

# Women and Politics around the World

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*Joyce Gelb • Marian Lief Palley*

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# Women in El Salvador: Continuing the Struggle

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*Irina Carlota Silber • Jocelyn Viterna*

## INTRODUCTION

For many in academic, activist, and policy fields, El Salvador is a significant case study for how to mediate a protracted civil war. The smallest though most densely populated Central American nation with a population of 6.8 million, El Salvador's recent history of violence and contemporary transition to democracy raises important questions about the processes of nation building out of a polarized political past. Recent work (see, for example, Kampwirth 2002, 2004; Luciak 2001; Silber 2004b) clearly indicates that a gendered perspective is crucial for discussing these Salvadoran processes. Indeed, women across class, rural, urban, transnational, and educational divides continue to be central actors in El Salvador's uneven struggle for peace, justice, and human dignity.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

El Salvador, like most Central American nations, is characterized by a long history of economic inequality, political authoritarianism, and violent class conflict. Since its inception as a nation-state, El Salvador has pursued export-oriented policies that followed shifts in the world market (for example, indigo, coffee, and cotton).<sup>1</sup> While recent historiography complicates a master narrative of class conflict in the mid-19th century and the place of the coffee oligarchy in the formation of the nation, by the mid-20th century, a small Salvadoran elite used their economic and political power to

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*Facing page: Pipil woman from the village of Nahuizalco in El Salvador at a produce market.  
(Andre Nantel/Shutterstock)*

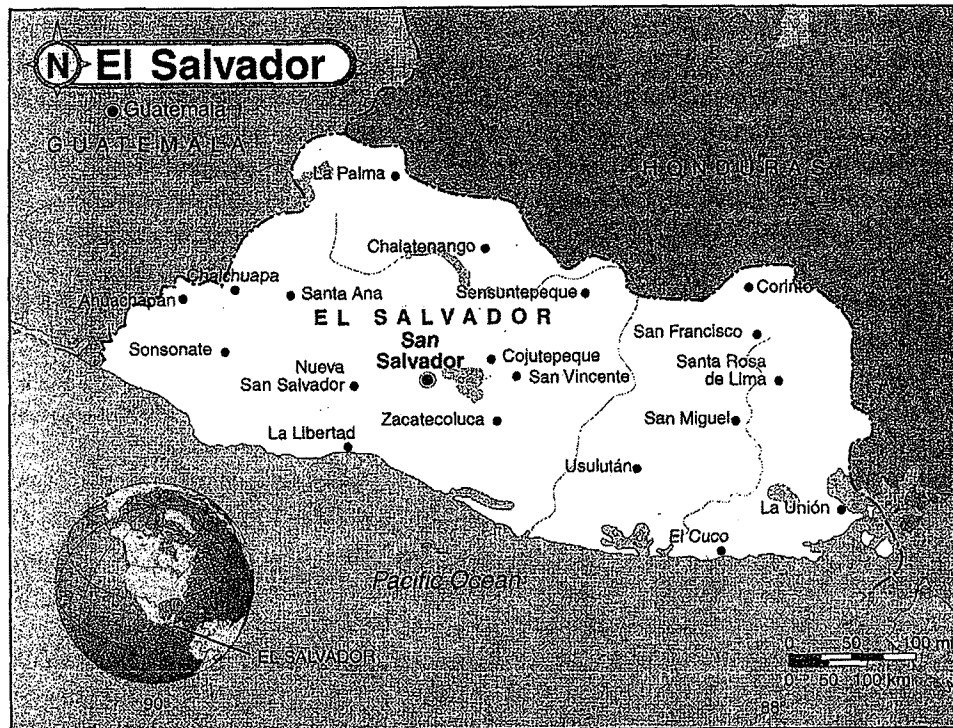
take control of most of the nation's fertile land.<sup>2</sup> Salvadoran peasants who protested the theft of their lands were violently persecuted. The most striking example was the genocidal repression of 1932, known as *La Matanza* (The Massacre), when 30,000 indigenous workers (at a time when the country had a population of 1 million) were annihilated because of their labor organizing (Anderson 1971).<sup>3</sup> Their Communist Party leader, Farabundo Martí, was captured and executed by firing squad. Already at the time, women's committees had supported the revolt (González and Kampwirth 2001).

Agrarian capitalism took hold in the 1950s and solidified an increasing disparity of wealth within El Salvador. Larger parcels of land were dedicated to cash-crop agriculture and grazing, which compromised subsistence farming through land overuse. As a result, seasonal labor migration by both men and women increased, and the numbers of landless peasants grew (Browning 1971; Dunkerley 1988). By the 1970s, numerous oppositional organizations emerged in struggles over land, mass underemployment, and growing poverty (Dunkerley 1988; Montgomery 1995; Pearce 1986). Consistent with its history, the state responded to this activism with brutal repression, of which the 1980 assassination of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero became emblematic.

In 1980, the most militant branches of the leftist Salvadoran resistance came together to form a single rebel army, calling themselves the FMLN (Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional or Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front), after the fallen leader of the 1932 uprising.<sup>4</sup> This marked the beginning of a 12-year civil war between the FMLN and the well-financed, highly trained military forces of the Salvadoran state. The state's military received approximately \$6 billion in aid from the United States government (Binford 1998, 11–12; Murray 1997, 15), and the FMLN was financed by state and civilian solidarity groups around the world as well as an extensive network of collaborators among civilians in El Salvador. The civil war ended on January 16, 1992, with a peace accord brokered by the United Nations. Under the accord, the FMLN was publicly acknowledged as having transitioned from a guerrilla group into an official political party. The accord also created a Truth Commission to investigate human rights abuses. Its final report, *From Madness to Hope*, found that the Salvadoran state, through its systematic institutionalization of violence, was the overwhelming agent of terror during the 12-year civil war. In the end, the civil war claimed the lives of approximately 75,000 people, displaced 1 million, and “disappeared” an additional 7,000.

