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# Out of the Shadows: Women of the FMLN Guerrilla Army in El Salvador's Civil War, 1979–1992

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OUT OF THE SHADOWS:  
WOMEN OF THE FMLN GUERRILLA ARMY IN EL SALVADOR'S CIVIL  
WAR 1979 – 1992

BY  
ERICA GONZALEZ

*A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York*

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Women of the FMLN Guerrilla Army in El Salvador's Civil War 1979 - 1992

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Erica Gonzalez

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Out of the Shadows:

Women of the FMLN Guerrilla Army in El Salvador's Civil War 1979 - 1992

Erica Gonzalez

Advisor: Professor Kenneth Erickson

Over the course of a century, revolutionary movements have emerged every few years across the region of Central America, movements that fought for overturning dictatorships and confronting socio-economic inequalities. Women experience higher levels of poverty, human rights violations and discrimination due to gender inequalities. Representing 30% of the FMLN guerrilla army, women in El Salvador took a quantum leap into one of the most horrific and violent armed conflicts in the history of the country (Montgomery 123). Theorists have sought to explain why women became involved in the war. Experts of insurgent collective action agree that women's participation played a significant role in the revolutionary movement. Women served as party leaders, guerrilla fighters, doctors, radio respondents and care takers (Viterna 58). However, most theories also differ as to the motivations behind their participation. The following thesis will examine the political and socio-economic roots and movements responsible for creating a peasant uprising and forming the FMLN, particularly how women of El Salvador formed a revolutionary movement in a patriarchic country controlled by an anti-democratic, military regime. The following pages will examine how and why they became involved and the impact their participation had on civil society post-war.

## **Acknowledgement**

To my mother, whose unwavering courage and support taught me your roots do not define your  
capabilities

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## **Introduction**

Over the course of a century, revolutionary movements emerged every few years across Central America, movements that fought for overturning dictatorships and confronting socio-economic inequalities. Due to gender inequalities, women experience higher levels of poverty, human rights violations and discrimination in civil society. Representing 30% of the FMLN (Farabundo Marti para La Liberacion Nacional) Marxist guerrilla army, women participants took a quantum leap into one of the most horrific and violent armed conflicts in the history of the country. Theorists have sought to explain why women became involved in the war. Experts of insurgent collective action agree that women's participation played a significant role in the revolutionary movement. Women served as party leaders, guerrilla fighters, doctors, radio respondents and care takers (Viterna 58). However, most theories differ as to the motivations behind their participation. The following thesis will examine the political and socio-economic roots and movements responsible for creating a peasant uprising and forming the FMLN, particularly, how and why women of El Salvador were able to form a revolutionary movement in a patriarchic country controlled by an anti-democratic, military regime. The 12 year war in El Salvador ended with 80,000 people killed, 8,000 missing, 1 million displaced internally and over 1 million in exile (Lakhani 1). Human rights violations went unpunished for years, giving state security forces and death squads free reign to carry out mass killings as they saw fit. Women were left with few options for safety, protection and survival. As a result, a gender-based, revolution took hold.



## **Roots and Causes of the Revolution**

Since the early 1900's, there have been a series of complex moving parts within the Salvadorian government that drew civil society further away from being a democratic state. Government corruption and abuse was not unheard of in El Salvador. As early as 1833, peasant revolts broke out against state forces, and again in 1880, 1885 and 1898 (Viterna 22). The trend of peasant revolts continued for decades. In 1907, an Agrarian Law allowed landless laborers to be arrested for vagrancy and they were put to work on area plantations, thereby legalizing the same system of forced labor that had been unofficially practiced for over a century (Viterna 22). Rural judges were responsible for maintaining lists of day laborers and enforcing their work on area plantations. Workers were powerless against the authority of the state.

Another revolt occurred as a result of coffee prices plummeting with the worldwide depression in January of 1932, simultaneously threatening the livelihood of the middle and lower classes (Viterna 23). Peasant groups invaded coffee fields and killed landowners, attacked National Guard outposts, and occupied municipal offices, all in an attempt to take back the land stolen from their ancestors (Viterna 23). One group was led by Agustín Farabundo Martí, a Marxist leader for whom the FMLN was named. The rebellion ended in what is estimated to be 10,000 – 30,000 peasants who were slaughtered by the state's military (Viterna 23). There are two trends that have dominated the history of El Salvador for 400 years; (1) the increasing concentration of land to fewer people and (2) the growing number of security forces, whose job was to enforce work on the land and suppress peasant revolts (Viterna 23).

From 1932 to the early 1960's, the Salvadorian state was under military rule. This was a result of a mutually beneficial partnership between elite landowners and the military powers; the

elite landowners allowed the military to take control of the government, providing that their profits and ways of life were protected from threats (Viterna 23).

Before the civil war started in 1979, many of El Salvador's poor worked on plantations earning meager pay. An example of such a plantation was Tierra Blanca, located on the Hacienda California, owned by the Palomo family (Wood 1). Every morning the peasant workers of Tierra Blanca would pass the hacienda's security post, past the gun ports of the fortified bunker, through the gated entrance and past the soldier's quarters (Wood 2). Before the civil war, children of the same peasant workers believed they would grow up and work on the plantations like their parents, tending cotton and cattle, processing salt on the Palomo family's vast and well-guarded estate (Wood 2).

In the mid-1970's, residents of Tierra Blanca, frustrated with the status quo, joined local protests and strikes against the corrupt elite and government forces (Wood 2). They marched into San Salvador, once again this resulted in more military violence against the poor and middle classes (Wood 2). Increasing hostilities, in 1976 a coalition of landlords and military hard liners brutally derailed a reformist government attempt at limited agrarian reform (Wood 2). The state's responses to opposition, including peasant protests, was to meet them with brutal violence. Case in point, in 1979, the workers of the Hacienda California plantation led a strike against the owners for higher wages and better working conditions (Wood 2). As a result, National Guard troops responded by killing those in opposition.

The government of El Salvador consistently refused to acknowledge the injustices and crimes being committed within its borders. They refused land reform measures that would allow peasants to participate in the modern monetized economy, along with the middle-class who sought access to governmental decision-making (Weiss 175). Counterinsurgency became their

main doctrine. This resulted in widespread human rights violations, so much so, that it forced the Carter administration to suspend U.S. military aid to General Romero's regime (Weiss 175). By the end of his term, the ongoing armed conflict in El Salvador had gained international attention. In an attempt to regain influence, President Carter resumed aid to the Salvadorian military, but found it was too late (Weiss 175).

