impact of female vigilantes, and more specifically the impact of the illegal violence perpetrated by them, might be limited. Sen (2012) points out that while, “Historically, neighborhood vigilantism has proved to be an effective, short-term response strategy for localized forms of gender violence (Sen and Pratten 2007; Oomen 2004)” [...] these acts of retribution have often presented feminist scholars and activists across the world with a moral predicament (Baccheta and Powers 2002)” (2). In order to illustrate this argument, the author points to scholarship that “has underlined reasons why women's illegal task forces (despite their limited successes) cannot be entirely celebrated as their agency to resist patriarchal cultures has not been bound by the aims and aesthetics of long-term feminist action (Parashar 2010; Ayyildiz 1996)” (Ibid.). One reason for their inconsistency with the aesthetics and aims of most branches of feminist thought is that “some women's vigilante groups [...] attack women across religious and ethnic divides (CNN Wire Staff 2011; Mason 2000)” (Ibid.). However, this does not apply to the vigilante groups described in this paper.

Sen furthermore underlines that “there are historical limits to viewing ordinary, non-militaristic women as perpetrators of violence and persecutors of men” (Ibid.). In order to demonstrate this, Sen refers to a study by Carden-Coyne (2008) which explores the “testimonies of wounded soldiers manhandled by female nurses as feminist revenge during the First World War” (Ibid., 11). This study suggests that, “after an initial round of applause for the women”, these acts have not had any long-term effect, but instead, “instigate[d] public amnesia” (Ibid.). Sen, citing Sharma (2011), concludes that, “women who are good 'bad citizens' occupy an uncomfortable position in the public.
imagination” (Ibid.). While Sen is right to point out that there are historical limits to how female vigilantes are perceived, there is no reason why this should not change over time. While female vigilantism still causes controversies, it also enjoys more and more support. That the acts committed by female nurses during the First World War did not have any long-term effect does not mean that the acts of today's female vigilantes will not either.

Another point that Sen makes is that, in India, “despite the pro-women stance of local female gangs, their collective actions [can] only be accurately peddled as a variety of soft feminism (Sen 2007)” (Ibid., 5). Using the example of the Gulabi Gang, she explained:

“Gulabi Gang members thrashed husbands but stopped short of urging abused wives to leave their marital homes. [...] This suggests that the gang members abstained from developing a radically liberatory voice, and refrained from dismantling rural families; instead, preferring to redomesticate village women by enabling the latter to lead better conjugal lives and carry on familial duties under safer conditions. Even committed gang members did not abandon their households, but resorted instead to negotiations with their families for permission to continue their participation in gang activities. [...] Educated gang members have played a leading role in inventing slogans on women’s employment and education, but they have not devised a rhetoric of emancipation (from men and marriage). Globally, female vigilantism eventually achieves only partial social freedoms for women, while continuing to operate within the constraints and constants of patriarchal structures (Sen 2007)” (Ibid., 5-6).

An example from Fontanella-Khan's (2013) study on the Gulabi Gang illustrates this claim. The author describes how Maya Goswami, a “victim of horrific domestic violence”, turned to the Gulabi Gang for help. She had been beaten with broken glass, and had gone through domestic agony for years. When her husband had died, his brother had offered to marry her, but only “to get back the small parcel of land that her late husband had let Maya” (219). Following this,

“The land was swiftly transferred over to her second husband after the marriage, and following the loss of her only property, Maya was kicked out onto the street. Maya's mother-in-law allegedly threatened to attack her with skin-corroding acid – a common threat made on women in the Indian subcontinent – if she returned. [...] Concern for retrieving the inheritance bequeathed to Maya was also the reason why, prior to her eviction, her mother-in-law allegedly had forced her to take abortifacients when Maya discovered she was pregnant with her second husband's child: Maya's mother-in-law did not want an heir to have any claim to the land. It was after one of her many violent confrontations with her in-laws that Maya, badly injured, sought the help of the gang” (Ibid., 220).