## VALUES AND A WOMAN'S PLACE IN SOCIETY

The preceding section reviews the Salvadoran historical context and suggests that the civil war was a key site for the elaboration of new gendered experiences. To understand these varied and shifting roles for women in Salvadoran society, this section examines how prewar organizing, wartime participation, and postwar reintegration processes were gendered.



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### *From Prewar Organizing to Wartime Participation*

Women have long been politically active in El Salvador, but this activism increased exponentially in the 1970s in conjunction with the nascent revolutionary movement. When more typically “masculine” forms of protest, such as political parties and labor unions, were forced underground, women-specific groups, such as the human rights group CO-MADRES (Committee of the Mothers of the Disappeared), remained above ground, even at great personal risk. CO-MADRES is a group of women who openly protested the disappearance of their family members by the Salvadoran state, actively worked to identify the mutilated bodies that showed up daily across the nation, and documented the location and treatment of various political prisoners. Women’s above-ground organizations like CO-MADRES suffered from bombings of their offices, kidnappings, torture, rape, imprisonment, and disappearances (Stephen 1997).

Women also became extensively involved in the militant revolutionary movement. Nearly one-third of the approximately 13,000 FMLN militants were women, and an estimated 80 percent of the civilian supporters of the rebel army were also female (Luciak 2001; Vásquez et al. 1996). Although many women continued to perform traditionally feminine duties in the guerrilla camps, such as cooking and nursing, many others assumed more masculine duties, such as political education, intelligence, and combat (Montgomery 1995; Reif 1986; Ueltzen 1993).

Scholars cite a number of reasons for women's unprecedented political participation in the 1970s and 1980s. Some argue that structural changes in society were critical agents for women's mobilization (Kampwirth 2002; Mason 1992; Reif 1986). Because of the explosion of agrarian capitalism mentioned previously, men migrated to the cities to work, leaving many women in rural communities as single heads of households or forcing young women into the informal economy of more urban centers (Kampwirth 2002). These scholars theorize that women's participation in these new roles helped them gain a political consciousness that led them to fight for social change in FMLN guerrilla camps. Yet other research finds that most of the women who lived and worked in FMLN guerrilla camps mobilized from rural, not urban contexts (Byrne 1996, 35; McClintock 1998, 266–267; Paige 1997, 379 n. 49), and that violence, more so than political consciousness, was central to most women's mobilization (Viterna 2006). Specifically, rural women who lost their homes or families to the war, or who were confined to refugee camps because of the war, chose FMLN participation as one of the few available options during a time of crisis (Viterna 2006).

### *Postwar Reintegration*

Many argue that “despite the dangers, the war gave many women access to literacy, political education, and skills building and broadened their horizons” (Pampell Conaway and Martínez 2004, 2). This, however, varied across levels of participation, access to power, and gender discrimination or empowerment within the armed movement. What most agree upon regarding women's wartime participation is “the fact that families even survived the war is due to the courage, ingenuity, and grit of women” as they carried the “triple load of family, community, and productive responsibilities” (Cosgrove 1999, 89).

The peace negotiations that brought an end to the Salvadoran civil war did not explicitly take into account women's subordination in any form. However, they were historic in having high-ranking FMLN women sitting at the negotiating table, including Marfa Marta Valladares (“Nidia Díaz”), Lorena Peña (“Rebecca Palacios”), and Ana Guadalupe Martínez (Pampell Conaway and Martínez 2004). Although they were not representing women's issues specifically or pursuing intentional gendered reconciliation, their presence did place women within the reconstruction process.

One of the first steps in the reintegration process was to demobilize armed combatants and reintegrate them into civil society, a process that relied heavily on the land transfer program, Programa de transferencia de tierras (PTT), for former combatants and noncombatants. Just as about 30 percent of those demobilized on behalf of the FMLN were women, 30 percent of the 36,551 beneficiaries of land were also women (Pampell Conaway and Martínez 2004, 4). Nevertheless, ethnographic data from the postwar period suggest that women were at times marginalized in this program through such practices as placing land titles in male kin's name (Pampell Conaway and Martínez 2004, 17; Silber 2000).

During the early and intermediate postwar period local development efforts were impacted by larger international development policies that shifted away from an isolating Women In Development model (WID) to one that attempted to mainstream gender within all programmatic development initiatives (Silber 2000). Concomitantly, throughout former conflict zones, national, regional, and local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) reframed their popular organizing into sustainable development programs and shifted from grassroots emergency relief organizations to professional development and reconstruction organizations (Pearce 1998; Silber 2000). Although a discursive shift was beginning, one that focused on gender as a social construct in community organizing, women-focused development projects penetrated the war-torn landscape in attempts to integrate women into the productive economy, address women's health, and promote new women's rights in the reforming Salvadoran judicial system. In many cases the (internationally funded and evaluated) local-level reconstruction programs rested on the backs of women survivors of the civil war (Silber 2004a) who often resisted the small scale development projects intended to alleviate their poverty while promoting a reentry into civilian life. Scholars characterize this period as one of disillusionment and demoralization (Silber 2004a; McElhinny 2004), where women and men's years of organizing, struggle, and empowerment rub up against the realities of ongoing poverty, organizing fatigue, and memories of violence and loss. Women, in particular, often retrenched into the space of the home, into their domestic life, and withdrew from community-based activism (Silber 2004b). This finding complements Ibañez's (2001) work on how traditional roles and expectations of motherhood were severely compromised during the civil war. Some suggest that this context "created a stable environment for men" (Pampell Conaway and Martínez 2004, 4).

