

# **Tortillas, Trauma and Tears: Gendering El Salvadoran Women's Participation in the 1980–1992 Civil War**

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**Throughout the centuries, armed conflict and the machinations of gender relations have been intimately entwined. In this paper the gendered impacts of armed conflict are discussed in relation to El Salvadoran women's experiences of the 1980–1992 civil war. Drawn from the author's field-work, testimonials are presented which highlight the contradictory nature of women's experiences of conflict. It is argued that while the participation of large numbers of women in the Salvadoran civil war was almost unprecedented, this participation was generally undertaken in ways which entrenched oppressive sex role stereotypes in Salvadoran society and thus, in ways which acted to disempower, rather than empower Salvadoran women.**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Contrary to popular mythology on their innate passivity, women have taken up arms in the pursuit of situated conceptions of justice and equality for centuries. Spanish historians have documented the active participation of Incan women during battles of conquest in Latin America (Dransart 1987) and the participation of women in wars to end colonial rule and in partisan struggles resulting from decades of poverty and inequality has been common-place throughout the twentieth century (see for example, Ranchod-Nilsson 1994; Katzenberger 1995; Jaquette 1973).

In addition to their roles as combatants, women have participated in armed conflict in other forms that have challenged the binaries constructing them as naturally weak, passive, non-participants in the fight for nationhood against men's warrior strength and activity. As nurses at the front line, as drivers, cooks or conscripted industrial workers, women have not only challenged the myth of their non-participation in the "war effort," but also, what was seen as their inability to manage traditional masculine labour practices (Elshtain 1987).

In recent years, therefore, the opportunity armed conflict offers to disrupt sex role stereotypes for women has been the topic of intense scholarship. It has been shown, for example, that conflict acts to open up spaces previously closed to women, as the community tends to be preoccupied more with the external threat and less with internal social ordering (Ridd 1986) and that women's involvement in community and political activism during such periods has been an enormous source of empowerment for many (Byrne 1996; El-Bushra and Mukarubuga 1995; El-Bushra and Piza Lopez 1993; Ridd 1986; Turshen 1998; Peteet 1991; Jorgensen 1994; Park 1994; Aretxaga 1995).

Paradoxically, however, recent scholarship has also shown how discourses of gender in times of conflict have correspondingly sought to entrench traditional expectations and stereotypes (Lake and Damousi 1995; Byrne 1996). Thus, just as "Rosy the riveter," that famous World War II American icon was exalted for her contribution to the war effort, a conservative lexicon stressing the importance of women's place in the home existed alongside this emancipatory discourse to define and undermine women's war work outside the home (Montgomerie 1996).

This conservative lexicon was generally found to continue in the post-conflict context such that in the case of post-conflict Britain, for example, women resuming their place in the home became an important signifier of pre-war order (Lake and Damousi 1995). Similarly, following the repatriation of male combatants in Nicaragua, Myrna Cunningham observed that, "men want to become the leaders and decision makers, to take back their jobs, displacing the women who remained holding the community together for years" (cited in Piza Lopez 1991, 55). Experiences in Algeria during and after the liberation war were similar for women (Fanon 1965, Bouatta 1994, Cherifati-Merabtine 1994, Hopkinson 2000).

That is not to say, however, that women's intra-war and post-war experiences are necessarily uniform. Scholarship in the field of gender and conflict needs to recognise the diversity of women's experiences so that women's agency is not denied or distorted in ways which reinforce mechanisms of power and domination (Marchand 1995). To contribute to this knowledge, this paper will discuss the impacts of the 1980–1992 civil war in El Salvador on Salvadoran women. The concept of empowerment will be used as a means of interpreting these impacts.

Empowerment suggests a process whereby power is generated in order to achieve individual or collective goals (Rowlands 1997). In the context of Salvadoran women's participation in the civil war, empowerment can be seen as a process that enables Salvadoran women to undo the negative social constructions which have prevented them from gaining control over the material and non-material resources necessary to determine the directions of their lives. Disempowerment, therefore, is the inability to overcome such negative social constructions.

