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# Women, violence and tourism: modes of domination in the Mexican Caribbean

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## ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyze and determine the factors that reinforce the precariousness experienced by women in Cancún, Mexico's most important international tourism city. For this research, we follow the literature on the structure of coloniality, as well as critical research on the relations between domination and violence against women. We identify three aspects. First, the mechanisms inherited from the social differentiation since colonization between central (Western) and peripheral (non-Western) actors. Second, the fracture of the social fabric built by tourism between tourists and locals. Third, the patriarchal structure that particularly affects women. We ask ourselves to what extent the democratization process has not modified a postcolonial society for women. We show this through the study of a threefold event: a femicide, the protest it triggered and the implausible repressive response of the state. We realize that bringing the debate on femicides to the public arena in Cancún implies a significant barrier (because the city depends on its international reputation). Usually, research on the subject concentrates on one or two variables; our work contributes to the state of the field by intertwining multiples ways of domination experienced by woman who suffer most from the so-called intersectionality (racism, classism, xenophobia, heterosexism). This allows us to understand how and why women in civil society demonstrating against gender violence can be repressed with impunity. We conclude with the fact that oppression is physical but also legal (justice and Rule of Law) and that both are pending issues in the democratization process.

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## Mujeres, violencia y turismo: modos de dominación en el Caribe mexicano

### RESUMEN

Este artículo pretende analizar y determinar los factores que refuerzan la precariedad que viven las mujeres en Cancún, la ciudad turística internacional más importante de México. Para esta investigación, seguimos la literatura sobre la estructura de la colonialidad, así como la investigación crítica sobre las relaciones entre la dominación y la violencia contra las mujeres. Identificamos tres aspectos. Primero, los mecanismos heredados de la diferenciación

social desde la colonización entre actores centrales (occidentales) y periféricos (no occidentales). Segundo, la fractura del tejido social construido por el turismo entre turistas y locales. Tercero, la estructura patriarcal que afecta especialmente a las mujeres. Nos preguntamos hasta qué punto el proceso de democratización no ha modificado una sociedad postcolonial para las mujeres. Lo mostramos a través del estudio de tres eventos: un feminicidio, la protesta que desencadenó y la respuesta represiva del Estado. Damos cuenta de que llevar el debate sobre los feminicidios a la arena pública en Cancún implica una barrera importante (dependencia de su reputación internacional). En general, las investigaciones sobre el tema se concentran en algunas variables; nuestro trabajo contribuye al estado del campo al entrelazar las múltiples formas de dominación e interseccionalidad que experimentan las mujeres (racismo, clasismo, xenofobia, heterosexismo). Esto nos permite entender cómo y por qué las mujeres que se manifiestan contra la violencia de género pueden ser reprimidas impunemente. Concluimos con que la opresión es física pero también legal (justicia y Estado de Derecho) y que ambas son asignaturas pendientes en el proceso de democratización.

## 1. Introduction

Since the 1960s, many instances have suggested a need for the development of the tourism sector in countries considered as “developing”; even assimilating it to an “industry”. Thus, at the Rome Conference in 1963, leaders of the United Nations believed that developing countries:

[A]cted rightly in giving priority to tourism as a means of earning foreign Exchange, but that they should at the same time take into account the value of tourism as a means of developing new industries and services, especially building and transport in areas particularly suited to that type of development. The growth of service industries would not only provide prosperity and employment in those areas, but would also afford a basis for the growth of other consumer trades. (UN 1963, 22)

Needless to say, recent publications have shown the abysmal contrasts between the failure of such development: namely, the failed prosperity for local populations with poorly paid jobs and precarious working conditions (Blázquez and Cañada 2011) and the anarchic urbanism or real estate speculation, the lack of attention to the ecological aspect or natural preservation (Marín, Palafox and Zizumbo 2020; Marín 2012) as a consequence of developing tourism.

On the other hand, as most analysts have pointed out, Mexico began to experience a process of democratic opening at the end of the twentieth century, mainly and necessarily focused on electoral aspects. It is undoubted and unquestionable that the contemporary political regime is more democratic and less authoritarian than during the seventy years of government of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (1929–2000), often considered as a one-party state (Sartori [1976] 2012, 285). However, some contemporary authors observed the dissatisfaction that comes from having given centrality to the electoral aspect, omitting, among other things, a Rule of Law and a politically active citizenry. According to Olvera Rivera

(2010, 19), the democratization process was not only unfinished electorally, but its development was also frustrated because it does not promote a citizenship that articulates demands from “below” (civil society) and responses from “above” (political society) in a fluid and satisfactory manner. For this reason, Olvera Rivera (2010, 16) considers it important to “democratize democracy”; that is, to expand and strengthen the Rule of Law so that, from the political-electoral rights for all, other social rights can be obtained for those excluded, racialized or sexualized: indigenous peoples, unskilled workers, women, the LGBT+ community, migrants, among others.

These are indispensable precedents to understanding that neither the tourism economy nor democratization have modified the hierarchies inherited from a post-colonial society. As a hypothesis, we propose that they continue to be burdens that establish the basis of a fractured society between extreme opulence for tourists (Western and/or wealthy Mexicans) and labor marginality (Mexican middle and lower classes), linked to the racism, classism and sexism in Mexico. This shows that the class dimension is also part of the intersectionality of the problem.

The objective of our work is to analyze the city of Cancún, which receives 30% of the country’s tourism revenues (third largest foreign exchange earner after oil and remittances), as well as 90% of the economy of the state of Quintana Roo (Oehmichen 2020). In terms of practical issues, Cancún’s success brings with it multiple failures that we seek to understand. On the one hand, the disadvantageous, fragile and vulnerable socio-economic or labor conditions in which local workers live, imposed by hotel chains or other multinationals. On the other hand, the asymmetrical racial conditions generally suffered by the same discriminated population in a tourist center where thousands of foreigners (white Westerners) converge. And finally, a relation of domination, closely linked and complementary to the previous ones: gender violence and access to a decent justice system for women. It is for this reason that we are obliged to use intersectionality as a concept that illustrates that the problem lies “at the intersection of race and gender [which] makes our actual experience of domestic violence, rape and remedial reform qualitatively different than that of white women” (Crenshaw 1991, 1245). However, we do not assume in any case that the category of women, as Hernández and Suarez state, is homogeneous and only linked to sexual or biological differences, but that it is far from being independent of other categories such as class, race and ethnicity (Hernández Castillo and Suárez Navaz 2008, 88). Indeed, what Cancún reveals is the structure of domination through which certain tourists (foreigners and upper-class Mexicans) rely on marginalized sectors of the national population, but mainly women.