A key question becomes, what happens in the postwar period? Have women's roles and values shifted because of these experiences? Have gender relations changed? In everyday life, household gender relations may have changed as evidenced by shifts in domestic labor, but changes in gender relations are also demonstrated by women's growing involvement with community-level politics, where women are presidents of community councils and work at and become directors of the local NGOs that emerged out of the popular organizing (Silber 2000). Indeed, NGOs, whether exclusively women's or with a women's programmatic branch, played an integral role in reinserting and reintegrating women into postwar society. In the later postwar period, El Salvador was wracked by several "natural disasters, Hurricane Mitch in 1998 and two earthquakes in the first months of 2001. Women's earlier reconstruction experiences with postwar aid and development also proved critical during this rebuilding process" (Pampell Conaway and Martínez 2004).

## POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND REPRESENTATION

Activists and scholars alike hoped that women's high levels of wartime participation in El Salvador would translate into an increased female presence in formal politics after democratization. After all, because of their wartime participation, women had not

### THE REPERCUSSIONS OF 9/11 FOR SALVADORAN ACTIVISTS

The terrorist attacks against the United States on September 11, 2001, had serious repercussions for women activists in El Salvador. A longtime ally of the United States, the Nationalist Republican Alliance (Alianza Republicana Nacionalista, ARENA) government sent Salvadoran troops to Iraq and has begun to use the language of "terrorism" to justify the repression of peaceful opposition groups within its own borders. The ARENA president has publicly referred to the FMLN political party as a front for terrorist organizations, and a coalition of right-wing parties in the Salvadoran parliament passed an antiterrorism law over strong protests from the FMLN. This law defines terrorism so broadly that it has been used against people taking part in peaceful acts of civil disobedience. To illustrate: On July 2, 2007, several hundred men, women, and children gathered in the town of Suchitoto to protest the privatization of water. They were dispersed by Salvadoran riot police using rubber bullets, tear gas, and beatings. Thirteen protest leaders, six of whom were women, were arrested under the new antiterrorism law and faced up to 60 years in prison. Due in large part to the outcry from Salvadorans and the international community, all charges were formally dropped ten months later. However, on May 2, 2008, shortly after the dismissal of the charges, one of the protestors, Hector Antonio Ventura Vasquez, was brutally assassinated, and the potentially political murder remains unsolved. It remains unclear what consequences this renewed violent repression of peaceful protest—which is highly evocative of the state-sponsored violence utilized during the recent civil war—will have on future activism in El Salvador. If the terrorist discourse succeeds in silencing war-weary individuals, then Salvadoran women, who are disproportionately responsible for household necessities like affordable water, will find their primary avenue to political power—protest actions—closed.

only "proven" their value to men, but they were also organized, were networked locally and globally, and had learned important new political skills. Moreover, women were frustrated that, despite the undeniably central role they had played in bringing about the democratic transition, women and women's interests were largely ignored by both sides during the peace negotiations.

In an effort to redress this exclusion, a number of women's organizations in El Salvador, many of which had developed during the war and for revolutionary purposes, began collaborative discussions. They chose to focus their efforts on increasing women's rights and representation within the first postwar elections in 1994 and thus called their coalition Women '94. Women '94 wrote a platform that addressed women's rights and then lobbied to get all party candidates to agree to adopt the platform. They also sought out exceptional women who supported the platform and encouraged them to run for office. And given that an estimated 75 percent of unregistered voters were women, Women '94 launched a voter registration drive (Saint Germain 1997).

Yet, despite this impressive mobilization, women's gains in formal political participation were minimal in the 1994 elections. Women's legislative representation

increased by only two seats, or from 8.3 percent in the 1991 (predemocratic) elections to 10.7 percent in 1994. Moreover, although all major parties agreed to adopt the Women '94 platform, the winning political party, ARENA, did little to institute the proposed reforms when they took office (Luciak 2001), and the 1994 ARENA president, Armando Calderón Sol, named only one woman to his 12-person cabinet.

These disappointing electoral results were the first in a long line of frustrations for Salvadorans seeking more gender-equitable power structures. Because of another strong push by women's organizations and the FMLN's early receptivity to women's proposals, women's legislative representation increased to 15.5 percent in 1997. However, it fell again to 9.5 percent in 2000 and 10.7 percent in 2003. The March 2006 elections saw a surprising increase to 16.7 percent (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2006), yet even with this increase, El Salvador's ranking of percent of female parliamentarians continues to fall further behind other Latin American nations, which are showing more consistent growth (Viterna and Fallon 2008). In addition to parliamentary frustrations, only 2 members of the 12-person presidential cabinet are women, and at the municipal level, only 8.4 percent of the nation's mayors are women (COMURES n.d.), leaving the top policy-making positions in El Salvador almost exclusively in men's hands.

In addition to seeking greater female representation, Salvadoran women activists have also pushed to change state structures and policies to better reflect feminist interests. After the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, the new Salvadoran state acceded to women's calls to institutionalize gender concerns in the state apparatus and created the Salvadoran Institute for Women's Development (Instituto Salvadoreño para el Desarrollo de la Mujer, or ISDEMU). In 1997, ISDEMU developed the *National Policy of the Woman* (Política Nacional de la Mujer, or PNM) document. The PNM delineated 10 "action areas"—legislation, education, health, work, women's participation in politics and civil society, family, violence, agriculture, environment, and the media and culture—and pledged to work within these areas to make the state's policies and practices more favorable to women.

In many aspects, women's political gains have been stronger within the FMLN political party than within the state. As such, women's successes have been tied to the FMLN's political fortunes. Although the FMLN is the key opposition party to ARENA, disappointing election returns in 1994 forced the FMLN to acknowledge that their strong base of support as a rebel army did not translate easily into voting support as a formal political party. The FMLN thus began to discuss how it could transform itself from a militant group into an effective political organization that maintained its base of support while broadening its overall voter appeal.

FMLN leaders soon argued that transforming the party required unification of the internal wartime factions (Luciak 2001). Women in the party, working largely through the FMLN's Women's Secretariat, showed unprecedented unity during this period of conversion and began to actively push for women's rights. They were successful in committing the FMLN to a 35 percent quota for women's representation in the party's internal governing structures, as well as on the candidate lists for



municipal, departmental, and national elections.<sup>5</sup> The FMLN also agreed that its presidential ticket would always include a woman in the presidential or vice presidential slot (Luciak 2001).