Beginning with a brief exposé of the social, political and economic background which led to the civil war and drawing on data collected during the author's fieldwork in El Salvador, this paper will employ the above conceptualisation of empowerment to discuss the nature of Salvadoran women's participation in the recent civil war. It will then examine, in relation to the themes of sexuality and motherhood, how the social construction of Salvadoran women has been simultaneously challenged and reinforced by this participation.

## BACKGROUND TO THE CRISIS

The political and economic history of the small Central American country of El Salvador, has been one of inequality and conflict. From the time of Spanish conquest in 1524, Salvadoran society has been structured like a "squat pyramid" with the oligarchy (the descendants of the Spanish *conquistadores* and coffee growing elite) forming its tiny apex, the military, its next slightly larger layer, and the remainder of the population, its main substance (Thompson 1996). Wealth and resources have been controlled by the oligarchy with the support of the military, leaving the remainder of the population, the largest layer of the "squat pyramid" of Salvadoran society, desperately poor and without any official power of redress.

By the late 1970s, when the civil war had all but begun, these conditions of domination had seen the marginalisation of subsistence production in favour of export (Montgomery 1995). Landlessness had increased from 12 percent in the early 1960s to 41 percent of the total rural population by the 1970s (Murray and Barry 1995, xv; Pearce 1986, 261), and the military governments of Colonel Molina and General Romero had begun overruling election results and putting down opposition with increasingly brutal repression (Arnson 1982).

As in the past, however, the majority of the population joined forces to resist this latest wave of repression. From the streets of central San Salvador to the hamlets of the rural north, the sight of students, workers, peasants, farmers and teachers marching through the streets and staging land occupations became an everyday occurrence (Leo-Grande 1983). A radical wing of the Catholic Church known as the "Church of the Poor" and its founding philosophy, Liberation Theology, was crucial at this time of mass conscientisation. Born of a 1968 Bishops' conference in Medellín, Liberation Theology redefined poverty as a sin against God and placed the Church of the Poor squarely on the side of the suffering masses (Sobrino 1991, 169). Hence, when the popular movement came under attack by the military and its right wing death squads, and the deaths and disappearances of students, teachers, peasants and other groups reached almost epidemic proportions of up to 1000 a month (Thompson 1996, 325), priests and nuns espousing Liberation Theology came under attack also. In February 1980, when Archbishop Oscar Ro-

mero, a man celebrated for his commitment to the poor was murdered by a sniper acting for Major Roberto D'Abusson's death squads, the pressure cooker that was Salvadoran society at this time, was ready to explode.

Widespread election fraud, the economic crisis and the impunity with which the military and its death squads enacted their repression, had proved to the five main opposition movements that it was no longer possible to pursue their claims within the political sphere. In October 1980, seven months following the murder of Archbishop Romero, they coalesced to form a revolutionary alliance, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). The Salvadoran civil war had begun.

## SALVADORAN WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE CIVIL WAR

Analogous to other struggles for national liberation in Central America (Randall 1981), women participated in the Salvadoran conflict in great numbers. Dependent in part on social class factors, Salvadoran women joined what was seen as the struggle for a wide variety of reasons. For middle-class urban women, for example, romantic and idealistic notions of a better society often influenced their decision to join the FMLN:

My involvement in the war was conscious but dream like, romantic, it was the idea that to give oneself to others was the best way to live life, to construct a more just, more humane society where there wouldn't be so much sadness in the eyes of the people . . . Since my childhood, I assumed responsibilities for others, and it was great to organise. It attracted a lot of people with whom I felt a sense of belonging (Participant in Las Dignas self-help group, cited in Garaizabel and Vázquez 1994, 34).<sup>1</sup>

Conversely, in rural areas, where persecution by the Salvadoran Armed Forces (FAES) was a daily occurrence, a decision to join the FMLN (also referred to as the guerrillas) may just as likely have been motivated by fear:

I joined the *frente* [the FMLN] when I was fourteen years old. When I joined I was afraid of persecution . . . I wasn't conscious of what I was doing, only that I was afraid of being in the community, that they would capture me. What I mean is, I thought it would be more difficult for them to find me in the *frente* (Participant in Las Dignas self-help group, cited in Garaizabel and Vázquez 1994, 41).