At the end of the 1970's, the country was headed toward civil war. Brutalized corpses of activists and their relatives seemed to appear overnight (Wood 2). Salvadorians were left with few options for safety, some fled to neighboring countries while others migrated to the United States (Wood 2). During this time, in order to provide international assistance, the Reagan administration's political strategy required the backing of a relatively strong reformist government (Diskin and Sharpe 62). But there were two governments in El Salvador: a reformist and relatively powerless civilian government led by Duarte, and a repressive and increasingly powerful military government led by Defense Minister Garcia (Diskin and Sharpe 62). Duarte's government had no control over the military, which complicated attempts towards reform and made fair elections impossible (Diskin and Sharpe 62).

The government's attempt toward addressing land-reform involved three phases. Phase I of the program addressed the expropriation of the largest estates, which had been launched quickly and expeditiously in the spring of 1980 (Diskin and Sharpe 62). However, violent acts by state security forces accompanied the path to reform. Shortly after the reform was announced, Jorge Villacorta, the under-secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture, announced his resignation due to the extreme violence against the very peasants who were the rightful 'beneficiaries' of the process (Diskin and Sharpe 62). Worsening contentions, the military and death squads targeted land-reform recipients, leaders of the cooperatives, and the Salvadoran Communal Union (UCS)

(Diskin and Sharpe 62). Phase II of the program was the most critical – as well as most opposed – in that it would have redistributed a portion of the oligarchy's coffee-growing lands to the corresponding workers (Diskin and Sharpe 62). Phase III, known as the "land to the tiller" program, aimed to give renters and sharecroppers ownership of small plots they had been working (Diskin and Sharpe 62).

However, the implementation was delayed for nearly a year after the law was passed. By early 1981, when the Phase III program began to receive applications to issue titles, land reform no longer had much support from the military (Diskin and Sharpe 62). Salvadorian land reform had expropriated approximately 700,000 acres out of the country's 1.6 million acres of cropland, 44% of the total, and transferred it to over 210,000 out of the 300,000 non-landowning agricultural families, reducing the number of tenants and landless laborers from 37% of the Country's total population to 11% (Prosterman 171). In order to avoid any reversals of ownership, formal titles needed to be issued to both co-ops and individual ex-tenants perpetuating their rights, and the modest compensation was due to be paid to ex-landlords (Prosterman 171). In addition, 110,000 acres of cultivated land and benefits needed to be resuscitated (Prosterman 171). Clearly the contentions against land reform lacked substantial footing.

On April 9, 1981, in the most popular protest demonstration in fifteen months, 10,000 peasants gathered in San Salvador to demand that their land reform be carried through to its full completion. During this time, there was much chaos and confusion about where the country was heading and whether a solution could be reached by democratic means. Old formulas could no longer work, particularly with the current political climate at the time that influenced the war. Case in point, according to a U.S. government audit, about one-third of the applicants for Phase

Ill land "were not working the land because they had been threatened, evicted or had disappeared (Diskin and Sharpe 65)." In reality, the peasant workers were targeted by a military group referred to as ISTA (Salvadorian Institute for Agrarian Transformation) (Crandell 152). ISTA was created to enforce agrarian reform (Diskin 1). However, from 1982 – 1984, the group was controlled and used by the military to identify and kill peasant leaders (Diskin 1). "One ISTA technician stated: "The troops came and told the workers the land was theirs now. They could elect their own leaders. The peasants couldn't believe their ears, but they held elections that very night. The next morning, the troops came back, and I watched as they shot every one of the elected leaders (Crandell 152)".

In June 1980, the Washington Post reported: "A squad of more than 20 men in the National Guard uniforms with complete battle dress and an armored car drove to a government agrarian location with a list of potential leaders considered to be subversive (Dickey 1). Twelve of the local directors who were supposed to carry out government-related reforms, were killed, and the 160 families living there fled in terror (Dickey 1).

In the 1982 elections, President of El Salvador's Constituent Assembly, Roberto D'Aubuisson, created ARENA (National Republican Alliance) (Diskin and Sharpe 63). D'Aubuisson united into the ARENA "the Broad National Front, made up of private business associations, antireform groups of coffee growers and cattle ranchers, young executives, a women's association, and a right-wing nationalist youth organization; the old ORDEN network, which D'Aubuisson had kept alive; and the civilian-military death-squad network that D'Aubuisson and the extreme right had organized" (Diskin and Sharpe 63). The FDR (Democratic Revolutionary Front), on the democratic left, fearing that public political participation would have been suicidal, as was its participation in reformist organizations after

the coup of 1979, boycotted the election (Diskin and Sharpe 63). The Reagan administration said this was proof that the FMLN's affiliated group, the FDR, was anti-democratic. Thus, with only the CD (Democratic Convergence), PCN (Party of National Reconciliation), and ARENA as the big players in the election, and with a boycott by FDR supporters who wanted reform, the ARENA won 19 seats and PCN won 14, to the CD's 24 seats, and thus the coalition of reactionaries controlled the parliament (Diskin and Sharpe 63). They elected D'Aubuisson for president of the Constituent Assembly and put ARENA in charge of the Agrarian Institutions and transformations, where they cut the budget for agrarian reform and pressured peasants to let ISTA technicians to take the place of their elected managers (Diskin and Sharpe 63).

In 2010, Serena Cosgrove contested that the role of civil society was at the core of the civil war, instead she argued that the central issue was the lack of access to the state, civil society not being involved in decision and policy making in determining how wealth and land were to be distributed more equitably (Cosgrove 159). However, there were a number of additional factors that caused economic, social and political disruption, including the years leading up to the civil war. Primarily, the government's failure to maintain law and order with their state military forces, contributing to a growing number of horrific human rights violations over a 12 year period.

## **Factors Leading to the Sustained Armed Resistance**

During the protest wave in the late 70's, peasants occupied coffee, sugar and cotton plantations and marched in downtown El Salvador, demanding land, credit, and state subsidized agricultural input (Almeida 6). Peasants revolted and occupied the town square (Almeida 6). Grievances, resource mobilization and religious conflict also created mass opposition towards the state's security forces. Leading up to the civil war, three overlapping institutions came together against the state's corrupt actions: the public and Catholic universities, the Communist Party and the Catholic Church, all of which were subject to politicization and growing increasingly critical of the status quo of the country and undergoing crises of identity (Grenier 43). All three institutions were committed to defending the moral, cultural and political vanguard of the people.

The steady erosion of democratic rights and public security created a huge disruption within civil society causing conditions that favored the rise of insurgencies. Human rights violations continued to be carried out by the state security forces and National Police, causing further disillusionment that a resolution would be reached. Tilly explains that the multi-dimensional concept of 'threat' aids our understanding of the specific mechanisms conditioning popular contention in regimes that roll back the liberalization process (Almeida 22). Collier and Hoeffler argued that rebellion is better explained by opportunity rather than by grievance and that the main determinant of opportunity is the availability of finance and recruits for rebels (Fearon and Laitin p.76). However, Fearon and Laitin agree the factors that determine both the secular trend and the cross-sectional variation in civil violence in this period are not only grievances, but rather, conditions that favor insurgency (Fearon and Laitin p.75). It is this thesis'

contention that the civil war in El Salvador, and the women's revolutionary movement, was the result of a perfect storm of conditions that favored insurgency. As a form of desperation leading to warfare, insurgency can be harnessed to confront political agendas and motivations, as well as grievances (Fearon and Laitin p.75). Such explains the rise of the Marxist insurgency comprised of workers, teachers unions, women's groups, student groups, peasant organizations and victims of the state's corrupt leadership.

The FMLN was made up of 5 Marxist groups: FPL (Fuerzas Populares de Liberacion Farabundo Marti), ERP (Ejercito Revolucionario del Pueblo), FARN (Fuerzas Armadas de la Resistencia Nacional), FAL (Fuerzas Armadas de Liberacion), and PRTC (Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores Centroamericanos) (Viterna 248). A declassified document from the Salvadorian Military archives estimated the following numbers in each of the guerrilla factions: FPL 3,300 - 3,750, ERP 3,050 – 3,600, FARN 1,300 – 1,550, FAL 800 – 1,100 and PRTC 550 – 700, totaling 9,000 – 10,700 of armed combatants (Viterna 251). According to Montgomery, the FMLN was able to arm themselves and protect their forces by purchasing arms from the international market using voluntary contributions from solidarity movements, one source of funding came from Western Germany, contributing over \$1Million in an "Arms for El Salvador" campaign (Montgomery 117). In addition to contributions, the FMLN acquired weapons by buying arms from corrupt officers in the Armed Forces, attacking army barracks and stealing their weapons (Montgomery 117). Eventually the FMLN became proficient in manufacturing their own weapons, hand grenades and land mines (Montgomery 117).

The FMLN's ideology promoted a socialist revolution. According to Grenier, the emergence of insurgencies routinely encompass three different sequences of events: the actual emergence of an insurgency, the epicenter of the revolution (this happens when the old regime is



overthrown and replaced by a new revolutionary regime), and the ensuing period of implementation of radical changes by the new government (Grenier 30). Ideology carries the most weight during the emergence of insurgency period. In addition to the previously mentioned approaches, Paul Almeida describes 3 principle threats generating collective action that often apply to states in the global periphery which include 1. State-attributed economic problems 2. Erosion of rights and 3. State repression (Almeida 22). The first being economic and the latter two are repressive, all 3 forms of threat in most times and places increase the costs of collective action (Almeida 22). “If the recipients of these threats are well organized, resourceful groups with an elaborate organizational infrastructure, greater levels of collective action and resistance are expected (Almeida 22).”

Almeida offers a few propositions to consider:

(1) Authoritarian governments in most times and places decrease the potential for social movement activity because of restricted access of the citizenry to state institutions, the lack of political and associational freedoms, and the heavy penalties incurred for trying to obtain such freedoms.

(2) Paramilitary violence and injustices create a political mobilization by connecting isolated individuals and groups.

(3) Continued state repression against peasants, social segregation and political tensions, all attributed to the state, resulted in a radical, disorderly and violent wave of protest (Almeida 7). These propositions apply to El Salvador’s civil war.

The people of El Salvador were motivated to join the FMLN because the state of repression was so extreme. Many civil society groups recognized an added benefit to joining the

party, as a long-term goal, there was the potential for their organization to become political stakeholders and influence the economic and social priorities of the country (Cosgrove 159).

The international human rights office of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of San Salvador, identified over 38,000 civilians who were murdered by the government security forces and death squads (Diskin and Sharpe 67). The vast majority of these killings were crimes by the right against the left (Diskin and Sharpe 67). It was not until late 1983 that the Reagan administration finally spoke out against death squads; the delay was because it didn't want to criticize the military, who were the pillar of their strategy against the left (Diskin and Sharpe 68).

In May 1984 Duarte won the presidential election against D'Aubuisson and chose to reconstitute the conservative PDC (Christian Democratic Party) coalition he presided over during the repressive period of 1980-1982 (Diskin and Sharpe 70). Duarte's major internal support came from "the silenced majority", middle-class professionals and small to medium scale private entrepreneurs who distrusted the left but felt abandoned by the government along with a large group associated with the popular movement, such as people who supported the reformist goals of the FDR (Democratic Revolutionary Front) and the FMLN but not armed revolution (Diskin and Sharpe 72). Duarte's election and his ruling against massive repression allowed the popular organizations to start mobilizing again. In 1985, he faced three continuing constraints:

- (1) Strong opposition from the private sector for any serious reform effort. ANEP's (National Association of Private Enterprise) links with death squads, influential military officers, and the US embassy gave it leverage, even though Duarte controlled the banking system and foreign commerce.

(2) the nature of non-military US aid (while the Reagan administration labeled the bulk of aid as 'economic', less than 16% of 1984 and 1985 aid totals went to financing agrarian reform and IAD development projects (Diskin and Sharpe 73).

(3) only by establishing the rule of law, to prevent repression, could he have mobilized a victorious coalition for the reforms that would end the instability, but the repression continued, as an Americas Watch report pointed out in 1985 (Diskin and Sharpe 74).

Over 40% of the total went to redress damage done by the civil war, and most of this took the form of cash transfers to sustain the government and economy in the face of economic collapse brought on by the civil war (Diskin and Sharpe 73). As long as the oligarchs and officers had Washington to bail them out, they had neither the incentive to stop blocking reform nor the incentive to negotiate a solution to the war, which was soaking up the 'economy' in the first place (Diskin and Sharpe 73).

The armed forces expanded the air war, with indiscriminate bombing. These weren't accidental bombings or lack of training, but part of the very strategy the military employed to terrorize civilians in guerrilla-held zones, forcing them to flee and thus depriving the guerrillas of food and security (Diskin and Sharpe 75). Officers were not tried for their involvement in death-squad killings, on the contrary, they were sometimes sent into cushy diplomatic exile (Diskin and Sharpe 75). President Magana, on the eve of Duarte's inauguration, even explained to a reporter how the government tried to persuade military officials suspected of participating in death squads that their proposed transfers were not to be considered punishments (Diskin and Sharpe 68) Duarte denounced the Church's human rights monitoring office, for being unreliable and

"trying to help subversive groups", a clear sign that the government would not seek a definitive end to repression (Diskin and Sharpe 76).

As mentioned previously, the Catholic Church became a threat and target for the security forces. The Church supported the ideals of the revolutionaries, their fight for democracy, respect of human rights and an obligation of the state to attend to the social needs of its people (Cosgrove 159). One horrific and historic event was the assassination of Archbishop Romero who was murdered during one of his sermons. Considered a defender of the people, Archbishop Romero was very vocal about his position against corruption and social injustices. On July 1, 1977, the Archbishop declined to attend the inauguration of President Romero because it was preferable to risk worsening hostilities than to appear supportive and thereby bless a system characterized by fraud, corruption and repression (Montgomery 111). He asked the United States to stop all military aid to El Salvador as the regime was not in control of the death squads, and within 24 hours, he was assassinated during his own sermon (Wood 26).

During Oscar Romero's three years as Archbishop, the role of the Church within the political arena expanded greatly due to the protection, hopeful influence and acknowledgement of the poor (Montgomery 112). His murder and the bombings in the city all resulted in riots, and with the murder of Archbishop Romero and the social injustices, many of the people of El Salvador saw no other alternative than to join the FMLN. Another priest was suspected of lending his vehicle to the guerrilla forces, Padre Sabino Marcial Serrano Cornejo. And he was captured on November 28, 1980 and was never heard from again (Marcialteniarazon.org 1). The killing of these religious leaders angered peasants and further motivated them to revolt against state forces.

At the macro level, the Salvadorian war was a struggle between classes. The long-standing oligarchic alliance of the economic elite and the military led to a highly unequal society in which the great majority of Salvadorians were excluded from all but the most meager life opportunities (Wood 8). The response of this oligarchic alliance to the social movements of the 1970's and their demands for economic reform and political inclusion was repression, not compromise.

Marx argued that the shared experience of exploitation on the part of the industrial proletariat would lead to socialist mobilization and revolution (Wood 11). Marx was mistaken in his identification of the likely bearer of revolutions: poor rural working people played essential roles in most social revolutions, while the industrial proletariat mobilized for revolution in only a few (Wood 11). Wood references Jeffrey Paige who concluded that peasants participate in revolutions, whereas landlords largely depend on income from land, and thus can make few concessions (Wood 11). Peasants depend on wages and are therefore less dependent on particular landlords for access to land (Wood 11). The vast majority of insurgent combatants were from these poor rural backgrounds.

El Salvador's rural poor were highly heterogeneous in terms of their livelihoods. Participants in the insurgency came from a variety of poor rural class backgrounds. Mancur Olsen, in his critique of Marx's approach, says collective action of this type yields benefits that are public goods, whose enjoyment does not depend on one's having contributed to their provision (Wood 12). Olsen concluded that forms of collective action that are costly to individuals will not be sustained, except where participation is coerced or motivated voluntarily through the provision of selective incentives available only to those participating (Wood 12). The immediate consequence of mobilization was violence rather than material gain. Early in the war,

insurgents were initially only able to offer very few benefits to civilian supporters. However, the poor were allowed to stay in abandoned farm lands without being required to support the FMLN, so refugees and peasant families could enjoy a few significant comforts without directly supporting the insurgency (Wood 13).

## **Women Join the Armed Resistance**

Women's experiences in the early part of the war were filled with fear, displacement, family disruption and loss, caused mostly by the state forces and death squads (Viterna 31). Mothers became single heads of households throughout the war because their spouses were either killed, forced into hiding or forced to pick sides. Early on in the war, joining the FMLN was considered, by some individuals, the only hope to stay alive (Viterna 31). Leading up to and during the civil war, women were often raped and killed by state security forces and death squad members. Since female victims were generally from within lower classes, rape crimes were routine and not punishable by law. Once in the FMLN, women were united with other women who shared similar experiences and daily struggles. This provided a sense of comradeship and comfort for women who saw no hope for a future.

As was the case for many women in El Salvador, young adolescents and young women became active participants with the organization. During the armed conflict, many groups of women throughout the country became involved, all for different reasons. There have been several theoretical approaches as to why women became involved in the insurgency. Elisabeth Jean Wood asked "What accounts for the emergence of a powerful insurgent movement in an area where acquiescence had long been the response for the rural poor to social injustice, why did so many poor people run extraordinarily high risks to support the insurgency?" Wood argues that traditional explanations such as class struggle, political opportunity structures, solidarity among peasant communities, the existence of social networks, deprivation, and purely rational self-interest alone fail to account adequately for the extent and timing of collective action on the part of the insurgency and its supporters (Wood 14).