However, in response to the injustice and inhumane treatment that Maya had had to endure, the members of the Gulabi Gang did not ask her mother-in-law to return the parcel of land to Maya that she had inherited from her first husband so that she could use it to provide for herself and lead a life independently of the family that had treated her so badly for such a long time. Instead, they surrounded the house of Maya's mother-in-law and, armed with bamboo laathis, “threatened to knock down the property and come with thousands of other women from across the region if
Maya's mother-in-law did not welcome Maya back into her home and let her live in peace” (Ibid.). To this day, Maya lives with the very family who abused her mentally and physically, but she is happy with the situation, since they let her do what she wants and she can participate in the activities of the Gulabi Gang. This shows that most Indian women, including vigilantes, are still dependent on their fathers, brothers, husbands, and in-laws. This could be due to the fact that they cannot imagine any other way of living. However, in the case of the Gulabi Gang, the Red Brigade and other poor women, the reason is probably that they have little other choice in order to survive, and that these groups often do not have the financial means to offer victims of abuse shelter and food. In the long run, as we have seen, their vigilantism and their efforts to empower and educate girls and women might change this situation, as they contribute to creating a society in which strong and independent women are valued. In such a society, they might soon be able to find jobs and leave abusive relationships without being condemned by their communities. In fact, even “critiques of women's vigilantism acknowledge that collective acts of aggression create new feminine social linkages, which, in turn, allow certain women's groups to acquire physical and social mobility (Blee 2008; Sen 2006)” (Sen, 2012, 2). This mobility is the first step to empowerment and liberation.

Another concern about the rise of female vigilantism that should be mentioned, expressed for instance by the director of the New Delhi-based Center for Social Research, Ranjana Kumari, is that “On one level, it may sound as if women are empowering themselves, but it is also a disturbing development. Does the responsibility for women’s protection lie with the women themselves or with the state?” (Lakshmi, 2014). In fact, it is states that must respond to the problems of violence and discrimination against women. Therefore, female vigilantism can only be a short-term response to these problems, not a long-term solution. Female vigilantes contribute to creating an environment in which women will no longer have to resort to violence in order to protect themselves. However, they should cooperate with and ask authorities for support whenever possible in order to create this environment as fast as possible.

Finally, the analysis of media reports on women in the mixed autodefensas of Guerrero and Michoacán showed that they did not seriously challenge traditional assumptions about women's roles in Mexican society, but instead emphasized stereotypical views of women as mothers and objects of male desire. Therefore, one has to conclude that it is mainly all-female vigilante groups who might be able to trigger the above mentioned short and long-term impacts, while mixed vigilante groups, in the worst case scenario, might reinforce stereotypical views of women's roles within society.
f) Conclusion and directions for further research

To conclude, the female vigilantes presented in this paper clearly have a positive short and long-term impact on society. In spite of the limitations listed above, they significantly contribute to the improvement of living conditions for people within their respective communities, especially of those of girls and women. I do not agree with Rastogi and White's (2009) conclusion that “violent retributive activities do not challenge fundamental structures of domination in society over the long term” (324) nor with Sen's (2012) conclusion that “Globally, female vigilantism eventually achieves only partial social freedoms for women, while continuing to operate within the constraints and constants of patriarchal structures” (5-6). There might be female vigilante groups for which these claims are true, but they do not hold as a general conclusion. In the case of the female vigilantes presented in this paper, we have seen that the conclusions drawn on women participating in the autodefensas of Michoacán and Guerrero were mixed, as they do not act independently of men and the media sometimes portray them in a way that highlights the inequality between them and their male comrades. Concerning the Ni Una Más movement, the Gulabi Gang and the Red Brigade, however, this paper has demonstrated that they clearly contribute to the betterment of society. They might not be in a position where they have the means and influence to radically change their communities, but it would be unrealistic to expect them to be able to achieve this in the short run. Considering the highly oppressive and violent contexts in which these women live, the manifold activities and services that they have developed are already revolutionary. And by showing their communities – and the world – that they want change and are ready to fight for it, they have taken the first step to reforming society. Today, there might still be flaws in their strategies and limitations to their impact, but they have already achieved a lot, and each and every of their small achievements contributes to long-term change in their communities. However, it is obvious that it takes a long time to make such change happen.