Thus, participation in the FMLN represented something of a safe haven for many women. As Matilde observes,<sup>2</sup> "I was more afraid living here [in San Salvador] than back there [in the rural areas] because the FMLN were guiding us, helping us, getting us out of places so that nothing could happen to us" (From author interview 1/10/1997). For some women living in conflict zones, then, joining the FMLN may not have been so much of a conscious

choice based on political beliefs or a utopian vision of society, but rather, simply a matter of survival.

For other women, however, the principal reason for becoming involved in the struggle was the influence of family. Witnessing their children/husbands/brothers/fathers experience torture or death at the hands of the FAES or their associated death squads forced some women to participate, while for others, the need to support and nurture family members who were guerrillas was the motivating factor. Matilde, for instance, spoke of participating more directly in the FMLN by moving to a guerrilla controlled zone in the mountains once her son became a guerrilla soldier. Notwithstanding the fact that her decision to move her family was also based on the repression they were experiencing at the hands of the FAES, Matilde felt that by being close to her son she could help him and the other “boys”<sup>3</sup> cope with their difficult life in the mountains (Group observation by author 1997).

Haydeé who joined the guerrillas at the age of 11, was influenced by her family in a slightly different way. Her parents declared themselves guerrillas in 1980 and from then on she lived in a guerrilla controlled zone. Growing up in that kind of family and community environment meant, therefore, that Haydeé had no choice but to join the struggle:

I was young when they joined [around the age of nine]. The guerrilla army opened a school where they only talked about Farabundo Martí . . . They told us why there was a need to have a war, and so they made me realise many things. I was very convinced that I had to participate and that surely I was going to be killed, but I knew why (From author interview 17/11/1997).

For many, the murder of Archbishop Romero was a watershed for their participation. In interviews and conversations with participants, the death of Romero became a reference point through which political involvement or commitment to the struggle could be measured. “After the death of Romero,” Lilian observes, “we became involved in the struggle around the San Vicente region” (From author interview 17/11/1997). “After the death of Romero,” Haydeé states, “my mother and father declared themselves guerrillas” (From author interview 17/11/1997). While the intense repression that existed at the time of Romero’s death would have also provided impetus for women’s participation in the FMLN, there is no way to deny the depth of feeling Romero engendered in Salvadoran women. Bemanda, a member of a women’s group in Suchitoto, speaks, for example, of Romero in the following way:

You mentioned Amatitán. I survived the massacre [over 200 men, women and children were killed]. My little girl and I survived . . . They [the FAES] were killing everyone then. They lined up the children, then the women and the old people. I buried myself in the ground and threw grass over my little girl and me . . . I kept saying, “The blessed blood of Monseñor Romero” . . . Monseñor Romero saved me from that massacre . . . Later, I had a little boy who was

deaf and dumb. I took him to specialists but my little boy didn't get better. I became discouraged and I went to cry at the tomb of Monseñor Romero, and I told him about my son. I gave him his name. Now my son can talk and hear. He's called Oscar Arnulfo, Monseñor Romero's name. He hears, he speaks, he goes to second grade. He is big and dark [like Romero was] (Cited in Best and Hussey 1996, 109).

Hence, through the influence of the Church, family, political beliefs, fear, and romantic ideals of a better society, women participated in large numbers in the opposition movement against the FAES. And just as the influences for this participation were varied, the actual forms this participation took were also diverse. In the early 1980s, for example, a member organisation of the FMLN estimated that 40 percent of their military commanders were women (Women's International Resource Exchange 1980, 4). In reality, however, women's participation in the opposition movement as military commanders and combatants was less marked than their participation in other forms of revolutionary work (Thompson 1986).

The majority of women who participated in the FMLN did so as civilian collaborators. Utilised mainly for their traditional roles as mothers, cooks, nurses, cleaners and carers, women civilian collaborators cared for, provided for and nurtured the guerrilla army, setting aside any desire to question this sexual division of labour in order to ensure a final victory for the revolution (Vázquez and Castañeda 1996).<sup>4</sup>

For some of my research participants, however, collaborating with the guerrilla army was simply not an option. For many of the women who had spent the civil war living in zones which were controlled by the FAES, but constantly under attack by the FMLN, participating in the FMLN would have spelled certain danger. As Julia, for example, observes:

Because they visited us [the FMLN], the soldiers came by and then the FMLN again, maybe asking for food. You couldn't take anyone's side, because if you took one side, the other would get mad, so I took nobody's side . . . If we had done so we wouldn't be here today (From author interview 14/11/1997).

For these women then, as well as for other participants who had lived in similar environments before moving to San Salvador, participation in the civil war was a complicated feat of negotiation and fear, compounded by poverty and the threat of losing children to the struggle. Hence, the FMLN, rather than protecting and caring for these women often only contributed further to their fear and insecurity:

I was laying down one night, and the boys came over [the FMLN, around 15 of them] and said "we want to eat." I said I didn't have any food to give them. I said I could give them tortillas if they wanted. Then they told me to stand up and give them tortillas. I had a pot of beans that I had cooked that day and a very bad tempered man was searching my house and found it . . . I was shaking out of fear that something was going to happen to me. They took

the tortillas and the pot of beans and the next day they wanted food again. I only had two tortillas and eggs, so they took the eggs. They kept coming night after night. I made sure I had enough maize . . . so I had enough food to give to them. I lived in fear. I thought about how my children [there were ten living at home at this time] were left with no food because they ate it all. In the mornings I couldn't find any food to give to my children. They came around asking for food for a month (From author interview 1/10/1997).

Thus, for Salvadoran women who participated in the civil war in different ways, participation had both its empowering and disempowering impacts. The next section will discuss these impacts with particular reference to the themes of motherhood and sexuality.

## THE EMPOWERING/DISEMPowering IMPACTS OF WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE CIVIL WAR

When we speak of the social construction of women in Latin American societies, what we are predominantly referring to is the way women are viewed and exalted as mothers (inside the sacrament of marriage), and chaste pure virgins (prior to marriage) (Fisher 1993). In view of this, the changes or challenges that took place in the areas of sexuality and maternity during the civil war arguably represented the most significant of all the changes and challenges to gender roles that took place. Certainly, women's experiences of motherhood and sexuality had an enormous impact on their sense of well being during and after the war.

During the civil war, many Salvadoran women were, for example, separated from their children. For those who became guerrillas, an FMLN imperative of having no children at the front line, meant that they were forced to leave their children in the care of others (From author interview with Cristina Ibáñez 19/11/1997). Often those "others" would be family or friends of the family, and often children were left in care for long periods at a time (up to six or seven years). For other women, separation was due to the fact that their children had become guerrillas. But for still other women, this separation was neither purposeful nor short term. Rather, the civil war was defined by the death or disappearance of their children.

Interview data and fieldwork observations reveal that very few women who were involved in the opposition movement were spared the death or disappearance of a child. Living through such a loss, is, at the best of times, a traumatic experience. The healing process is long and painful and it requires the expression of grief and the support and guidance of family and friends (Herman 1997). Women were prevented from grieving during the war, however, because it was not only dangerous to do so (open expressions of grief signified to the FAES a relationship between the griever and the FMLN and

therefore put the griever and her family at risk of reprisals), but also because of a further FMLN imperative banning the expression of grief (Garaizabel and Vázquez, 1994). Haydeé, who lost three brothers and sisters during the conflict, explained to me that the FMLN had this policy because the war “had to do with strong people” and that “they couldn’t really pamper us” (From author interview 17/11/1997). For Lilian, Haydeé’s mother, this imperative was not quite so easily understood:

In ‘84, after we had been here for a year [in the refugee camp], they killed Chente. He was a guerrilla and he was 16 years old. My other son was 14 years old and Haydeé was 12. They told me not to cry, they told me to feel comfort because of the fact that he had been involved in the struggle. He had said that if his time was up, he was OK with that, that he would rather die fighting than be captured and killed. He died on December 1st. He had left and told me that he was coming back for Christmas and to have things for him since he suffers a lot. Fifteen days before Christmas I was starting to get a few things together—every eight days food was brought here. I had bananas, zapotes, pineapples, I had everything for him! Well the 20<sup>th</sup> went by and the 24<sup>th</sup> . . . I didn’t have a life there. I would get up at 10pm at night and wait for him. Then dawn broke and I got desperate because I couldn’t find him. My heart was aching . . . Then one night I went to bed with fear . . . I heard them come and say we’ve got news for Calete [Lilian’s partner]. I fell to the ground screaming. I knew it was him . . . They said to me to accept the news because that was the way wars went and . . . that because of my reaction the soldiers were going to find out that they were guerrillas. I told them that I was going to say that they had nothing to do with the FMLN, that I was the mother of the guerrilla and that if they wanted they could take me. But I couldn’t easily accept the news [she cries]. My other son died sending me messages . . . He was just a young boy, 14 years old . . . My daughter was killed with another 80 children [during an FAES massacre] . . . We asked the FPL to tell us where their bodies were so we could pick them up, but it never happened. So that is all that I can say. There are a lot of us mothers who have suffered . . . There are only a few that have all their children alive. The majority had their children murdered (From author interview 17/11/1997).

For Matilde, the unbearable loss of her two daughters and grandchildren in a FAES bombing raid of her camp was further compounded by the fact that she blames herself for these losses. Matilde feels this way because they were visiting her in the camp at the time of their death:

My children died over there [in San Vicente] because the soldiers saw two men who were travelling on foot. They [the soldiers] saw them and went to tell the others. They couldn’t get out . . . my daughters were in the barricade making food for the boys. At this time an airplane flew by and dropped a bomb. It wasn’t just them, there were twelve people in the house, and all the twelve died. You can imagine the pain! My daughter who was thirteen years old died too. So it was two of my children and four grandchildren,



there were six, my daughter's husband too (From author interview 1/10/1997).

Blaming themselves for the death of their children was almost a universal experience for women who were mothers in the civil war. For those women who left their children in the care of others to become guerrillas, their experiences of motherhood were also of a negative nature. While it must be said that many felt a sense of liberation through being able to participate in different aspects of community life without being defined or burdened by child-care, these feelings were often reversed when the time came to take responsibility for their children again. In a survey of 64 women participants of self-help groups facilitated by Las Dignas, for example, 89 percent of mothers felt that the war had adversely affected their relationships with their children (Garaizabel and Vázquez 1994, 42).

For many of these women, leaving children in the care of others was seen as abandonment. Notwithstanding the fact that many believed that their participation was necessary to win the war, the cult of motherhood in El Salvador still ran roughshod over their own political aspirations and beliefs. The following testimony elucidates these points:

When I went to the front I thought that it would be easy to separate myself from my children. I had good reasons for this [for fighting]. Afterwards, I've always felt to blame for this, it was a trauma to have abandoned them. They always reproach me for abandoning them. I think that they are never going to understand nor pardon me. Now I feel very alone (Participant in Las Dignas self-help group, cited in Garaizabel and Vázquez 1994, 79).

It seems unlikely then, that women's experiences of motherhood during the war were in any way empowering. For some, perhaps, being forced to live their lives without their children may have opened up increased opportunities in terms of mobility and the fulfilment of non-traditional gender roles. For the majority, however, motherhood during the war was characterised by the disempowering impacts of self-blame, anxiety, fear and the inability to grieve in an appropriate and necessary way when tragedy befell them.

Such contradictory impacts seem also to have been the predominant case with women's experiences of sexuality during the civil war. Initially, living and working alongside their *compañeros*<sup>5</sup> in guerrilla camps gave many women the opportunity to experience relationships with men that differed from the traditional marriage contract. Margarita observed, for example, that sexuality was "different" in the camps. She described sleeping on the floor of a hut with many men around and not feeling threatened or scared that something would happen. In describing the relationships that formed between men and women in the camps, she stated that these relationships were "more respectful" and "more free" than traditional ones between men and women in El Salvador (From author interview 9/12/1997).

Due to the adverse situations under which they lived—not knowing whether they would be attacked from one day to the next, if they would sur-

vive the conflict, or would have to move camp—many men and women in the guerrilla army formed intense sexual relationships very quickly (Vázquez and Castañeda 1996). In some cases, the leadership officially sanctioned these relationships and a marriage, along with instruction on natural birth control to prevent unwanted pregnancy in the camps, would take place. In other cases, however, especially if the couple were deemed to be “unrecognised” by the leadership, recriminations, such as the demotion of the male partner would occur (Thompson 1986, 128–9).

For many women, these recriminations reflected the same double standards they had thought the war was beginning to dissolve. Thus, while women describe the freeing up of sexual relationships during the civil war, they also describe how this experience reinforced the traditional divisions of women into “good women” or “whores”:

My mother didn't let me go to the front because she said that girls were raped or turned into whores there.

When I let off steam with my *compañero* about men hassling me, he would tell me off and call me a whore (Participants in Las Dignas self-help group, cited in Garaizabel and Vázquez 1994, 99).

Similar contradictions in gender roles also took place when so-called sexual freedom in the camps resulted in pregnancy. For women who had been socialised into believing that motherhood was the most important destiny for them, that it enabled them to become complete, pregnancy was often met with much satisfaction. This soon turned to disillusionment, however, when their male partners either failed to recognise, or to take responsibility for, the children born to the partnership. The war gave men a perfect excuse to exercise a lack of paternal responsibility. Thinking about or taking responsibility for children was not only distracting, it was argued that because men were primarily accountable for the operation of armaments, it was also detrimental to the struggle (Vázquez and Castañeda 1996).<sup>6</sup>

Hence, while relationships were ostensibly more egalitarian between men and women in the camps, it was still men who had the power to define what women should or should not do with their bodies. As a direct consequence of this power, rape, even within the boundaries of the guerrilla camps, was often found to occur. While it must be said that the majority of women combatants and collaborators of the guerrilla army were raped by the FAES, fieldwork observations and research conducted by Las Dignas revealed that such women were also subject to rape at the hands of their male *compañeros*. Being raped by a fellow member of the FMLN was perhaps even more disabling for women who felt not only disempowered by the experience, but also that their commitment to the struggle had been betrayed:

The party used women. It hurt me the way people were treated, especially the way women were treated by the leaders. The problem was that we formed idols, that we couldn't believe that those *compañeros* that we respected could destroy us. For those three months I was in the FMLN, a *compañero* raped me. He was the

boss and it was horrible because he seemed like the best man of all the men that were in the camp . . . I had the idea that there [in the camps] there were the best people, an example for all the rest. And it was totally the opposite. They treated us women very badly, I was very disappointed (Participants in Las Dignas self-help group, cited in Garaizabel and Vázquez 1994, 90).

Rather than using these contradictions in gender roles that arose during the conflict to analyse and work towards overcoming women's subordination in society, however, the opposition movement was silent when it came to questions such as these. Unlike the discussion that took place on the issues of imperialism and inequality in society, there was little said on the subject of gender, particularly in relation to sexuality, partnership and contraception (Murguía, Olivera and Vázquez 1997, 31).<sup>7</sup>

Thus, in the two areas that had perhaps the most potential to empower Salvadoran women, real change failed to materialise for many. In fact, as we have seen in the discussion above, women's experiences of sexuality and maternity during the civil war were, in the main, disempowering experiences, reflecting and entrenching their traditional position in society as responsible mothers and chaste virgins.