Thus, following Bourdieu (1998, 40), the state ends up “somatizing the social relations of domination [...] ratifying and duplicating the prescriptions and proscriptions of private patriarchy in the public sphere” (1998, 120), reflected in a conservative society such as the Mexican one (Aragón Falomir 2021b). However, for Rita Segato, as a Latin American woman, the construction of the current state is a consequence of coloniality-modernity (Segato 2016). Segato adds that masculinity is exercised at all socioeconomic levels or origins; from the most miserable and indigent man to the most affluent, “any man must exhibit his potency, his power, to be considered a man” (in Berman 2022).

Without claiming to be exhaustive, in our methodology we have selected a triple event as case study: an individual femicide, the social movement it entailed and the state repression unleashed on 9 November 2020 (“9N”) in the city of Cancún. We selected these events following different criteria: 1) it was identified by Amnesty International and the National Human Rights Commission as an event of extreme gender violence; 2) it took place in an international tourism destination and had little media coverage; 3) it shows the differential treatment of local and foreign populations; 4) it involves the three types of violence enunciated by Butler (2015, 33–4): domestic, state and, by omission, of the state; 5) it exemplifies sexual violence in the public space; and 6) it allows us to show an example of intersectionality.

For those reasons, during the month of January 2022 and via zoom, semi-directive interviews were conducted with some members of the *Comité de Víctimas del 9N* (9N Victims’ Committee) who were present during the protests. 9N Victims’ Committee was formed at the beginning of November 2020 by the thirteen victims who were at the origin of the first legal complaints (three men and ten women – teachers, educators, chefs, reporters, journalists and activists with indirect links to tourism – and the two spokespersons of the committee were interviewed). Today only four members remain and follow all the administrative and legal processes; the other members have had to move from the city due to fear and harassment, others preferred to keep their mental health (Galarza 2022).

A bibliographic review of specialized and journalistic literature was also carried out. For reasons of space, other precarious groups, such as people with dark skin tones and migrants, were omitted. Although they experience racism and xenophobia, both of which are abysmal disadvantages for social advancement (Gómez 2020), the magnitude and dimension of the vulnerability and intersectionality of violence experienced by women due to their gender is incomparable (Crenshaw 1991; Segato 2016; Hernández Castillo and Suárez Navaz 2008). It is needless to say that these women generally belong to those groups with darker skin tones and/or migrants. Caputi and Russell (1992, 13) state that, according to numerous surveys, fear is experienced differently by each gender: men fear being laughed at by women, while women fear being killed by men. Mockery and death have no point of comparison.

The text is divided in three parts. Firstly, a theoretical framework that guides our reflection, articulating tourism, coloniality, feminism and democracy. The second section focuses on the concrete case of Cancún during the pandemic and the lockdown as a precedent of the event. In the third part, we describe the most relevant aspects that operated as a prelude to the event: the femicide that triggered the social movement and the state reaction.

## **2. Between tourism, coloniality, feminism and democracy**

### **2.1. The field of tourism: the fracture between nationals and foreigners**

The UN insisted that developing countries should, on the one hand, “provide a dual standard of facilities and services for foreign and domestic tourists respectively, because many foreign tourists were used to a higher standard of living and had different habits and preferences” (UN 1963, 22). On the other hand, it considered that “such countries might find it necessary to allocate a high proportion of their services to foreign tourists.

In that situation, the willingness of the local population to welcome visitors was an important factor” (UN 1963, 22).

This is the reason why, following these recommendations, some territories were “touristified” by proposing differentiated standards and facilities, which fractured both the social and spatial fabric of the population (Roche 2002, 317; López and Marín 2010, 238). However, many countries have opted for tourism (Costa Rica, Kenya, Mexico, Thailand, Cuba, Barbados, Bahamas, Dominica, etc.) or tourist resorts (Ibiza or Marbella in Spain, Jericoacoara in Brazil, Punta Cana in the Dominican Republic, Cancún or Tulum in Mexico).

Consequently, these territories absorb immeasurable amounts of population of both nationals (generally internal migrants) and foreigners (tourists and migrant workers). These constant population flows imply a rapid and aggressive transformation of the territory: spaces, modes of consumption and, above all, hierarchical relations of domination are transformed. All these sudden transformations, linked to this touristic “industry”, amplify the social burdens carried by each receiving society in particular, but, in general, they will almost always widen inequalities as the asymmetry of social relations persists. As suggested by the UN, while some live in a situation of vulnerability and marginality, others retain their higher standards of living, their habits and preferences.

Tourism has been described by López and Marín (2010, 226–8) as an economy linked to globalization, capitalism and Western mobility that produces spaces, meanings and experiences, linking dynamics of production and consumption of goods (spatial and symbolic) where natural places and local cultures (both symbolic and real) are commodified, spectacularized and folklorized to guide forms of onerous, exclusive and luxury consumption of the world’s tourist centers.

In this way we observe that, on a planetary scale, tourist cities appropriate ancient peoples and cultures in peripheral countries to adapt them in favor of Western populations that demand sun and beach, culture and/or entertainment (Macías and Pérez 2009; López and Marín 2010, 230). In this sense, Zukin (2000, 2) argues that “culture is increasingly the business of cities, the basis of their tourist attractions and their only competitive advantage”. In the case of the Mexican Caribbean, it proudly assumes the past of the Mayan civilization and its archeological sites “but it is lived as a dead thing, a matter for specialists or an irresistible magnet to attract tourism” (Bonfil 1987, 23). It is worth mentioning that both the Mayan archeological sites of Chichen Itza (one of the so-called Seven Modern Wonders of the World) and Tulum are located only 200 and 133 kilometers from Cancún, respectively. The area also offers “theme parks” (Xel’Ha, Xcaret) or “fantasy cities” that satisfy the consumer demand (real or imaginary) of the generally foreign tourist (López and Marín 2010, 230).