Deducing from over 200 interviews conducted from 1987 to 1996 of peasant supporters, Wood developed an alternative explanation, that in addition to traditional explanations, civilian supporters contributed to the insurgency for the moral and affective benefits they received through participation. Wood argues the “puzzle of insurgent collective action” in the high risk circumstances of severe repression and civil war was a combination of material grievances including starvation, the need for protection from abuse by the landlords and the state, inadequate access to land, and the emotional and moral motives as essential to the emergence and consolidation of collective action. One woman in particular stated the following, “Some armed themselves, others fled. We, those who stayed in the area, were all seen as guerrillas. Every time we went to the coast, we were searched at the intersection. 1982 was a year of desperation. Almost everyone left, my brother disappeared that same year, one of hundreds who disappeared in 1982-1983, every day there were two or three bodies at the intersection. After all these years of war, the dead weigh heavily on us (Wood 8).” Why did women feel the need to join? Some joined mainly for protection, for as it stood, state violence left no other way out than joining the insurgency.

On the other hand, protection and survival motivated other peasant women to flee. While protection from death squads or the hope of some degree of it, motivated participation in insurgency, the FMLN was not able to always protect its members, even in their strongholds of northern Morazán (Wood 13). The FMLN could not protect women from aerial bombardment and many civilians went to refugee camps until the late 1980s (Wood 13). Therefore, protection from state forces could not fully account for women’s ongoing participation in the insurgency (Wood 13). As is evident in the massacre at the Lempa River. Men, women and children were fired upon as they attempted to cross the Honduran border for safety from military forces.



Witnesses stated a helicopter pilot flew low enough to the ground where they were able to see his face (Hoge 1981). Thus, they could not have been mistaken to be insurgents. There also could have been no doubt in the pilot's mind that he was on the Honduran side of the border during most of the attack. It was the second massacre of fleeing Salvadoran refugee families at the hands of their own troops within the year (Hoge 1981).

In December of 1981, a modest town named El Mozote, would unknowingly become one of the most violent and brutal murder sites in Salvadorian history. The U.S. trained Atlacatl battalion arrived into town and within 2 days brutally executed most of its citizens, including women, children and infants (Lewis 1993). Reports of the massacre were released describing the methods in which the victims were slaughtered. Newborns were thrown in the air and stabbed with bayonets, the women were tortured, raped then killed, but not before husbands, fathers and brothers were killed in front of them (Lewis 1993). The battalion's justification for the murders was attributed to suspicions that the town was harboring rebels (Lewis 1993). News of the Mozote massacre, as well as other injustices, spread nationwide.

The growing state violence increased insurgent participation. Tommie Sue Montgomery approaches the justification and necessity of joining the insurgency from a liberation theology perspective. Unlike Karen Kampwirth, Montgomery's ethnographic observations weren't limited to 'rank and file' female members. In addition to researching motivations, she focused on the relationship between female and male participants from rural vs. urban areas (Montgomery 123). Montgomery found machismo was universally regarded by the revolutionaries as a legacy of colonialism and capitalism; men who served under female dominated units expressed feeling emasculated; and they associated women's participation in male dominated roles as a threat

(Montgomery 124). She interviewed one man who said “we decided to fight because we like what the FMLN is doing, we saw that this organization is seeking the liberation of the people (Montgomery 16-17). Kampwirth and Viterna identified similar reasons given by women of the FMLN for joining the insurgency. A common motivation for participating was that their recruiters were effective and politically active, and they responded to the appeal of the FMLN’s commitment to gender equality (Viterna 64-65). Viterna and Wood agree on two specific observations:

(1) The women who were sought out by the FMLN ranged from adolescents to young adults, who were victims of the armed conflict and were skilled in radios or machinery (Viterna 262).

(2) That emotions are relevant and significant for an identity-based theory of micro-level mobilization because they lubricate the expansion of existing identities to incorporate that of activist (Viterna 46). Viterna references Wood’s theory that pride motivated many of these individuals to take part in the social movement, even with no expectation of success (Viterna 46).

## **Women's Roles and Challenges within the FMLN**

Montgomery asserts that female combatants were approximately 30% of the FMLN and 20% of the military leadership (Montgomery 123). ERP had the largest percentage of female combatants and officers (Montgomery 123). These factors varied among zones, units and the constituent organizations of the FMLN. Montgomery found that some participants of the FMLN had an ideology of liberation (Montgomery 125). As was necessary for protection from the abusive state and its military, Christian based communities spoke of a liberation more so than a revolution; for example, Norma Guevara, member of the FMLN commission on information said “the resources for which we are struggling belong to all so that the possibility of resolving the problems of women and children exists only in the context of a project that takes account of all the social political and economic problems of our country (Montgomery 125-126).” This also provided a sense of empowerment and control, which suggests they identified themselves as activists within the organization.

U.S. officials often charged that the pluralism reflected in the composition of the FDR was merely a façade for the hard line Marxists-Leninists of the FMLN who after victory would shove all the democrats aside and seize control of the state (Montgomery 125). Maria Caminos responded by saying, “this charge is a maneuver of imperialism to deny the authenticity of our revolutionary forces. Also an effort to present our struggle as a struggle for communism manipulated from the outside (Montgomery 125).” Caminos argued that the democratic sectors can never be isolated from the process because they represent the aspirations of the people, and as long as they do that, they will be present.

According to Kampwirth, the factors that led to mobilization of women as guerrillas were structural changes – Land concentration created increased insecurity for rural poor due to economic globalization and population growth. This involved 1. Male migration and often abandonment of families, 2. Rise in number of single female headed households, 3. Female migration which broke traditional ties and made organizing more possible (Kampwirth 14). Kampwirth’s case study focused specifically on mid-prestige women, also known as members of the “rank and file” group (Kampwirth 15). This level allowed women to carry out traditional work as well as tasks that created opportunities for decision making in political education, human rights or student activism. As a result these participants were able to develop political skills and consciousness that they may not have been exposed to had they been restricted to a lower ranking position (Kampwirth 15).

The regional samples were also unique, Kampwirth focused on three specific regions: Managua, San Salvador and San Cristobal de las Casas (Kampwirth 15). The benefit of focusing on these regions allowed a more comprehensive view of women’s roles within civil society during the war. A total of 205 open-ended interviews were conducted within a ten year span (1990-2000), 69 specifically in El Salvador (Kampwirth 18). Kampwirth also participated in workshops, conferences and followed the press, and a significant subset of her sample were former guerrilla fighters (Kampwirth 16).

Ideological and organizational changes show there was a rise in liberation theology which also parallels Montgomery’s view. Adolescent girls and young women who joined the guerrilla forces, identified a series of factors which started them on this political path to activism. These included migration, growing up with family stories of political violence, participation in strikes or Christian faith organizations and being part of a pre-existing network (Kampwirth 59). Most

of the women in the insurgency described going through traumatic events prior to joining the FMLN, such as witnessing loved ones being murdered (Kampwirth 59). These experiences led them to see the social injustices occurring within civil society. It was logical to seek refuge and protection from the insurgency which was against the state's security forces and death squads.

Becoming part of the FMLN provided a sense of structure and equality among peers with the same past experiences. One of the interviewed guerrillas, Yamileth, spoke of breaking away from the FMLN and taking part in political feminist organizations at the time (Kampwirth 80). Two such organizations were CEMUJER (Center for Women's Studies), and ADEMUSA (A Women's Organization for Human Rights), however the army ransacked these organizations as a form of revenge and the organizations had to rebuild (Kampwirth 80). It has been noted by some guerrillas that although they found the FMLN did not ultimately focus on respecting equality, it did give women an opportunity to recognize what feminism was and led them to start their own organizations that would promote and recognize gender equality (Kampwirth 81).

Jocelyn Viterna is an associate professor of sociology at Harvard, and she provides an in depth analysis of why women joined the insurgency. A random subset of households in the two largest communities were surveyed, survey questions included the number of residents in each home, age, and whether or not any of them lived and worked in the guerrilla camps during the civil war (Viterna 236). Within this subset, 120 individuals were selected, all whom identified as the 'rank and file' of the FMLN, similarly to Kampwirth's sample (Viterna 237). Viterna identified 3 types of women who shared a number of identities that FMLN expansion workers specifically targeted, especially in the late war period. Recruiters looked for females (as young as 8 years old,) who were victimized and those who had useful skills (Viterna 101). They worked narratives into their recruitment pitches that sounded appealing to young women, promises of

adventure, opportunity for revenge to those who were personally affected by the state forces violent acts and for their ability to contribute needed skills for the movement (Viterna 101).

Women were needed because there was a high mortality rate early on in the war, the FMLN could not afford to only recruit men (Viterna 63). Its increasing logistical sophistication required the advanced technical skills brought in by women from refugee camps, and having women in the guerrilla camps provided monetary and political support to their international campaign, as well as providing a sense of family, support and comfort (Viterna 63).

## **Impact of the Armed Revolutionary Experience on Women During the War**

The impact of the armed revolutionary experience on women during the civil war is affected by the reasons for becoming involved, their wartime connections and wartime experiences. Women who joined the organization by choice were more likely to become or continue being activists post-war as opposed to those who were forced or had no other choice for survival (Viterna 9). During 1978 – 1991, agents and allies of the Salvadorian government killed an additional fifty thousand civilians, from a population of roughly five million (Stanley 1). Violence intensified in late 1979 and 1980, particularly toward political leaders who advocated reform or negotiated solutions to the growing political crisis (Stanley 2). In November 1980, security forces killed the entire top leadership of the non-guerrilla ‘left’, hours before a scheduled press conference at which they were to present a proposal for a negotiated solution between the state and FMLN (Stanley 2). FMLN’s Women combatants and operators were sought out by the National Police, and civilians who were suspected of harboring subversives associated or assisting the insurgency were killed openly by internal security forces (Stanley 1).

Many of the victims included labor organizers, members of opposing political parties, priests, and Catholic activists, teachers, and members of nascent guerrilla cells (Stanley 1). Security forces used intimidation tactics to heighten fear among civilians and supporters of the opposition. Victims, including women and children, were often tortured then killed. Torture methods included carving the names or initials of various death squads into the victims’ bodies to the removal of limbs, teeth, fingernails, eyes, breasts and genitals (Stanley 2). Bodies were burned with fire or acid that would melt features of the face thereby eliminating the possibility of identification (Stanley 2). Women combatants as well as female non-participants were exposed

to the gruesome violent acts of the National Police, for example, morning commuters would often find severed limbs and heads at bus stops and on board buses (Stanley 2). Wives whose husbands were known or suspected of being involved with the FMLN were often raped then killed based on association (Stanley 2).

In the documentary entitled, 'In the name of the people: El Salvador's Civil War' published on November 11, 2011, we see a collective narrative that includes all of the theories discussed above, and this is probably the most accurate depiction of why women, teenage girls and children ended up joining the FMLN (Drehler). Women from Honduras crossed country lines to join the FMLN; field commanders held daily classes to teach the newcomers how to read and write since most of the recruits were illiterate (Drehler). However there were challenges faced by the FMLN. Recruitment meant taking women from their traditional roles at home and convincing them to fight for the revolutionary transformation of the state, take up arms, be able to kill and risk their lives in the process (Viterna 64). Rural El Salvador was highly patriarchal, so the FMLN needed to convince both men and women to bend gender norms enough to accept the idea of women warriors. Many women joined the insurgency simply because they were recruited (the FMLN had a comprehensive consistent recruitment strategy) (Viterna 64). Some women were already politically active and joining the FMLN was seen as a natural 'next step', family networks, material incentives, repression, and the appeal of FMLN's commitment to gender equality (Viterna 64-65).

In researching through Salvadorian archives, Viterna found 2 recruitment manuals left behind by the FMLN, suggesting their approach was strategically constructed and highly organized (Viterna 66). These strategies were developed over time through trial and error. The FMLN and the Guardia Nacional developed their own language to communicate in code, there



was a radio station called “Radio Venceremos” run by a female commander, Guadalupe (Viterna 262). Essentially the FMLN goal was to recruit the best revolutionaries, defined as those who were willing to sacrifice anything for the cause.

In order to acquire the best, the recruiters focused on women who understood and were committed to FMLN’s ideology of a socialist revolution, and women who were former or current activists (Viterna 65). Women who were within existing political organizations like the Christian based communities of the Catholic Church, student groups in local schools, ‘campesino’ or peasant cooperatives and unions like FECCAS, were also sought out by FMLN recruiters (Viterna 65). Childless women and activists were trained as combatants. However, women with children were rarely asked to join the fight; instead, they were brought in to support in other ways, caring for refugee children, cooking and taking care of the wounded (Viterna 66).