## CONCLUSION

The civil war in El Salvador was a time in the history of this small nation where there existed the potential for overarching social change in the arena of gender relations. Poverty and political and economic repression had provided a climate for the participation of unprecedented numbers of women in the guerrilla movement against a well-armed government of the elite. As combatants and as civilian collaborators, women took up arms and provided essential support to the guerrilla army in ways that challenged the social construction of their sex in Salvadoran society. This opportunity to challenge traditional gender roles was not only often profoundly empowering for individual women, but it also challenged the perceptions of the men with whom they lived and worked:

The first time I came up against a woman *comandante* . . . I realised just what a *macho* I was at heart. I felt it was wrong. Wrong to trust a woman with the responsibility of leading a hundred soldiers on a mission. I was convinced she would muck the whole thing up! (Pedro cited in Thompson 1986, 127).

I learned a lot during the war, in the sense of being a woman. I learned that I have equal capacities to men, because before that women were taken for granted by men. What I mean is that now, they believe that you are incompetent, and in the war they saw that you were capable of doing the same kinds of things that they did. Of course when talking about physical strength we are not going to be the same, because they have more of it. But in the way we think and make decisions, I think that we are equal

(Haydeé from author interview 17/11/1997).

Yet what empowerment women did experience in the civil war has been seemingly negated by a post-war society structured by the cultures of violence and *machismo*. Stating that Salvadoran society is “violent” does not adequately describe the poverty, the desperation and the sense of fear and paranoia that is still evident throughout much of the country. While gangs of largely poor youth rob and murder, the right wing ARENA government slowly stifles any hope of social reform through its support of foreign and national elites and its dogged commitment to a neo-liberal economic system. Violence against women is endemic and women’s lives continue to be defined by *machista* attitudes that assert the superiority of men over women in the home, work place and community.

This paper does not, however, fully support studies that place these examples of women’s post-war disempowerment in the context of dominant post-war ideologies focusing on the re-establishment of peace and security. Rather, this paper has argued that Salvadoran women remain disempowered in the post-conflict context precisely because their experiences of participating in the civil war were also largely disempowering.

Despite the potential offered to aid women in challenging their gender roles particularly in the areas of sexuality and motherhood, the guerrilla army was complicit in maintaining or further entrenching these roles. Thus, while women were able to free themselves from the bonds of motherhood, or to engage in sexual relations that differed from the traditional marriage contract, they often did so surrounded by guilt and insecurity.

In the post-war context, many women bear the scars of these contradictions. With few opportunities to grieve and to work through the disempowering outcomes of the civil war as they occurred, many Salvadoran women now blame themselves for their own situations (Leslie 1999). This sense of hopelessness is compounded by the grave doubts that many hold concerning the possibility of Salvadoran society to ever be a place where the interests of women and other disenfranchised groups are addressed.

It is well recognised that empowered women can confront and challenge the political and economic inequalities that exist in any given context. Given this fact, the potential for women’s participation in the guerrilla movement to be empowering for them as individuals and ultimately to society in general could have been enormous. The testimonials presented in this paper suggest, however, that while the civil war did indeed contribute to a sense of empowerment for many and thus a step forward in gender relations, overwhelmingly the civil war in El Salvador provided the context for a step backwards.

## NOTES

- 1 All text sourced by these authors has been translated from Spanish by the author.
- 2 Participants names appear as pseudonyms where requested and all text sourced by participants has been translated from Spanish by the author.
- 3 Soldiers of the FMLN were commonly referred to by participants as 'the boys'.
- 4 All text sourced from these authors has been translated from Spanish by the author.
- 5 "Compañero" is a term used interchangeably in El Salvador to signify friend, colleague or lover.
- 6 On falling pregnant, women were forced to leave the guerrilla camps by the FMLN (Thompson 1986).
- 7 All text sourced from these authors has been translated from Spanish by the author.

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