It is important to remember that this is taking place in a world that is increasingly fractured between Western and non-Western, colonial or post-colonial societies. The Guadeloupean intellectual Toumson (1998, 16–17) pointed out two consequences. On the one hand, a growing migratory phenomenon of people that, for economic reasons, put their lives at risk to go from the Global South to the Global North. On the other hand, the counter-movement of those who travel for leisure, which is diametrically opposed from the perspective of comfort: “the tourist migration” from North to South of those

who “are inscribed in the networks of planetary fluctuations that correlate distant geographies”.

For Oehmichen (2020), tourism brings to mind “an agricultural structure of monoculture that not only does not respect the environment, but is highly profitable for certain economic powers, the workers have no specialization, which allows them to abandon them”. The absence of labor rights made it easier for all the chains to settle in Cancún. The reference to monoculture evokes the sugar cane plantation system that existed during slavery, mainly in the Caribbean, when the structure of exploitation and domination was based both on a racial hierarchy of individuals and on a classification linked to the productive role they played, both in favor of the white Western sector and at the expense of native or enslaved peoples.

However, it is necessary to mention that not even all of the slaves were equal in colonial times. Also, generally because of race, some had better living conditions than others, as was the case of mulattos, who could claim to be inspectors or foremen; the only ones above them were the Western whites, generally plantation owners. In this way, critical sociology considers that domination was justified by the dominant allowing for social “ascension” to happen in order to show that it was plausible, although almost impossible in reality (Boltanski 2009, 176).

## **2.2. The social field and the fracture of coloniality**

The link between the plantations during the colonial era and contemporary tourism is also pointed out by Peruvian philosopher Anibal Quijano, who observes a continuity of racial hierarchy despite independence, in favor of mestizos or descendants of colonists. For this reason, Quijano proposes the concept of coloniality (instead of colonialism) to understand that, even without the colony, power relations continued in the same way. When colonialism was extinguished as a formal political system based on the exploitation of “inferior races” with non-wage labor forms (slavery, servitude, salaried labor, peonage), a new social power was born, based on prolonging the existing social classifications.

For this to occur, coloniality needs to link two entities that classify society in: 1) “races” (Western white, mestizos and non-Europeans) and 2) “classes” linked to labor power relations “according to the changing needs of capital, in each historical context (time and place)” (Quijano 2014, 611). It is important to emphasize that Quijano identifies an articulation between the various material relations of exploitation and labor to create racial identities and impose a symbolic difference that is grounded in real racism and domination (Quijano 2014, 757). Two other decolonial thinkers contribute to such reflection. Dussel (2016) proposes to speak of the Western (white) feeling of belonging to the interior, which implies considering the Other (non-Western, non-white) belonging to the exterior because of his condition of being different. In the same vein, Grosfoguel (2012) speaks of the zones of “being” (racially privileged) and of “non-being” (inferiorized and racialized by class, skin and gender). All three intend to contribute to the debate by showing how the oppression exercised on some sectors facilitates exploitation, subordination, exclusion and domination (Gómez 2021).

Such differentiation and unequal distribution of power is repeated when observing the contemporary situation of world tourism (and segregation), as spaces are again classified



as they were during the plantation era: at the top of the social pyramid, foreign tourists move in the illuminated hotel zone, while some national workers that work in the hotel or restaurant “industry” with unskilled jobs and few labor benefits continue to live in darkened residential areas with deficient basic services (public transportation, lighting, drainage, etc.) (Macías and Pérez 2009; López and Marín 2010, 230).

During an interview, a resident of Cancún (who is not blond but has white skin) stated that she began to see the multiple forms of violence when she opened her eyes and realized that she was subject to a better treatment and salary than those belonging to indigenous groups with darker skin tones, coming from the rural world or who do not have a university degree (Galarza 2022).

### ***2.3. Being a woman in the intersectionality of violence***

Our description so far concentrated on racial and socio-economic issues within the tourism sector. To these mechanisms of domination, we must include another deeply linked one that operates as a factor of social, labor and spatial differentiation: the one between the masculine and the feminine. The relations of domination are not evenly distributed between genders and, for this reason, Rita Segato coined the concept of the “mandate of masculinity” that allows us to understanding how patriarchal, racial, imperial and metropolitan societies construct a man who profiles himself as “normal” (Segato 2016, 16). In this way, everything else is reduced to minority subcategories: all other people who do not respond to these characteristics have a residual value, they are remains, they are “the others”, the “abnormal”, the minorities (Segato 2016, 16). Dussel also includes, among the Others, all women, as they live in a macho society at the social, sexual, economic, cultural and religious levels (Dussel 2016, 153). Grosfoguel (2012, 96–7) adds that, although Western women also experience oppression, they have resources that are not available to non-Western women, which tend to be exacerbated in a tourism-based society. For this reason, Bourdieu reminds us that women inhabit a double fracture in the inhabited spatialities: on the one hand, “separated from men by a negative symbolic coefficient” and, on the other, “separated from each other by economic and cultural differentiation” (Bourdieu 1998, 128–9). The differentiation between outside for men and inside for women is thus accentuated, exacerbating the gender distinction (Bourdieu 1998, 42–3).

In other words, to the condition of labor, race and class that imprints tourism and coloniality, we must include the suffering of women who live an intersectionality of oppressions; and, above all, the fear of losing their lives. That’s the reason why Judith Butler established the concept of precariousness to link all the violence suffered by women, identifying that there are segments of the population that suffer greater precariousness (socially and politically induced) and are more exposed to injury, violence and death. In fact, Butler considers that there is a differential treatment depending on the level of precariousness vis-à-vis the different types of violence: 1) arbitrary state violence; 2) street or domestic violence; or 3) other forms of violence not enacted by states but for which the judicial instruments of states fail to provide sufficient protection or redress (Butler 2015, 33–4).

It is important to mention that the third form of violence cited by Butler is of great significance because it speaks of systemic impunity or omission of the state deeply linked to being a woman. To these three, we must include another form considered by Caputi

and Russel in the 1990s: the distortion and journalistic coverage of femicides, rapes and assaults, which are often either ignored or mediatized “according to the victim’s race, social class and attractiveness (according to male standards)” (1992, 15). This complexity demonstrates the need to resort to the concept of intersectionality, as it makes social inequalities and their correlation (to race, gender, class and other individual characteristics) more visible. In this way, it is observed that the same individual can face multiple oppressions (racism, sexism, classism, ableism, heterosexism, xenophobia, etc.) and the more oppressions a person experiences, the more vulnerabilities (or precariousness) she is exposed to (Guimarães-Silva and Pilar 2020, 60).

It should be noted that the structures of gender division endure because they are not visible and are among the best concealed aspects of contemporary society, which allows the arbitrariness of a crass division to continue to be eternalized (Bourdieu 1998, 7–8). For this reason, Bourdieu reminds us that this social order reinforces male domination, based on a triple division of work, space and time:

The sexual division of labor, a very strict distribution of the activities assigned to each of the two sexes, their place, their time, their instruments; it is the structure of space, with the opposition between the meeting place or the market, reserved for men, and the house, reserved for women, or within the house, between the masculine part, with the home, and the feminine part, with the stable, the water and the plants; It is about the structure of time, the day of the agrarian year or life cycle, with the moments of rupture, masculine, and the long periods of gestation, feminine. (Bourdieu 1998, 22–3.

Regarding the definition of violence against women, the OAS (Organization of American States) defines it as “any action or conduct, based on gender, that causes death, harm or physical, sexual or psychological suffering to women, both in the public and private spheres” (in Hernández Ojeda 2020, 415). The Mexican Penal Code (article 325) defines femicide as a homicide against a woman for gender reasons, where it is important to identify that between the perpetrator and the victim there is a history of violence (in the family, a relationship, which may include threats or deprivation of liberty) that the body is exposed to and/or has signs of sexual violence. This legal definition is open to criticism because it is necessary to know and prove that there is a relationship prior to the act, which can be extremely complex and cumbersome, as stated by Merino, Zarkin and Ávila (2014).

For this reason, we prefer to consider the view held by Jane Caputi and Diane Russell (1992, 15) when they postulate that, “like rape, most murders of women by husbands, lovers, fathers, acquaintances, and strangers are not the product of unexplained deviance”. In fact, this definition allows them to typify, as femicide, the massacre of fourteen women committed by Marc Lépine in Montreal on 6 December 1989, shouting “you’re all fucking feminists”, and the subsequent inscriptions on the walls of Canadian universities, as in Ontario: “Kill feminist bitches” (Caputi and Russell 1992, 13).

#### **2.4. Democratization without feminization**

Indeed, the year 2000 was transcendental for Mexican politics, as the hegemony of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, defined as a “non-democratic authoritarian regime” (Linz 2000, 160, 181; Aragón Falomir 2021b), came to an end. Some authors defined

the year 2000 as the key moment of the end of the Mexican transition (Woldenberg 2012, 36), while recent publications have shown that, when analyzing the transition, it is important to contemplate the duration or timing of this sequence of five moments of this phenomenon, proposing that it concludes in 2018 (Aragón Falomir, Lucca, and Pérez Talia 2022). That is to say, the country experienced electoral fluctuations during the first two decades of the current century, bringing a more democratic process to certain areas while experiencing a regression in others. However, it is possible to affirm that the Mexican transition to democracy concluded in 2018 with a consistent change of its political regime (Aragón Falomir, Fernández and Lucca 2019).

At the same time, aside from an electoral perspective, multiple researchers proposed that the process was frustrated and that the country did not guarantee access to justice due to its high rates of impunity, violence, corruption, clientelism, lack of transparency and a disrespect for the Rule of Law (Hernández and Pansters 2012, 777; Durand 2009, 124). In other words, a Rule of Law that does not guarantee equal access to all individuals vis-à-vis political, administrative and legal institutions could hardly be considered fully democratic. For Acemoglu and Robinson (2012, 68), having dysfunctional institutions “is no error or ignorance, but it is on purpose”, as they can thus be used as a coercive mechanism against certain opposing groups; in this case, the judiciary.

The present article understands that, in the city of Cancún, the most vulnerable and precarious groups, in Butler’s sense of the term of precarious and/or vulnerable, are women. Not only do they have feminized jobs (maids, cleaning staff, waitresses or prostitutes in hotels, bars or brothels) but they also live in an urban area with many inequalities and increasingly normalized daily violence. In the same way, criminal groups have seen that the trafficking of women is another method of making money:

trafficking exists in all its variants, mules, prostitution, organ trafficking, kidnapping, forced labor, it exists and is something normal here. There are clandestine brothels, where women are pawned (by their own will or by their husbands), and can only leave once they manage to recover the money and pay it back. (Ramírez 2022)

There are also “paid escorts” to attend parties or meetings who have been murdered, which is linked, according to Galarza (2022), to Cancún being a tourist destination.

### **3. The Mexican Caribbean facing multiple pandemics: occupational, spatial, viral and sexual**

The Yucatan peninsula, where Cancún is located, has become for Mexicans what researcher Pedro Lewin Fischer calls “the North in the South” (in Contreras 2020), and for foreign tourists a new consumer product: “the Mexican Caribbean”. This entire coastal strip is an example of the way in which actors linked to tourism (businessmen and politicians) have been co-opting land, spaces and institutions (López and Marín 2010, 243).

#### **3.1. Vulnerability of the tourism model**

Framed in the Caribbean dynamics, the “Cancún project” was born in 1970 as a “substitute good” to fill the vacuum created by the Cuban Revolution (impossibility of travel for Americans). It is worth mentioning that, together with Brasilia, it is one of

the few cities founded from scratch in the twentieth century for specific purposes (one political and the other touristic). Cancun and Quintana Roo had 2,000 and 50,000 inhabitants respectively in the 1960s; today they have almost one million and two million, respectively (INEGI 2020). In the last five years alone, their population grew 11% (González Damián 2020, 4). It is an unprecedented growth that shows an extremely young city, recent institutions and an important migrant population expelled by violence or poverty from their states with little roots: “here you come looking for a better life [...] I come from San Luis Potosi [a conservative state] fleeing from machismo and double standards [people] are fleeing from the mentalities of their states”, says an interviewee (Galarza 2022). It is important to remember that recent publications have demonstrated the levels of conservatism in Mexican society (Aragón Falomir 2021b). By way of comparison, Mexico’s capital city had a population growth of 20% (from 1 million in the 1950s to 20 million in the twenty-first century), which is considered the source of most of its social and urban problems, while Cancún has had 500% growth.