By the 1997 elections, the party's growth and unification had generated confidence among its voters, and the FMLN doubled its legislative representation. It also captured the mayorship of the capital city of San Salvador. The gendered policies adopted by the party were effective: of the 14 women elected in the 1997 Salvadoran elections, 9 were from the FMLN, constituting 33.3 percent of the FMLN's 27-seat representation. The FMLN also nominated a woman as a pre-candidate for the presidency in 1999 (Victoria Aviles), and in 2006, a female FMLN candidate, Violeta Menjívar, won the mayorship of San Salvador, making her the first female mayor of the capital city. Over the years, the FMLN has consistently been the party with the highest percentage of women in the legislature, and the FMLN's top decision-making bodies at the national level have generally maintained substantial women's representation; women hold 8 of the 19 seats on the party's Political Commission, and 13 of the 36 seats on its National Council (FMLN n.d.). Nevertheless, only 1 of the 14 departmental coordinators is female.<sup>6</sup>

## LIMITATIONS TO WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND REPRESENTATION

Establishing new democratic institutions in a war-torn country is not easy, and women in particular faced limitations to their formal political participation in El Salvador. At the most fundamental level, registering people to vote was difficult, given that those fleeing wartime violence had often lost important identifying documents, and many local municipal records were destroyed. Before the 1994 elections, an estimated 75 percent of unregistered people were female (Saint Germain 1997).

At the national level, women's political participation also faces a number of obstacles. The ARENA political party has held executive power since before the war, and their platform largely espouses traditional female (deemed "family") values (Cansino 2001; Kampwirth 2004; see also ARENA n.d.). The three ARENA presidents since the peace accords have been consistently poor at integrating women into their ministries, the party has been resistant to instituting gender quotas at the party or national level (Grégori 2005; Luciak 2001, 229), and the ARENA presidential candidates have a poor record of listening to or taking seriously the concerns and proposed policy changes of women's coalitions (Las Dignas 2003, 25).

Although ISDEMU should in theory be a voice for women within the state apparatus, its organizational structure, in conjunction with its continuing control by the ARENA party, has resulted in few real gendered changes in state policies, institutions, or personnel. In a recent review by a Salvadoran women's organization, ISDEMU was found to have rewritten the original 1997 PNM (National Politics of the Woman) document to better reflect ARENA principles of individual responsibility, family values, protection of business and personal property, and privatization (Orellana 2004). This places responsibility for women's rights squarely on women and not on the state.

Furthermore, the ARENA government's push to privatize health care and education is largely incompatible with the idea that the state could take direct action in promoting positive discrimination forces for women, while its desire to attract more foreign investment in the form of export-oriented factories (*maquilas*) obviously discourages any policies generating more protections for workers in these factories, most of whom are women (Orellana 2004).

Although the FMLN has institutionalized more policies to support women's rights and encourage women's political participation than ARENA, women have faced strong obstacles to political participation here as well. Shortly after the peace accords, the FMLN espoused feminist goals in its written documents and created a Women's Secretariat, in part to show itself as a modern socialist party and in part to appease the demands of powerful women activists within the party (Luciak 2001). However, the Women's Secretariat was not given any funding and, like the political party, suffered early on from the continuing divisions between the wartime factions. The Women's Secretariat's request that the party reprimand members who do not pay child support or who engage in sexual harassment generated some hostility toward women's rights among the male party leadership. Moreover, the Women's Secretariat's push to get more women to run for office occasionally resulted in the election of a poorly qualified candidate. Although there were certainly underqualified officials of both sexes, men used the poorly performing women to caution others not to go too far with positive discrimination measures or the party would suffer (Luciak 2001). To date, the Women's Secretariat is still required to raise funds independently, often from international sources (Luciak 2001), and more feminist secretariat leaders appear to be censored by party leaders in favor of more moderate alternatives (Escobar 2004; Luciak 2001).

Perhaps most frustrating to feminist activists is that the FMLN representatives, including its female representatives, have not been particularly supportive of feminist issues in parliament. The most compelling example was in 1998, when the parliament voted to amend the Salvadoran constitution to protect the sanctity of life from the moment of conception, with no exceptions. This move constitutionally outlawed abortion even in cases of rape, incest, or where the life of the mother might be at risk. Although the FMLN had presented a bill to liberalize abortion laws in 1995 (Hitt 2006), only one FMLN member, Eugenio Chicas, openly opposed the constitutional amendment in 1998 (Luciak 2001). (Lorena Peña, a vocally feminist FMLN representative, did not participate in the vote as she was just returning from an international trip.) The others, fearing losses at the upcoming elections, "voted their consciences," and the amendment passed with an overwhelming majority. The severity of this abortion ban is overwhelming: the district attorney's office has mandated that doctors cannot operate on women with ectopic pregnancies until the fetal heartbeat stops or the woman's fallopian tube has ruptured, the police aggressively pursue and incarcerate women who are suspected of having abortions, and women found guilty of abortions may serve prison sentences of up to 30 years (Hitt 2006).

After the 1997 elections, the FMLN again began to suffer from internal party divisions, this time between the orthodox members, who wished to pursue a strongly

socialist agenda, and the reform members, who desired a more social-democratic agenda. As mentioned previously, the FMLN had nominated a woman, Dr. Victoria Aviles, as a pre-candidate for the 1999 presidency. Aviles had served El Salvador as the human rights ombudsperson after the peace accords, and thus the broader Salvadoran population viewed her as well educated, well respected, and well qualified. Moreover, as a newcomer to the FMLN, she was not associated with the violence of the civil war, a situation that may have improved her chances of securing broad voter appeal. Many women's organizations actively supported Aviles's campaign. However, she never became the official FMLN presidential candidate, because she did not receive sufficient votes from the FMLN party's nominating convention, even when running unopposed.<sup>7</sup> It is not known whether her defeat was due to these internal divisions or due to her gender. Nevertheless, the internal party divide, the lack of support on the abortion vote, and the inability to place a highly qualified woman candidate into the presidential race, even when she ran unopposed, provided a series of devastating blows to the women's movement and solidified many organizations' decisions to remain largely autonomous from formal political activities.

## WOMEN'S ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION

Since the peace accords were signed, the Salvadoran government, led by ARENA, has pursued neoliberal policies of economic adjustment and restructuring. These include encouraging foreign investment, converting its currency to the U.S. dollar, instituting free trade, privatizing government services, and reducing social spending. In spite of this fiscal discipline, economic growth over the past 15 years has been consistent but slow, with a gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate of only 1.8 percent in 2004 (ECLAC 2006, 85).<sup>8</sup> The unemployment rate has remained relatively steady at about 7 percent over the past 10 years, and this rate is higher for men (8.8 percent) than for women (3.8 percent) (ECLAC 2006, 54, 55). However, an additional 30 percent of the economically active population is underemployed, suggesting grave problems finding reliable income in El Salvador (UNDP 2003, 136). Overall, the population living in poverty has declined from 54.2 percent in 1995 to 48.9 percent in 2001, but it remains high. The percent of the population living in extreme poverty has increased slightly in that same period, from 21.7 percent to 22.1 percent (ECLAC 2006, 74). Income inequality, historically extreme in El Salvador, has worsened slightly over the past decade. The richest quintile increased their percentage of the national income from 55.1 percent in 1995 to 56.4 percent in 2001, while the poorest quintile's share declined from 3.5 percent to 2.9 percent (ECLAC 2006, 77).<sup>9</sup>

The Salvadoran economic situation is in flux, largely because of three recent occurrences. First, the historically dominant agricultural sector in El Salvador is now in crisis, in part because of the war that was fought in primarily rural areas, in part because of neoliberal economic policies that open El Salvador's borders to agricultural goods from abroad, and in part because of global drops in coffee prices.

Most recent economic growth has taken place in the service sector, and about 49.8 percent of the total labor force is now employed there (Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs 2006). Second, the signing of the U.S.-Central America-Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR, implemented March 1, 2006), solidifies the Salvadoran government's commitment to free trade and limits protections that the nation may provide to its workers and products. Finally, a steadily increasing stream of migrants out of El Salvador and to other nations (primarily, the United States) has resulted in a situation where more than 20 percent of El Salvador's population lives outside El Salvador, and 22 percent of local Salvadoran households receive remittances from abroad. These remittances total more than \$2.5 billion annually and constitute more than 16 percent of the GDP and an astounding 65.5 percent of foreign direct investment (UNDP 2005, 7-8). Estimates suggest that remittances from abroad have lowered the national poverty level in El Salvador by 7 percent, providing temporary relief to the problems of unemployment, underemployment, and poverty without actually addressing their structural causes (UNDP 2005, 16).

Women's participation in the formal and informal economy in El Salvador, like in most of Latin America, has increased dramatically over the past decade, from 28 percent (of women aged 10 years and older) in 1995 to 34.5 percent in 2005. The quality and quantity of women's labor force participation has changed relative to the three trends highlighted in the previous paragraph. First, the agricultural bust has lowered the number of women working in agriculture from 7.3 percent of all women workers in 1995 to 3.3 percent in 2004 (ECLAC 2006, 44) and has been a contributing factor in an increased rate of rural-to-urban migration. The percent of the Salvadoran population living in urban areas has increased from 52.5 percent in 1995 to 57.8 percent in 2005 (ECLAC 2006, 33). Second, the Salvadoran government's commitment to free trade through agreements like CAFTA has made the *maquila* sector in El Salvador a viable option for women. According to the Ministry of Work, *maquilas* in El Salvador generate 92,000 jobs, 87 percent of which are filled by women (Las Mélicas 2006). This, too, has contributed to women's rural-to-urban migration. Finally, the increasing rates of outward male migration have been a factor in increasing the number of female-headed households in El Salvador, from 28.9 percent in 1990 to 35.4 percent in 2004 (ECLAC 2006, 36). Although women left behind by migrating men are sometimes the recipients of remittances from abroad, many are left to support large, extended families on their own, and thus have no choice but to seek employment.

Despite the government's solicitation of *maquila* factories from abroad, *maquilas* employ less than a quarter of working women in El Salvador. Moreover, the overall percentage of working women employed in industry is actually in decline, from 26 percent in 1995 to 21.6 percent in 2004 (ECLAC 2006, 44). Women's labor force participation tends to be increasingly concentrated in the service sector, which employed 75.1 percent of all economically active women in 2004. Perhaps most striking, 56 percent of female workers are employed in the informal economy, which means they have no set salary or benefits and are covered by no labor legislation.

## LIMITATIONS TO WOMEN'S ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION

As the previous statistics make clear, most working women in El Salvador cannot find wage labor in the formal economy, but rather they are relegated to the instability and poverty of the informal economy where most cannot meet their basic needs. Working in the informal economy is the only option for most Salvadoran women, either because they do not have the educational background or training required for most formal employment, or because they cannot balance the schedule of a salaried job with their domestic responsibilities of housework and child care. Working in the informal economy leaves women highly vulnerable to exploitation, fraud, or violence, because these jobs are not regulated by the laws governing jobs in the formal sector. Moreover, women in the informal economy have no access to health care and other work-related benefits. Thus, one of the central limitations for Salvadoran women's economic participation is the lack of formal employment available for women.

Women in the formal economy, although they generally earn more money than women in the informal economy, still have great difficulties maintaining a dignified standard of living. As written, the Salvadoran labor code is actually quite progressive. However, reports from labor watch groups, as well as some documentation from the Salvadoran Ministry of Labor, make clear that these policies are seldom implemented on the ground. Women workers in Salvadoran *maquilas* report forced overtime work, mandatory pregnancy tests, poor drinking water and sanitation facilities, violence and mistreatment at the hands of management, denial of time off for health care needs, hazardous working conditions, and blacklists that circulate among factory managers of women who should not be hired because of their suspected propensity to organize (Wichita Area Globalization Coalition n.d.; Viterna interview with Salvadoran *maquila* workers, December 1995). A labor rights organization reported that Salvadoran factories regularly fire hundreds of workers each year just before Christmas to avoid paying the legally guaranteed Christmas bonus to its workers (CISPES n.d.). Although women in factories generally have higher incomes than women in the informal sector, these incomes are still not sufficient to meet a basic standard of living. For example, in 2003, a woman in a *maquila* would earn \$151.20 per month, while the cost of the *canasta básica* (literally, the "basic food basket") for an average family was \$514 per month. In other words, a family would need 3.4 full-time workers earning the minimum wage just to cover their most basic needs ("Sube el Salario Mínimo" 2003; ORMUSA 2006).

Judging by the experience of Mexico with the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) a decade earlier, the implementation of CAFTA in 2006 is expected to exacerbate women's labor problems in the *maquila* industry in El Salvador. The labor rights provisions included in CAFTA make no specific mention of women or the particular problems of gendered discrimination endemic to these factories. Moreover, although the language of CAFTA appeals to all member countries to adhere to its labor code, there are no provisions for monitoring, reporting, or enforcing (Campanile 2005). Finally, as free trade agreements make it

easier for companies to enter and leave countries in search of the cheapest, most docile labor, it is likely that *maquila* employment in El Salvador will grow more unstable.

The signing of CAFTA has had difficult economic repercussions for women working in other sectors as well. For example, in the informal sector, women vendors of pirated CDs and DVDs have been the targets of an increasing number of raids by the National Civilian Police in El Salvador, where all their merchandise has been confiscated, as the nation works to comply with the intellectual property right clauses of the free trade agreement (CISPES 2006). Moreover, based on the experience of Mexican farmers with NAFTA, Salvadoran farmers will soon be unable to compete with U.S. food production, given the agricultural subsidies received by U.S. farmers despite free trade agreements. This will likely force the foreclosure of many small and medium-sized farms in El Salvador (Campanile 2005), increasing rural-to-urban and rural-to-international migration flows. And, more generally speaking, signing on to CAFTA has only increased El Salvador's commitment to neoliberal policies and has pushed the government to further its efforts at privatizing public programs like health care and education. Since women are the critical providers of services to their families, these cuts will increase the amount of time and resources nearly all women must devote to domestic care. Moreover, because women who constantly struggle to feed their children are unlikely to risk their meager incomes by protesting or demanding their rights, the decrease in state services only increases women's vulnerability in the workplace. And cutting the state's investment in education will destine women in the Salvadoran labor force to stay in the informal sector, as they will not have the training to qualify for formal employment.

A final limitation to women's economic participation in El Salvador is the basic pervasiveness of sexism throughout the workforce. As discussed previously, this sexism takes its toll in placing demands on women to perform the majority of the work in the household, or the so-called "reproductive sphere," even when they are working one or two full-time jobs in the productive sphere. It also makes women more vulnerable to harassment, violence, and discrimination on the job. But perhaps one of the most fundamental ways in which this sexism is evident is the continuing gendered gap in wages. Women with less than five years of education earn only 77.4 percent of what men with the same education earn, and only 76.2 percent of men's income if their education level is between 6 and 9 years. Women with higher levels of education do better, earning almost 90 percent of what men earn, but women also suffer from higher rates of illiteracy than men (21.1 percent compared to 16.4 percent) (ECLAC 2006, 57, 80). The Salvadoran state supports this gendered discrimination every three years when it evaluates the national minimum wage: over the past decade, the state has raised the minimum wage for other workers more rapidly than for *maquila* workers. As of September 2006, the minimum wage for a woman in the *maquila* sector is \$157.25 per month, compared with \$170.28 in other industrial jobs, and \$174.24 in retail and service employment (Ministry of Labor 2006; *Diario Co Latino* 2003; ORMUSA 2006).

## WOMEN'S MOBILIZATION AND CIVIL SOCIETY: TRANSITIONS TO DEMOCRACY

Scholars of women and democratization around the world have often documented a demobilization of women after a democratic transition (see, for example, Jaquette and Wolchik 1998). This trend seems to hold in El Salvador, where the return to peace and normalcy has apparently stifled popular women's mobilizations, especially compared with the thousands of women who routinely challenged the authoritarian government in the 1980s through their roles as mothers, teachers, students, Catholics, and guerrillas. Nevertheless, although the revolutionary mobilization of the recent past subordinated struggles for gender equality to the struggle for social justice (Kampwirth 2004; Molyneux 1985; Vásquez et al. 1996), today a diverse group of Salvadoran women's organizations now place feminist issues at the center of local, regional, and national politics and society.

During the civil war, each faction of the FMLN created its own women's organization. Secondary sources argue that male leaders of the FMLN promoted women's organizing not because they were particularly interested in gender equality, but rather because women's groups were particularly adept at garnering funds from the international community and funneling them into the war effort (Luciak 2001; Shayne 2004). During the war, even well-educated women leaders believed women's societal subordination was a secondary problem to their central concern of class inequality and extreme poverty, and their very presence in the guerrilla camps seemed to belie concerns of sexism. Lorena Peña, a former FMLN commander and a present-day leading Salvadoran feminist, remarked in an interview: "In the beginning, I believed that I suffered no discrimination. 'I'm the commander of an armed front, and all the rest are men, and I command them . . . what discriminations?'" (Kohan n.d., 6). She went on to say that after the war, when she was able to reflect on her wartime experiences and the extraordinarily small number of women who were promoted to leadership positions, she began to develop her feminist consciousness (Kohan n.d.).