In a nutshell, female vigilantism seems indeed to have “transformative and dynamic properties [...] that support and empower the potential for equitable and viable female agency (Graham-Bertolini, 2011, 4). In fact, the diversity of the activities undertaken by most of the vigilantes described in this paper prove that they do have a long-term, collective vision of what they would like to achieve: in addition to their short-term goals of protecting themselves against male aggression and providing their communities with services and support on a day-to-day basis, they also clearly work towards their long-term goal of empowering women. In fact, by giving women a voice and creating an environment for them in which they can act more self-determinedly and more independently of
men, as well as by negating commonly assumed gender roles and prejudices about violent women, they might be able, in the long run, to change the place that is assigned to women within their respective communities, thereby improving women's living conditions and liberating them. The success and popularity of female vigilante groups is a proof of “the power of informal women's collectives to implement change without elite intervention or leadership” (Sen, 2012, 10).

However, if the Ni Una Más movement, the Gulabi Gang and the Red Brigade clearly contribute to the betterment of society, this is in large part thanks to their peaceful activities, not through the violent acts that they perpetrate. As we have seen in this paper, violence merely represents a starting point for these vigilante groups: it is used in order to gain the attention and respect of the community, especially of its male members and of officials, and thereby enable the women to carry out their manifold activities. He have also seen that members of female vigilante groups, especially of the Gulabi Gang and the Red Brigade, “are increasingly called upon by men to challenge not only male authority over women, but all human rights abuses inflicted on the weak” (website of Sampat Pal Devi). These findings are consistent with Rastogi and White's conclusion that Gulabi Gang members are “women with grassroots feminist sensibilities, offering psychological, social and justice-related assistance” (2009, 314), as well as with Graham-Bertolini's claim that female vigilantism can be described as a form of “constructive collective enterprise” (2011, 6).

These findings indicate that an important direction for further research lies in the exploration of more traditional scholarly work on activism and social movements. It would indeed be very interesting to analyze female vigilantism from a perspective where the phenomenon is seen as part of more traditional forms of collective action. This approach would allow the researcher to refer to the abundant literature available on social movements, and on the role that violence can play within them. Traditional scholarly work on activism and social movements that would be helpful in this context includes, for instance, the work by Sidney Tarrow (1994) on “protest cycles”, also known as cycles of contention or waves of collective action, which help explain the rise and fall in social movement activity, described by the author as being related to cyclical openings in political opportunity which create incentives for collective action. Another important work by Tarrow, developed in cooperation with Doug McAdam and Charles Tilly, concerns the concept of “contentious politics” (Doug, Tarrow and Tilly, 2001; Tarrow and Tilly, 2006), which explains how dynamics of social protest are tied to their social, political and economic contexts. With regard to the study of vigilantism, this concept is important both as a field of study and as a methodological approach, because, amongst other things, it helps describe the use of disruptive techniques to make
a political point, or to change government policy. Another important contribution to the study of social movements by Tilly (1995) is the conceptualization of the “social movement repertoire” which describes “a limited set of routines that are learned, shared, and acted out through a relatively deliberate process of choice” (264). These routines “emerge from struggle” and change over space and time (Ibid.). The concepts of protest cycles, contentious politics and repertoires are particularly relevant to the study of vigilantism because they help describe and explain the repression of social movements, as well as consequences of, and reactions to, such repression. The latter include militants' adaptation techniques and their turn to violence (Steinhoff, P.G. and Zwerman, G., 2013).

The issue of social movement repression is particularly important to further the study of the Ni Una Más movement, and has been explored in more detail by Hélène Combes (2009) and by Daniela Cuadros and Daniella Rocha (2013), amongst others. Some other sources that are relevant to further research on female vigilantism include work by Étienne Penissat (2009) on the occupation of premises – a strategy used by the Gulabi Gang – and work by Lucie Bargel and Xavier Dunezat (2009) on gender and activism – especially important with regard to the study of women within mixed vigilante groups.
Sources

a) Books:


Staudt, K. (2009b) Violence at the Border: Broadening the discourse to include Feminism, Human


b) Journal articles:


c) *Press articles:*


**d) Human Rights reports:**


**e) Websites and Blogs:**


Pal Devi's website: http://www.gulabigang.in/


Red Brigade blog: http://red-brigades.blogspot.fr/

Red Brigade website: http://redbrigade-lucknow.com/

f) Videos:


