

# El Salvador: Revolution, War and Women

by Norma Vázquez

I am part of a generation that lived the best years of its life believing in revolution, that spent endless hours of its youth debating on the most appropriate tactics and strategies for carrying it out worldwide, which was no mean task. Instead of going dancing or out on dates, our generation attended study groups, where each word of Marx or Lenin had to be learned like the credo. And, in many cases, ours was a generation that spent endless hours in military training and learning clandestine tactics in order to combine political and military aspects in a single individual, along with a high dose of sacrifice and mystique. The result? "The new man", descendant and heir of Che Guevara, for whom the answer is not in this world, but instead in the socialism which by the inexorable design of history would have to replace the said capitalist system and open the way—following the dictatorship of the proletariat—to an era of love and equality among men. And only among men, because adding the part about men and women had the ring of a petit-bourgeois deviation.

I am part of a Latin American generation that could not bear the extreme poverty of the majority of our countries' population and the lack of spaces for expression of political dissidence—to which repression was often the only response—and whose political-military projects led revolts, revolutions and civil wars, and resulted in deaths, a few revolutionary governments, creation of spaces for open political opposition, and electoral transformation which, though still generating struggles to ensure transparency, has managed to reduce social inequalities.

In the 1970s, the majority of those who decided to channel their rebelliousness into militancy sought one priority objective: taking political power. Most chose the route of armed struggle, guided, metaphorically and materially, by the triumph of the Cuban revolution.

Background photo taken from LOLA Press

Twenty-five years later, in most of the countries of this continent, my generation has had to renounce its aspirations of obtaining and maintaining power through the use of arms and has moved into other forms of struggle or disillusion. Some now deny their past or file it under the heading of "craziness of youth". Others have laid down their arms because victory did not come as quickly as they had hoped, but they keep thinking its time will come. There are those who joined the ranks of social movements, many women undoubtedly, and who today devote their energies to building organic spaces or movements around social inequalities, and have even broadened their sphere of action and gained legitimacy and a space for action, of which the feminist struggle is an example.

Nevertheless, like others I consider that the armed military option left major marks on our generation. It is important not to ignore this. The basis for inequality and the lack of democratic spaces in our countries continue to exist, stirring anger in any minimally sensitive person. And while reason may recognize the stumbling blocks for the armed struggle, somewhere tucked away persists the idea that some of those impediments must be eliminated and that by force we can put an end to the daily, silent violence that is slowly destroying the majority of the population of our countries.

In the specific case of El Salvador, revolutionaries sustained their vocation for radical change over more than 20 years—10 years of social struggle and creation of political-military groups that in 1980 gave rise to the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN), followed by more than 10 years of a bitter civil

war which came to an unusual conclusion in 1992, with no military victory for either side, but instead a negotiated peace.

In this Salvadoran experience, revolution and war fused in a single cause. Over more than 10 years, winning the war was the motivation of thousands of militants (men and women) and collaborators of the FMLN. But war leads to escalating violence and polarization, and submerges contending forces in a logic of destruction. A human and material destruction that has been extensively quantified and documented, a destruction of dreams, of ways of life, of beliefs and ways of relating among people, which have been less studied and evaluated.

Feminists do not have a unanimous position on war and it is perhaps one of the most difficult issues to tackle. From some angles it is seen as part of the patriarchal logic of destruction into which women are drawn. In my view, thousands of women have not only allowed themselves to be drawn in, but instead have fought voluntarily and have participated in the decision to make war. Thus far there is no evidence supporting a supposedly peaceful nature of women, and moreover, the experience of the Salvador war has shown that many women learned the military art and applied it with great skill, and even fought to form part of the guerrilla columns that confronted the enemy army.

But something on which feminists can agree is that war, once unleashed, is a sufficiently powerful force to modify behavior patterns, and the conceptions that support them, in the life of women and men. A feminist view of the transformations in the life of women should include an analysis of two central aspects in the construction of the female identity: sexuality and maternity.

As a result of research undertaken over a one-year period under the auspices of the Reproductive Rights Research Program of the Carlos Chagas Foundation of Brazil, the group Las Dignas today has the testimony of 60 ex-combatants and ex-collaborators of the FMLN on the changes in their sexual and maternal conceptions and practices as a result of their participation in the war.

The histories of these women showed that they had sexual and maternal practices that to a great extent contradicted the conservative training received during their childhood. The rule of keeping sexual relations within the framework of stable, monogamous and faithful couples was much attacked during the war, especially among women guerrillas. The inevitability of pregnancies and the sexuality-reproduction continuum were very much questioned by the requirements of armed struggle or clandestine living. The unfailing correspondence between biological maternity and motherhood was broken, with great pain for women who were mothers, and in many cases would never be repaired.

These modifications in sexual and maternal practices are, however, seen by the women as circumstantial, the product of the time and inevitable due to the situation of war, but they do not manage to see them as an opportunity to question the traditional structures of femininity. Their incapacity to reinterpret those changes in a liberating sense shows the weakness of a project—the FMLN's—that put more emphasis on destruction (material and symbolic) of what it considered to be an oppressive order, than on designing new values and models for living, both for its militants and for the people whose historical representative they

claimed to be.

We found that the FMLN lacked progressive theoretical referents on sexuality in general and on female sexual oppression in particular, which prevented it from constructively criticizing the changes that had actually occurred on that score. The current balance is that many ex-combatant women deny, distort, or feel guilty about their experience during the war, resorting to mechanisms that become more

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intense in a postwar atmosphere where the most conservative positions on sexual and reproductive rights of women have gained ground. Other women have left the FMLN upon finding that it does not offer attractive references in the analysis of relationships between genders; many, finally, now reject the feminist proposal because the aspects related to sexuality and maternity would lead them to review their past experience.

With a view to strengthening women's struggle in connection with their sexual and reproductive rights, not only in El Salvador but also in Central America, we shared the results of this research with 40 women from the region—including some Mexican women

working in the conflict-ridden Chiapas areas—in a forum held in December 1995. The processes relating to a will to forget or a disdain for the subjective aspects in Central American revolutionary projects were evidently similar. The Nicaraguan women, for example, shared their surprise at this reflection on the situation of the Salvadoran women at a stage so soon after the end of the war, given that they themselves have still not evaluated their participation during the revolution and while they were in power. The women at the forum promised to look deeper into this subject as soon as possible, since they see an interesting vein for reflection.

One of the conclusions of the forum—whose intensity will not be soon forgotten by the participants—was that we, the heirs of the generation of frustrated revolutions and wars without victory, have to look into the female experience of everyday life in extreme situations like war, as well as the assumptions on the subject by the Left throughout the region.

We believe that if something can be redeemed from irrational destruction by armed processes, it is the capacity to learn from pain and to change in order to transform our lives. The past and present conflicts in the region, regardless of whether some women do not want to participate in them while others do, affect the lives of all of them. Recovery from the changes this history left in the lives of thousands of Central Americans is one of the most necessary feminist contributions in this convulsed strip of the Americas.

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asia

# from an Indonesian Prison, on International Women's Day 1997

*Chairperson of the Indonesian Center for Labor Struggles and leader of the People's Democratic Party of Indonesia (PRD), Dita Sari was a guest speaker at the International Women's Day march and rally held on 8 March 1995 in Perth, Australia.*

*She was the first prominent democratic leader to be arrested by the Suharto dictatorship in the wave of repression that began in July 1996. She was arrested 8 July while attending a peaceful demonstration of 20,000 young women workers demanding wage increase and other improvements. She has been an outspoken defender of women's rights in Indonesia as well as a courageous reporter of freedom in East Timor. She was also active in solidarity with Megawati Sukarnoputri in the latter's campaign against harassment by the Suharto dictatorship. Even though from a different political party than Megawati, Dita spoke frequently at public meetings and demonstrations as an act of solidarity with another victim of repression and a symbol of democratic struggle.*