Consequently, Cancún is, as one inhabitant describes it, a city lacking or deficient in urban planning, public institutions of higher education (there are no public universities) and social security, with a shortage of day-care centers for children or nursing homes for the elderly, and without mental health centers (Ramírez 2022; Fleuret and Marie dit Chirot 2021). In addition to these problems, there are other indicators that prioritize this phenomenon: robbery of homes and pedestrians, synthetic drug use, divorce, suicide (adults, adolescents and children), child prostitution, sex tourism and crime prevalence, among others (ENVIPE 2021, 12; Negrete Aguayo and Viveros García 2018; ENSU 2021).

The key problem is undoubtedly inequality, as most of the population lives impoverished and exploited with low wages (“justified” by low qualifications), an overload of work or extreme schedules, temporary contracts (subcontracting) and a dependence on tourist seasons (sometimes workers are dismissed during low seasons). Other aggravating situations can extend as far as the suppression of wages and dependence on tips in bars or restaurants (Cañada 2017, 66–71; Oehmichen 2020).

The second problem is the spatial fracture, as they reside in urban settlements called *regiones* or the “favelas” of Cancún (local slang to define the areas furthest from the city center, without any link to the Brazilian favelas), which were originally thought to invisibilize the local population; the tourist goes from the airport to the hotel zone directly without perceiving their existence. The higher the number, such as *región 259* (one of the most violent), the further away from the center. As mentioned by Oehmichen and Escalona (2020), the east of the 21 kilometers of the coastline is practically reserved as a luxury hotel zone, while the west is where the mangrove has been gradually destroyed so that new residents can settle, a place where a quarter of Cancún’s population lives (Flores 2021). The population generally identifies the road parallel to the coast that runs from North to South as the division of the entire Riviera Maya (130 kilometers of beaches and resorts stretching from Cancún to Tulum); as described by one interviewee:

It is a border that crosses and divides territories into social strata [...] What is near the beach [for tourists] and what is on the other side [...] is the new boom of piranha real estate developments, that is the greatest crime that has been committed in this city, the urban plundering by businessmen who build neighborhoods of identical houses with low quality materials with very long-term loans and very high interest rates for the workers.

Neighborhoods without schools, without social services, without drainage, without garbage collection, without lighting. These houses are traps for entire families. (Ramírez 2022)

Within the Riviera Maya, Cancún holds an important role (airport, hotel, restaurants, nightclubs, malls, etc.). This is the reason why the city of Cancún has been identified as a place of high social polarization, with stores and services of international prestige for cosmopolitan elites that make-up highly exclusive spaces (Oehmichen 2010). Throughout this area there is an uncontrolled and dollarized real estate bubble that shows the weak institutional and organizational control of the region. Despite the fact that Cancún receives millions of visitors who bring dollars, two worlds coexist: the sphere of high luxury consumption of the (inter)national elite, turning their backs on the consequences of such a model; and the misery of locals in search of the “North in the South”.

As a result, violence has increased in the Riviera Maya in recent years (homicides and femicides), often linked to organized crime cells. In fact, the homicide rates that can be observed in the state are among the highest in the country, with 33.3 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants, where 39 is the maximum and 15 the minimum (ENVIPE 2021).

### **3.2. Inequalities and pandemic**

Cancún’s relationship with the SARS-CoV-2 virus began early on, as, at the end of February 2020, the *Meraviglia* cruise ship (rejected by other ports on suspicion of a contaminated case) was allowed to dock on its shores. Subsequently, when the pandemic spread throughout the country, international airspace was closed from March to June. This resulted in the obvious cancellation of international flights and reservations and the resulting closure of hotels, restaurants, museums, stores and archeological sites.

In fact, according to the state governor, more than half of the state’s income comes from tourism, making it one of the most affected regions in the country. In fact, if the state had 2 million inhabitants (1.5% of the country) in June 2020, massive layoffs represented 91,000, the equivalent of 10% of the nation unemployed (González Díaz 2020). However, other authors identify the situation to be more serious, with almost 200,000 layoffs plus 400,000 undeclared jobs lost in the hotel sector alone (Oehmichen and Escalona 2020).

This scenario suggests that the population was severely affected. Flights were interrupted and, with the central element of the productive chain (tourists) gone, the entire tourist economy was forced to a close. In our interviews, we were told that many people were laid off without pay during the two months of quarantine. In Cancún, demand stopped and most workers in the service sector did not have the possibility to work remotely (Aragón Falomir 2021a) because they depended on tips (waiters or tour guides) or commissions (car renters, tour salesmen) or in-person jobs (cleaning staff); almost all were sent home without salary. On some occasions they were fired and on others they were asked to take a “solidarity break” to support the multinational chains surviving without wages (Oehmichen and Escalona 2020). Countless men and women, with no income, were locked up with their partners, loving parents, sons and daughters.

Thus, although the pandemic did not dramatically affect large transnational corporations, for workers it was a period that only exacerbated their already extreme labor

vulnerability. In other words, the coronavirus crisis revealed a problem that, although visible, had been omitted: betting on the tourism model that bulimically absorbs the masses implies economic fragility and a high dependence on external demand (Dehoorne, Cao, and Ilies 2018). A heated debate emerged during the year 2020 between saving the economy or the population. Although such an axiom may apply to everyone, in some places (especially those that are tourism based), as we have just observed, either option is a zero-sum game.

### **3.3. Lockdown for women: “stay at home . . . with your aggressor”**

The year 2020 was a rare period because, while the world was closing borders or demanding quarantines or tests (PCR or antigen), Mexico had less restrictive measures: a sworn declaration of not having symptoms. To save the economy, the government accepted the arrival of tourists under the respect of sanitary measures. Without competition, Mexico went from being the seventh most visited country in 2019 to third in 2020, according to the World Tourism Organization (González Díaz 2020). In spite of that, the 25 million international travelers that entered in 2020 was 44% less when compared to 45 million arrivals in 2019. That said, it is possible to identify that the most vulnerable groups are low-income women who are faced with unemployment and, sometimes, prostitution with foreigners who lead “respectable lives, who are Christians or Protestants, who have their families back home, but come here to ‘consume’ people that [are less privileged because they] do not earn 15 dollars an hour” (Ramírez 2022).

The aforementioned disparity of conditions is at the origin of all the violence in Cancún. According to the ENVIPE survey (2021), Quintana Roo went from being the eighth to the fifth state with the highest crime rate against women. The municipality to which Cancún belongs, Benito Juárez, is among those with the highest number of cases. Approximately one in three households has a victim. All these data show us that a female resident of Cancún is highly likely to experience the five types of violence (physical, sexual, psychological, economic and patrimonial) in the five key areas of life (partner, family, school, work and community) (Caputi and Russell 1992; Butler 2015; Bourdieu 1998).

Only a few months of lockdown were necessary to show that gender-based violence was on the rise, as one interviewee stated on 7 January 2022:

Before [Alexis’ femicide] there was Covid, and what triggered it was Covid and the restrictions for us to go out and protest. Before Alexis there were obviously many more *compañeras* who were victims of femicide [. . .] During the pandemic, and with this logo of ‘stay at home’, they didn’t realize that for many women that meant staying at home with your aggressor. Of course, that’s not to mention the restrictions to peaceful protest or to report domestic violence. The pandemic played a key role in this increase in violence without a doubt [. . .] It is a fact that the emergency number, 911, had many more calls for domestic violence. (Galarza 2022)

### **3.4. Violence in a violent country**

Unfortunately, Mexico is one of the most violent democracies in the world (Trejo 2020), although it is not experienced in the same way by all people and, above all, varies according to class, gender or skin types. As the ENVIPE (2021, 18) reveals, although the incidence of crime at the national level is higher among men in almost all crimes, in

sexual crimes women suffer eight times more (3,100) than men (246). Sexual crimes are defined as all types of sexual harassment or intimidation, groping, exhibitionism, attempted rape and rape. Another pollster agrees that, of the multiple situations of violence that can be observed, the only two indicators in which women are more affected are domestic violence (71%) and sexual assault/sexual exploitation (69%); in the remaining areas (employment, access to justice, health and education), there is a fluctuation of around 25% (Parametría 2017).

To identify what types of women suffer from rape, INEGI (2020) considers that they are women from urban areas (70%), young women between twenty-five and thirty-five years old (70%), with higher education (70%) and not belonging to native peoples (70%). Among the aggressions, 40% involve sexual abuse and 37% rape. For the male sex, homicides mainly involve young, poor people with low schooling. However, there are two important differences between homicides committed against women and men. The former is generally murdered in their homes (50%) and the use of firearms is not “very” recurrent (40%), while the latter are rarely killed in their homes (20%) and generally with weapons (70%) (Merino, Zarkin and Ávila 2014; INEGI 2021).

This data shows us that the aggressors of women are people close to the victims, but, above all, that the impetus or harshness used to hang, drown, beat, poison or stab them reveals a crass degree of violence that falls within “the most extreme form of sexist terrorism, motivated by hatred, contempt, pleasure or a feeling of ownership of women” (Caputi and Russell 1992, 15). Undoubtedly, femicide is the continuity of anti-feminist terror that includes verbal, physical, emotional and sexual abuse in most spaces (home, streets, work, schools, telephone), but also the social mandate of being heterosexual or becoming a mother (criminalizing abortion and contraception). As long as these result in death, they should be considered femicides (Caputi and Russell 1992, 15). In other words, what Rita Segato conceptualizes as the “mandate of masculinity” defined as a way of showing power over others, the mandate of power that takes six main forms: sexual, economic, political, warfare, intellectual and moral (Segato 2010, 24–358).

#### **4. 9N Women and the intersectionality of precariousness**

Using Butler’s above-mentioned notions of maximized vulnerability and exposure to violence by certain sectors of the population, we will now analyze how they all converged in our case study in Cancún. The first two (arbitrary state violence; street or domestic violence) in November 2020 and the others (not enacted by states but for which the judicial instruments of states fail to provide sufficient protection) during the following months (Butler 2015, 33–4).

##### **4.1. Prelude to the event: domestic femicide and state impunity**

In this section, we will analyze two events that, implicitly and explicitly linked, show the degree of precariousness in which Mexican women live in Cancún. The triggering event was an act of gender, street and domestic violence that took place on 7 November 2020, when a twenty-year-old girl named “Alexis” (Bianca Alejandrina Lorenzana Alvarado) disappeared and was found dead in a garbage bag the following day. Alexis is described, during an interview with one of her teachers, as a “*chica barrio* [girl-next-door], she came

from the toughest neighborhoods in the city [*región 259*], her family was not economically needy, but she had grown up in a tough neighborhood” (Ramírez 2022). Indeed, two years earlier, Alexis, aware of the violence involved in being and inhabiting the female body in Cancún, wrote on her social networks: “I am afraid to leave my house and never see my mom again” (Milenio 2020).

The socio-economic, work, racial and gender violence indicators mentioned above are relevant as a general scenario of the event that was, according to an interviewee, “the drop that spilled the sea, because a wave came” (the last drop in the sea, because then a wave came) to denounce situations of violence against women (Galarza 2022). The link between intersectionality of violence against women and the aggravation of their socio-economic situation during the pandemic has been widely demonstrated. A report published by OXFAM states that unemployment has had (and will have) a major impact on women,<sup>1</sup> especially as confinement measures affect the service sector, with tourism as the main industry (OXFAM 2022, 6). This is one of the reasons why, during our interviews, one of Cancún’s residents mentioned that its impact was first economical, and then physical. She stated: “economic violence, [since] we were all very bad economically. And that too, this domestic violence comes from economic violence. You no longer had the means to go out on the street, to have a job, and to send the one raping you to hell. [Confinement] meant that women stayed at home. It was a situation that tied your hands” (Galarza 2022). A feminist Latin-American researcher affirms that, “especially during this pandemic, something that had been mentioned some time ago was now exposed: the feminization of poverty [...] Poverty, we have all discovered with this pandemic, has color and gender. It is feminine and black; it affects the most vulnerable women, the poor, the indigenous, among others” (Goulart Almeida 2020, 19).

The most relevant aspect preceding the murder of Alexis is, therefore, the “fed up with Cancún” in the face of the impunity experienced by numerous victims of femicide. One of the protesters declares: “I am telling you that they are killing me [...] [and we decided] to take to the streets to say enough is enough, since [due to the lockdown] up to this point they had been virtual” (Galarza 2022). For this reason, the murder of Alexis provoked a social catharsis that mobilized numerous social circles, resonating with almost 1000 people demonstrating to demand justice for her murder of 9 November 2020.