Peña's postwar transformative experience was not unique among leading women in the FMLN. In 2002, Viterna reviewed organizational literature and interviewed representatives from five leading feminist organizations in El Salvador.<sup>10</sup> She found that each of these women's organizations had declared its independence from partisan politics by 1994, and all were promoting explicitly feminist agendas. When asked how this metamorphosis took place, representatives of women's organizations frequently referenced the international community. Salvadoran women who were exiled in other countries, including Europe, the United States, Mexico, and Nicaragua, would learn about the feminist movement there and see how it applied to their struggles as women activists in El Salvador. International conferences also created opportunities for women's organizations to learn from and collaborate with each other. For example, shortly after the 1992 peace process, the sixth Feminist Encounter of Latin America and the Caribbean was held in El Salvador. Revolutionary women from Nicaragua shared their own marginalization after the

Sandinista victory, and this warning encouraged Salvadoran women's groups to collaborate on the Women's '94 platform (discussed earlier) and ensure their role in peacetime politics. The international community has also had more direct effects, as international agencies flooded El Salvador with people, money, and projects after the war. Given that these same Salvadoran women's organizations had gained great respect during the war, and given that many international groups had specific interests in promoting women's rights, these new feminist organizations that were formerly reliant on the FMLN now found themselves with independent resources to promote independent agendas.

Just as women activists were becoming increasingly aware of gender discrimination not only in Salvadoran society but also in the ranks of the new FMLN political party, the FMLN began distancing itself from its wartime emphasis on incorporating women as equals into the struggle. According to the women interviewed, these contradictions were the final push for feminist organizations to formally break from partisan politics. When women did officially separate from the FMLN, this separation was almost always credited at least in part to the financial support received from the international community, whose resources were critical for securing office space, elaborating and executing projects, and advancing the education of the staff by, for example, providing them with university training in feminist thought (see also Stephen et al. 2001 192–193). However, it is important to note that, although women's organizations declared independence from the FMLN, many individual women affiliated with these organizations remain committed FMLN members, and some have won political positions in the Salvadoran legislature and the internal party leadership.

With independence, the individual women's organizations began pursuing active agendas to improve women's position in society. Each organization interviewed has adopted a number of projects, including programs to educate women about women's rights, to train governments to be sensitive to gender issues, to promote nonsexist education in schools and school materials, to support victims of gendered violence, to promote women candidates to office, to support women suffering labor abuses in the *maquilas*, to provide economic development projects to the poorest of women, and even to rebuild women's houses after the earthquakes of 2001.

At times in the past, Salvadoran feminist organizations have formed strong coalitions to work for gendered change, particularly in relation to political issues. For example, the Women '94 campaign, described earlier, was followed with a similar coalition for the 1997 elections. This second coalition, although suffering from a late start and much internal disagreement (Luciak 2001), was ultimately more successful in increasing women's voter turnout and women's legislative representation than in 1994. The 1997 coalition also articulated a Salvadoran Women's Platform that clearly examined the multiple spheres of women's marginalization and discrimination, highlighting education, health, violence, sexuality, labor, and representation. They also challenged the government to put in place systems to make the called-for reforms. However, as previously mentioned, ensuing frustrations with the government and the



FMLN for their lack of attention to feminist issues left many women's organizations disillusioned with their efforts to influence politics.

Over the past few years, women's organizations have been less likely to work in coalitions, and some interviewees suggested that the organizations themselves maintain these boundaries with intentionality. Some suggested that a lack of cooperation was in part a product of the war, where women learned to compartmentalize information about their particular unit to keep the larger organization safe. However, the frequent mention in interviews regarding the struggle and competition for international financial assistance may also contribute to their unwillingness to cooperate with each other (see also Stephen et al. 2001).

Feminist organizations in El Salvador are staffed mostly by middle-class women who have achieved high levels of education compared with the majority of their Salvadoran counterparts. Poor women's experience with these programs is typically as a recipient of their services, such as when they receive legal support, economic development projects, health care, or educational classes about women's rights. In this manner, representatives of women's organizations believe they make a difference in other women's lives. In terms of whether or not their actions make a difference in terms of national-level politics, however, the feminists were largely pessimistic, suggesting that their proposals and platforms consistently "fall on deaf ears" (Viterna interview March 15, 2002).

Some scholars argue that the revolutionary past generated a strong, vibrant feminist movement in El Salvador, and that this movement is unique from Western feminist movements precisely because of its revolutionary birth (Kampwirth 2004; Shayne 2004). By contrast, several of the women interviewed by Viterna lamented the absence of a true women's movement in El Salvador; they pointed to the poor coordination between feminist groups and the absence of feminist mobilization among women outside internationally funded NGOs as evidence. We believe the actions and experiences of the Salvadoran feminist organizations clearly show that revolutionary organizing did in fact lead some well-prepared revolutionary women to develop as feminists and to continue their struggle on behalf of gender equality in a feminist movement. However, it is important to remember the boundaries of this movement. The wartime experiences of most women in guerrilla camps—poor, rural women with little education and few contacts with international feminism—did not appear to have a similar transformative feminist effect. For example, Viterna's interviews with rural women in former combat zones demonstrate that ex-guerrilla women may have more of a sense of efficacy and pride than their nonguerrilla counterparts, but they do not generally mobilize around gender (or other) issues (Viterna 2007; see also Cagan 2000). Moreover, the ability of a feminist movement to continue and expand when it is largely housed in NGOs that are highly reliant on international funding remains to be seen. Nevertheless, the work of feminist organizations in El Salvador has been truly outstanding in terms of promoting long-term social and political change, while still meeting the needs of Salvadoran women who live in a nation where the government has been both unwilling and unable to do so (Stephen et al. 2001, 188).