The FMLN recruitment strategy involved the gradual militarization of existing activists for self-defense – this was a response to the military and paramilitary forces of the state who sought out community activists to eliminate via kidnapping, torture, death and disappearance (Viterna 147). FMLN narratives were always focused on “defense” however, there was an underlying strategy to build forces for its planned 1981 offensive (Viterna 86). The FMLN also worked with international assistance to solicit funding for the campaign, one such advertisement appeared on the back of the Mexican Solidarity magazine, *Unidad*:

Urgent: Solidarity with the Salvadorian People’s Fight. Latin American friend, the Salvadorian people need your help in these decisive moments of our destiny and that of the Latin American community. You can collaborate with: clothes, shoes (especially boots). Medical Supplies. Money (providing a bank number for

deposits). Food (powdered milk, canned, rice, beans, flour, etc.). Our heroic people will one day remember to reciprocate this generous international support, and will add to the activities that all of you will realize at the national international level. (Mexican Committee in Solidarity with the Salvadorian People). – (Jocelyn Viterna P. 25).

Fighting for the FMLN was seen by many as a powerful and revolutionary response to the political, socio-economic and human rights violations being carried out by the state's security forces and death squads. Despite the dangers, the war gave many women (particularly those from impoverished rural areas), access to literacy, political education, and skills building. Their exposure to political discourse and access to new knowledge and skills broadened women's opportunities and horizons (Conoway 2).

Gender roles are assigned to men and women early in socialization. They cut across public and private spheres; they are affected by other forms of differentiation such as race, ethnicity, and class; and can change in different socio-political and economic contexts within a society. World Bank literature notes that in any given society, gender shapes the definitions of acceptable responsibilities and functions for men and women in terms of "social and economic activities, access to resources, and decision making authority (Conoway 10).

The civil war has been researched thoroughly over the years, however the research on women is much less in comparison, also there isn't much follow up on where their place is now in civil society and politics, and how the transition and reintegration affected future generations. In a war with 80,000 deaths and casualties, it is beneficial to acknowledge the role women played and

the impact their efforts made to the revolution. According to the Truth Commission Report for El Salvador in 1993, the United Nations sponsored organization was authorized by the Peace Agreement to document human rights violations during the civil war (Wood 8). Over 85% of the serious acts of violence investigated were carried out by state agents or those acting under the state (Wood 8). The Peace Agreement in 1992 transformed life for Salvadorians. It eased the struggle for change from a military to a political process, and it provided a vehicle for the people to secure their civil and political rights. It also served to dismantle a repressive and militarized state apparatus and enabled people to return to relatively stable lives.

## **Women of El Salvador Post-War**

In October 2000, for the first time in its history, the United Nations Security Council acknowledged that women have a key role in promoting international stability by passing Resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security (Conoway 1). It called on all parties to ensure women's participation in peace processes, from the prevention of conflict to negotiations and postwar reconstruction. The Women Waging Peace Policy Commission was established to examine peace processes with a particular focus on the contributions of women. This report revisits the Salvadoran disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration program from the perspective of women and assesses how a gender perspective can improve such programs worldwide (Conoway 1).

Despite substantial evidence of the actual contributions of women to post-war-reintegration and reconstruction, generally there has been limited acknowledgement or support for their efforts (Conoway 5). Among FMLN fighters and supporters, many were ready to settle into a peaceful life despite economic hardships. Women, in particular, had been significantly affected. They faced practical constraints, as they headed 29 percent of households following the war (Conoway 5). Whereas men were regarded as heroes by their communities for their participation in the war, women combatants were not always as easily accepted (Conoway 18). Many felt pressured to adopt traditional roles. Women's return to the private sphere, particularly in rural areas, created a stable environment for men. Many former male and female combatants note that it took five to six years to adjust to their new lives. Despite this social regression, in immediate post-war Salvadoran society, women struggled to maintain their presence in the public sphere. Alongside their domestic responsibilities, they took on community reconstruction

efforts, including physical construction and agricultural work (irrigation, harvesting, and storing produce) (Conoway 18). Women participated in local community organizations—such as cooperatives, municipal boards, and women’s groups—that supported not only women, but also male former combatants.

Among those who benefited from training programs, women in particular, have capitalized on new skills and knowledge. For example, in the Bajo Lempa region, a low-lying area prone to mudslides and flooding, women ex-combatants have mobilized their communities in emergency response efforts (Conoway 22). In addition to providing aid to community members, women maintain and mend levees, monitor local industries, and lobby government. “Women are playing a leading role,” says Arnoldo García Cruz, president of the Community Organization for Developing an Economic and Social System in the Bajo Lempa (Conoway 22). “They are undertaking work in the church, the schools... [And] supporting economic development (Conoway 22).”

After the war, over 526 women’s organizations were founded by women militants from the FMLN, these include community organizations, self-help groups, local projects for women, formal NGO’s serving women, national networks, women’s committees within political parties, regional offices of feminist NGO’s (Cosgrove 163). The women’s movement of El Salvador has become one of the strongest social and political actors in the country, capable of challenging authoritarianism with its proposals and demands in political, social, economic and cultural spheres (Cosgrove 163).

However, post-war, autonomy became a critical issue to the progress and solutions against women’s struggles and organizational strategies. Blanca Flor Bonilla, former NGO director and FMLN legislator to the National Assembly, described the risks of women being

associated with an inequitable economic model, stating while great disparities remain along with marginalization, exclusion and violence in society, it is impossible to have development (Cosgrove 165). Most of the women in these organizations declared their independence from the FMLN because they were in conflict with how funds were being distributed, such as contributions to support personal and political interests (Cosgrove 161).

The revolutionary movement worked to protect peasants from being taken advantage of by the state, and the insurgency defined itself as standing for the people against injustices. It was easy to shape emotion as this was a very personal war for those involved who lost their family and friends. These factors played a role in helping to create solidarity among movement participants. Women who lost their children in the war played a significant role. What transformed a group of mothers, most of them housewives without previous political experience, into political subjects and, ultimately into the symbol of resistance to military dictatorship? Two reasons, the nature of the military regime created by the armed forces when they seized power and the effect some of their policies had on women. The movement began with mothers searching for their kids; it didn't originally start as a social movement for this reason, however due to these injustices they were also seeking to "break the mold" (Eckstein 241). We can see structural factors leading to action; inequality, dynamics of contention, mechanisms, processes, events and analysis of discourse. Mobilization isn't the end of civil society, it's probably one of the most useful parts of it, because it happens when there's no other option.