Needless to say, in Cancún, the insecurity and impunity experienced by locals contrasts with the security for foreign tourists; as suggested by the UN, a differentiated treatment to the different population segments. Homicides of foreigners have important media and international coverage, but when they are Mexican, “they go up and down the internet” (Ramírez 2022). A treatment that, as mentioned by Caputi and Russell, is disproportionate. It is true that every city depends on its image to the outside world, but, in the case of Cancún, “the dead suffer from discrimination of color, race and social class” (Ramírez 2022).

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<sup>1.</sup>“The gender pay gap has widened: pre-pandemic projections estimated that it would take 100 years to close this gap; now it will take 136 years. In 2021, there were 13 million fewer women in employment than in 2019” (OXFAM 2022, 6). According to the ILO (International Labour Organization), job recovery will be much slower for women than for men (OIT 2021).



## 4.2. An event: state repression and “9N” social movement

A femicide is therefore the trigger for the protest that will take place on 9N demanding, from below, a top-down response to Alexis’ death. A member of the Victims’ Committee of 9N affirms: “[Protecting us] is their job, we are delegating it to them, but having these obscene indications of impunity throughout the country and in the state of Quintana Roo, what it entails is an environment of greater violence” (Comité de Víctimas del 9N 2021). For this reason, the protester and sociologist Julián Ramírez interprets, on one hand, that they seek to terrorize the citizenry to prevent them from protesting because “the most dangerous thing for an unjust state, [is] that [society] organizes itself”; and, on the other hand, because the population is tired of impunity, as he considers that “the real problem in why they continue killing women is because they can do it” (Comité de Víctimas del 9N 2021).

Therefore, on 9 November 2020, a protest was organized to march toward the Municipal Palace of Cancún. To find out who went to the protest, we turn to someone who was present. Ramírez (2022) mentioned in an interview on 14 January 2022 that

the people who were at the protest were neighbors, people and relatives with posters of disappeared women, relatives of other femicides, there were other collectives and this was a direct action of organized groups [...] by the way, there were many men.

The women decided to protest, according to an interview, for two reasons:

the victims are not so far away from us: they are our neighbors, they are the women around us, they are the women in our jobs, they are our relatives who are being murdered. We are not so far apart. And also, because we are afraid. We are afraid of being the next woman killed. (Galarza 2022)

What was not anticipated was for 9N to record a second act of violence at the hands of the state police who, despite being recorded, committed indiscriminate acts: beating, assaulting and firing bullets on the crowd, injuring numerous protesters, including one of our interviewees, who was the victim of two gunshot wounds to the leg. It is important to mention that this was not an isolated event, but was part of other homologous acts of violence and uses of firearms perpetuated by the state. As an example, other episodes were experienced by the population during police interventions, both against cab drivers (26 September 2020) and against citizens demanding the government to restore water and electricity in *regiones* 247 and 259, where Alexis lived (9 October 2020). In both circumstances, there was police repression, with officers shooting at civilians. In those areas (*regiones*), unfortunately, people “are used to being shot at” (Galarza 2022).

According to Amnesty International, on 9N, there were “men with uniforms that said Municipal Police on their backs, they fired semi-automatic pistols and rifles into the air” and, according to the same report, the arrests, mainly of women, were arbitrary (Amnesty International 2021, 41-2). This is how thirteen people, mainly women, were illegally deprived of their liberty, taken behind the Municipal Palace to be physically and verbally tortured, but above all sexually assaulted (anal and vaginal).

What the women experienced, between blows and screams, was a “psychological terror” (Santos Cid 2021). In emotional and sad statements, one of them declared: “I met all my fears: to be raped, to be disappeared” (Comité de Víctimas del 9N 2021). In interviews conducted by the Committee, the women recall the verbal violence exercised

~~by the police forces: “[They threatened us saying that] if we did not cooperate, they could disappear us”; “we are going to leave you worse than Alexis”; “we were whores, bitches and that is why they killed us, we deserved it”; “damn bitch, you are going to die right now, here your rights do not exist” (Comité de Víctimas del 9N 2021). According to the documentation gathered by Amnesty International, the use of violence against women by state authorities during the protest sought:~~

~~To teach and to punish [...] bad women who deserved to be punished for having defied the gender stereotypes that indicate that women should stay at home or in the private space and not in the public sphere, that which considers women as passive beings and not as holders of rights, and that which assumes that the means used by the protesters such as damaging or breaking things are not traditional women behavior. (Amnesty International 2021, 44)~~

### **4.3. The foundation-creation of 9N Victims’ Committee**

From this event, a month after 9N, about ten people decided to organize and start 9N Victims’ Committee. In a country with such high rates of impunity, one of the founders told us:

Despite knowing what our country is like and that this had happened before and that there had been impunity, I think we had a slight hope that this, because it had been so mediatic, was going to be resolved in a short time. When we saw that everything was being delayed, we decided to get all the victims together, to write the information down, what about your case? What happened to you? Where were you? It is important to say that we did not know each other. (Galarza 2022)

It is important to mention that the Committee has become “a new family”. According to one of its members, it “makes me feel I am not alone, it helps me to move forward” (Santos Cid 2021). This, in a city as new as Cancún, where “there is no community fabric or attachment to the land, [the population is] becoming politicized with social networks and they are beginning to formulate demands. And that makes the state nervous, and nervous people with guns, shoot” (Ramírez 2022). Therefore, a state used to not having political or social opponents, with extremely young institutions and bureaucracy, begins to be confronted by a group of protesters who, in an organized manner, demand in a “multiplicity of ways” to obtain answers from the state.

To date, no one was judged guilty of the 9N and only the Secretary of Public Security resigned for “moral responsibility” without having legal proceedings against him for Human Rights Violations. Members of the Committee confirm that both the Congress and the CNDH (Mexican National Human Rights Commission) betrayed them, as, without informing or consulting them, they took for granted the acts of reparation, integral access to justice, medical attention and compensation (Ramírez 2022). The resolution is “won” by Wendy Galarza and the CEAVEQROO (Executive Commission for Attention to Victims of Quintana Roo) dictates a payment of 138,000 Mexican pesos (USD7,000) as reparation for the damages and offers her medical and psychological attention. However, the latter were so deficient that the doctors only found one bullet (she had two) and that the psychologist, not knowing what to say in the face of the victim’s nightmares of being raped, recommended her to “smile, you look prettier”. Therefore, when she demanded quality care from CEAVEQROO, they sent her to private

specialists. In the end, she received only 8,000 Mexican pesos (USD400) because, when she demanded quality psychological treatment, CEAVEQROO attributed private therapists to her and, without informing her, deducted the price of this mental healthcare from the USD7,000 that was attributed to her initially (Galarza 2022).