## CONCLUSION: WOMEN IN THE 15TH DEPARTMENT

This essay has explored the ways in which women across time and space in El Salvador—through collective action in political parties, grassroots groups, professionalizing NGOs, and home and community life—shape and are shaped by society. Today, the Salvadoran women’s “movement” and organizations that concentrate on a diversity of women’s issues are increasingly receiving fewer funds from international donors as crises shift globally. Yet civil society groups attempt to address the many needs left unmet by a neoliberal shrinking Salvadoran state. A growing number of Salvadorans, even those with decades of organizing for social justice, living within the territorial borders of the nation state has become untenable. By way of conclusion, it is important to deterritorialize the nation and place women’s heterogeneous lived experience in the everyday bidirectional flow of the Salvadoran diaspora. The importance of the Salvadoran diaspora to the daily lives of Salvadorans is difficult to overstate. To illustrate, although there are only 14 departments (states or provinces) in El Salvador, mainstream Salvadoran newspapers such as *La Prensa Grafica* devote entire sections to what they call the “15th department,” which refers to Salvadoran migrants residing in the United States. Likewise, the most recent human development report by the United Nations Development Program reframes El Salvador’s human development indicators to include Salvadoran communities in the United States. This inclusion would shift the Salvadoran national economy from US\$16 million to US\$38 million (UNDP 2005, 2). A growing body of literature has examined the particulars of Salvadoran immigrant experiences, for example, the obstacles faced through fragmented social networks and the challenges women migrants in particular face (Menjívar 2000) and the bidirectional flows of globalization and capitalism from the United States into rural towns in El Salvador (Pederson 2002). Others have theorized about the relationship between legality/illegality (Coutin 2003), the negotiation of belonging (Coutin 2005), and the impact of transnational feminist and rights discourse to women’s mobilizing (Burton 2004). As scholars and activists make clear, it is critical to explore how migration affects communities not only in the host country but also in El Salvador. Men continue to emigrate, leaving women as heads of households to care for children, the elderly, and to take on in some cases new community leadership roles. However, women too immigrate in search of what Mahler depicts as the myth of the American dream (Mahler 1995) and to join partners. In so doing they redefine transnational family life and the meanings of motherhood. In this light, Silber’s preliminary project has begun to track ongoing waves of migration from formerly revolutionized communities by men and women and their now adult children, who never imagined leaving El Salvador after the negotiated peace, and how these transformations affect gender systems (Silber interview, November 2006). For now, many make a living as undocumented migrants and help their kin survive by sending them remittances while facing the legacies of their wartime activism and postwar fatigue.

## NOTES

1. Salvadoran independence was declared first in Guatemala City in 1821 and later in San Salvador in 1839 (Browning 1971, 139).
2. See Lauria-Santiago (1999) for a groundbreaking analysis of the role of small-scale agrarian producers during this historical period that complicates assumptions about the processes of capital export production and places the peasantry as agents in the process.
3. See Zamosc (1989) for a class analysis of the massacre, and Pérez-Brignoli (1995) for a more complex reading that looks to the relationship between Indian peasants (i.e., the role of *cofradías*) and communist leaders. Gould and Lauria-Santiago (2008) provide a recent detailed interpretation of events that highlights the importance of heterogeneous indigenous organizing.
4. The five groups that came together to form the FMLN included the FPL (*Fuerzas Populares de Liberación* or Popular Forces of Liberation), the ERP (*Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* or The People's Revolutionary Army), the RN (*Resistencia Nacional* or The Armed Forces of National Resistance), the PRTC (*Partido Revolucionario de Trabajadores Centroamericanos* or Revolutionary Party of Central American Workers), and the PCS (*Partido Comunista Salvadoreña* or Salvadoran Communist Party).
5. The FMLN agreed not only to place women on the candidate lists but also to ensure that these women were placed near the top of the lists, so that under the electoral system of proportional representation at least one-third would have a good chance of actually making it to Congress. This method of placing women in every third spot on the ballot is referred to as the "trensa" (braid).
6. In ARENA, only 2 of the 13 members of the coordinating council are women, and all 14 department directors are men (ARENA n.d.). A female ARENA parliamentarian, Mercedes Gloria Salguero Gross, was vice president of the parliament from 1994 to 1997 and president from 2000 to 2002, but overall, its female parliamentary representation is low compared with the FMLN. The March 2006 elections marked the first time ARENA placed a woman on a presidential candidate ballot (in the vice presidential slot). However, ARENA does a better job of getting women elected to mayoral positions: during the 2003–2006 term, only six of the FMLN mayors were women, compared with ARENA's 13 women mayors (COMURES n.d.).
7. The FMLN's eventual candidate, Facundo Guardado—a founding member of the FMLN, a guerrilla commander during the war, and with only a ninth-grade education—was resoundingly defeated in the first round of the presidential elections by ARENA's candidate, Francisco Flores.
8. This growth is low compared to Central American neighbors in the same year: Costa Rica's GDP growth was 5.9 percent, Guatemala's was 3.2 percent, Honduras's was 4.1 percent, and Nicaragua's was 4.0 percent (ECLAC 2006, 85).
9. The Gini coefficient increased from .507 in 1995 to .525 in 2001 (ECLAC 2006, 79). A Gini coefficient quantifies the difference between an observed income distribution and a perfectly equal income distribution. It ranges from a minimum of 0 (or perfect equality, where all income-receiving units receive an equal share of the income produced in a society) to a maximum of 1 (or perfect inequality, where one income-receiving unit receives all the income produced in a society) (Beckfield, 2008).

10. In 2002, Viterna interviewed representatives from five leading women's organizations in El Salvador. Each interview was conducted in the organization's headquarters in San Salvador, although most of the organizations also had projects or branch offices throughout the country. Four of the five had grown from a specific faction of the FMLN during the war; a fifth was also created by revolutionary women but was never explicitly linked to the FMLN. All interviews were conducted in Spanish and then translated by Viterna.

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