While women were acknowledged within the FMLN charter, once they formed their political party, we can see that the following promise was not fulfilled – the charter stated, "The construction of a true democracy entails the full realization of women [']s rights] and their creative participation in all spheres of national life. This is a fundamental principle in the

societal project for which the FMLN is fighting. We have a commitment: to win equal rights for women, [and] overcome their marginalization and oppression in Salvadoran society... FMLN Carta de principios y objetivos, 1993” (Luciak 149).

Post-war, many of the participants decided to join humanitarian organizations. One such organization is called LAS DIGNAS, which formed due to the lack of analysis around the participation of women in the war and its long term implications (Smith 5). This motivated the group to undertake research into the impact of the war on women combatants and supporters of the FMLN. Co-Madres was an organization that formed during the civil war by a committee of mothers and relatives of prisoners that disappeared and the politically assassinated to discover the truth behind the hardship and injustices (Smith 5).

A UNDP report referenced Ana Luisa Rodriguez de Gonzalez who has served four terms as the mayor of Atiquizaya (UNDP 1). She won her first election in 2003 and in that same year, of the 262 municipal councils holding elections, only 15 were led by women, “These first elections I contested were a two-fold challenge for me”, and she recalls (UNDP 1). “First of all, I was concerned not to let down all those people who had placed their faith in me; but I also felt that if I were to fail, people would not see this merely as a personal failure on my part, but would say instead that women were not up to the task (UNDP 1). Many people wondered about that, whether a woman would be able to be an effective mayor (UNDP 1). Participation by women in politics is still in its infancy in El Salvador, but over the last 10 years, progress has been made, and more women becoming involved in the political process.

Currently in the political arena of El Salvador, women are still trying to make positive strides. Some of these strides include a 30% increase in the 2015 elections for female representation (UNDP 1). Specialized training also boosted the participation of women in

community development associations, organizations and committees so that from 2003 – 2012, the number of female mayors in El Salvador increased from 15 to 28, representing 11% of the total number of municipal councils (UNDP 1). In an effort to support this needed change in society, the United Nations Development Program initiated training programs with the purpose of increasing the capacity for women while fostering a legal framework that promotes equality through the empowerment of women as political leaders (UNDP 1). “Since 2008 we have worked on various training programs and the strengthening of political participation by women as expressed in one of the key issues on the agenda of the Millennium Development Goals”, explains Xenia Diaz, Gender Advisor for the UNDP in EL Salvador, and who is at the helm of the “Towards the Political Participation of Women” project (UNDP 1). It was, in fact, this project that developed the “Political Leadership for Women”, promoted by the UNDP in tandem with the Association of El Salvadoran Women Parliamentarians and Ex-Parliamentarians (UNDP 1). These post-war programs are essential for the participation of women in politics. The Mayor of Atiquizaya was one of the first graduates in this program and she is mindful that the program equipped her with the necessary tools to carry out her role in such an influential civic position (UNDP 1). To quote Rodriguez de Gonzalez, “The training given has provided a significant boost to the participation of women in community development associations, organizations, committees and other influential groups in leadership positions (UNDP 1).



## Conclusion

Today as during the civil war, women are responsible for taking care of their families, working and participating in community development projects. Since the Peace Accords in 1992, former guerrilla combatants, care takers and participants of the FMLN have been actively leading humanitarian projects with NGO's, teachers unions and associations, and political parties, but their presence in the FMLN, the largest female presence in a guerrilla force, reached 30% by the end of the war (Silber 571). Many of today's women leaders credit their leadership and combat skills to their experience and knowledge gained during the war, whether it was through participation in the FMLN or humanitarian organizations such as NGO's or community associations (Cosgrove 158).

While it can't be denied that there has been progress in recognizing the significance of women within civil society, it has not fully translated into the male dominated workforce, government, state agencies and other programs. Feminist scholars have firmly established that women who participate in 'emancipatory' movements, particularly movements that articulate gender equality and protection as a goal of their revolutionary program, often find these promises of emancipation are abandoned with the return to politics as usual (Viterna 11). Referred to as a 'patriarchal backlash', assurances of emancipation are made to secure women's participation in the movement, only to be retracted once participation is no longer required (Viterna 11).

According to Ready, the Salvadorian women's movement has grown in the post conflict period, a period tied to democratic transition (Ready et. al. 198). When women take political roles in opposition movements, the existence of autonomous women's movements can be critical to ensuring that the women continue to occupy those roles after the conflict (Ready et. al. 198).

Men still hold up to 90% of public offices (Gonzalez 152). In order to find a compromise, women's organizations and legislators have proposed reforms to the electoral code including a requirement that women represent at least one third of the political party, one third of internal leadership positions and one third of candidates nominated for political office (Gonzalez 152-153).

Among the 22,000 complaints documented and investigated by the truth commission survey, 60% involved extrajudicial killings, 25% involved disappearances, 20% involved torture, and based on the collected testimonies, 85% of violent acts were carried out by state agents, death squads, the military and civil defense forces (Truth Commission 1). It was found that 5,293 women were assassinated, disappeared, tortured, sequestered, or injured (Smith 1). While women's involvement in the insurgency did introduce women of traditional roots to the values and ideas of feminism and equality, it hasn't proved to be sustainable.

The civil war in El Salvador, and the women's revolutionary movement, was the result of a perfect storm of conditions that favored insurgency. Women in the FMLN took a quantum leap into one of the most horrific and violent armed conflicts in history because they were not left with many choices for survival. Women, in general, faced the terrors of war at a deficit. They had fewer opportunities and were at a higher risk than men to be tortured and killed. In order to understand the root causes, development and success of women within the revolutionary movement, it is necessary to look beyond structural conditions, and take into account the historical and current relationship between social and political shifts, religious beliefs, ideologies, and incentives, both socio-economic and political. The literature on women's involvement in the FMLN, particularly their warfare participation during the civil war, has been pivotal in locating the gendered shifts of the revolution, and enters into larger scholarly

conversations on women's social movements within gender norms and under authoritarian regimes.

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