For this reason, the Committee declares not being naïve in expecting a response from the state, although they expect to be heard and for their demands to be met: “there is no negotiation point, it is pain and it is anger” (Comité de Víctimas 9N 2021). Therefore, they explain:

Through documentation and testimonies, [that] these are the guarantors of non-repetition, since they are part of the collective memory. In a culture of struggle and protest. If we stop going out to demand justice because we were shot at, the political culture of this city will go backwards because we will go home in fear. So, what we do every month when we go out to protest [every ninth] is to scare the fear away. Every month we go and we kick that Municipal Palace. (Ramírez 2022)

#### **4.4. Selective justice: “shut up, this is Cancún”**

To understand the reasons behind their actions, Ramírez (2022) states that “this is how they were trained, and this is how they were accustomed to act, in total disregard for human rights [...] this is the police we have”. Access to a justice that is racist, classist and anti-feminist.

Regarding the perception of justice, only 24% of Mexicans trust the judiciary and 82% consider their access unfair or very unfair (Latinobarómetro 2021, 46, 70). Among the most discriminated sectors are the poor (23%), native peoples (9%), Afro-descendants (7%), homosexuals (6%) and immigrants (4%). Women, for their part, are present in all the aforementioned groups. In general, violence against women is exercised in the streets (48%), verbally (36%) and within the family (35%) (Latinobarómetro 2021, 100). We therefore observe that access to justice is unsatisfactory, that women are present in the different social groups discriminated against by the system, and that the female sex experiences violence in both public and private spaces.

Access to justice is also intertwined with issues of social class because, as Wendy Galarza comments, when she mentioned to police officers that she had a college degree, the treatment she received was immediately different because they assumed she would demand her rights. But also:

We went out to protest because we were enraged by the families of victims of femicide being deprived of justice, of being tossed aside all this leakage of information, investigations that were not transparent towards the families [who were told to] come later. We were seeing this because they are women from our community. We went out to protest because of the empathy we have for all those families who are going through a horrible legal process. (Galarza 2022)

On the other hand, for the lawyer of one of the victims, the arrests had a racial component “because the profile of the girls they arrested were all Mexican, and there were also foreign women protesting” (Santos Cid 2021). The treatment in all aspects is very different; justice does not say anything to foreign women who get drunk in the streets of the hotel zone, “of course because they are going to leave money”, while

a Mexican woman is taken to a preventive prison: “this generates social discontent” (Galarza 2022).

The 9N was a political discussion, a demand by minorities to clarify the homicides due to “the lack of adequate investment, of a security strategy that grants access to justice and medical attention to the victims, this is what is happening with women and we can’t stand it anymore: the political response of the state is ‘shut up, this is Cancún” (Comité de Víctimas del 9N 2021). To which Galarza (2022) adds, they told us: “Shut up because this is our tourist area, shut up because nothing is happening here, shut up because tourism is not going to come. [That’s why] I come to collect signatures and each signature will be one less tourist”.

## 5. Conclusion

For these reasons, it is possible to say that Mexico went from being a non-democratic regime to a more pluralistic one at the end of the twentieth century, improving mainly its electoral democracy. However, this process has institutional limitations (such as the access to justice) as well as limitations for its citizens (citizen participation, bottom-up demands and top-down responses) that show an unequal Rule of Law. Moreover, the racist, classist and sexist elements that remain latent and strong in Mexican society are observed throughout our research but are exacerbated by the precariousness of women’s lives and the risk of being killed in the country’s most visited tourist destination. Undoubtedly, the pending issue today is still to give equal social rights to all, regardless of class, gender or race. We agree with Amnesty International’s final recommendations, that it is essential to review the following: arbitrary detentions, excessive use of force and firearms, torture and sexual violence, women’s right to live a life free of violence, rights to freedom of expression and protest (Amnesty International 2021, 47–50).

The consequences of such an act continue to be physical and psychological, as well symbolic, as there have been no culprits. According to one of the protestors, the police chain of command is long and complex, but it must be verified in order to know who hired, trained and supervised the police who committed the violent acts described herein. At the same time, the same protestor expects 9N to remain a movement that prevents any other human rights violations to occur in the future, a fact acknowledged by the government (Ramírez 2022). It is important for the state to stop having unilateral conversations (such as the monument in honor of the victims of 9N, which does not represent anyone in the Committee and is rejected by its members) and start building channels of communication between political and social spheres to fulfill its main role of protecting everyone.

As for the future of 9N Victims’ Committee, it is getting involved in other social issues such as the construction of a shelter for Haitian migrants in Alexis’ former school (Galarza 2022). For this reason, 9N will continue seeking to be a space to express dissatisfaction and avoid human rights violations against the population:

Very humbly [we seek] to generate a political culture of demanding the state to mark a before and after [. . .]) We will not let go, the 9N speaks of the lack of attention towards a group that the state has already failed, since instead of taking care of us, its response was to shoot at us. (Ramírez 2022)

9N became a scar for Cancún, as Wendy Galarza states: “having a scar, all the time you are remembering it. The physical becomes mental. You feel it, you see it”. That is why Rita Segato says that it is in the female body that we may witness the failure of the state:

[Because] both assault and sexual exploitation are today acts of carnage and consumption of the body, that constitute the most precise language through which the reification of life expresses itself. The remains of the female body do not go to cemeteries, they go into rubbish dumps [...] These [male] powers have to be constructed, proven and exhibited, spectacularized, and are also fed by a tribute, an exaction, a tax that is taken from the female position, whose icon is the female body, in the form of female fear, female obedience, female service and the seduction that power exerts on female subjectivity. (Segato 2018, 11–45)

These concepts of the body and the scar show us that the future must be feminist and, for that, it is indispensable to dismantle the structures of such anchored domination. Like other socially marginalized and oppressed peoples around the world, Mexican women face all kinds of dilemmas and challenges as a consequence of intersectionality and coloniality in a place dominated by cosmopolitan tourism where they face fear and death. This text aimed to demonstrate a revealing fact about the situation in Cancún. However, we may ask, to conclude, shouldn't living in one of the most touristic cities in the world improve the quality of life for local women, as it does for its tourists?

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