

## **Women in War - The Micro-Processes of Mobilization in El Salvador by Jocelyn Viterna**

Civil war was a stark reality affecting many countries in Central America during the eighties and nineties. Rural and lower income populations utilized guerilla warfare as a means of overthrowing dictatorships, challenging long-held political power by the elite classes and forcing land reform. The author of this book focuses on the civil war in El Salvador between the military-led government and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) which begun in January of 1980 and ended on January 16, 1992 with the Chapultepec Peace Agreement. As a graduate student from Kansas State University in 1995, she took part in a one-week peace and justice group in El Salvador where she first encountered women who were active participants in the war. These encounters sparked her interest in the dynamics surrounding women who were engaged in the fighting; how they came to be involved, their experiences in the camps and the effect it had on them once the war ended. With El Salvador being a traditional "machista" country, women being such an integral part of the guerilla forces added an extra level of curiosity.

Two circumstances led to this book catching my attention. The first, the fact that the Whole Planet Foundation is actively seeking a partner in El Salvador and becoming more cognizant of its history would be a valuable asset. The second, that currently I know of two organizations we partner with in the region that are led by women who were once members of the revolutionary forces in their country's civil war. The question arose of whether their confidence and ability to lead the women in their respective organizations were byproducts of their involvement in the war or the cause for it. With many aspects of micro-finance mimicking the grassroots efforts of a guerilla force including recruitment, community relations and command, I was curious to learn if the women participating in El Salvador's civil war went on to take leadership roles in their communities and country.

By interviewing more than 230 women across the country over the span of two years, the author was able to establish patterns as to how the women were recruited, the types of roles they had within the FMLN and the impact their involvement had post-war.

With the government's army and FMLN both recruiting men by force, villages in rural El Salvador became predominately inhabited by women early on in the war with men either conscripted into the fighting or going into hiding in the forests. Where once they assumed secondary and sequestered lives, rural El Salvadorian women found themselves making decisions regarding the family's finances and businesses. Due to the high mortality rate of the guerilla forces and lack of a male population in the village from which to recruit, the FMLN began to recruit heavily from the young female population both in the villages and refugee camps. Their primary targets were young women left without a family or support structure with the FMLN acting as a surrogate family providing security and purpose. These women then in turn became active recruiters as the FMLN discovered that women made better recruiters of other women. A common refrain heard from the author's interviews is that many women joined out of a sense of adventure previously denied to them and as a means of solidarity with male family members involved in the war. The FMLN army also provided a safe haven with strict rules regarding sexual harassment and violence, a position that was actively broadcasted in their recruitment efforts.

While some women were rank and file soldiers operating in the front line, a large percentage found roles as medics and radio operators. The latter two a result of being more educated versus their male counterparts who had their studies halted once the fighting began and they were conscripted or fled their villages. These were considered important positions within the FMLN, often performed under fire and almost solely female. It is interesting to note that despite several women working in the front lines and leading platoons within the FMLN, the kitchen was almost exclusively the province of women with men only assigned to making tortillas as punishment for breaking a rule. It was not uncommon, however, for women to have male

subordinates and the ability to mete out punishments, a situation that would have been extremely rare prior to the conflict.

With an active role in the FMLN, oftentimes in positions of prestige and authority, the assumption would be that post-war these women would move on to take leadership roles within their communities. The author's research, however, shows no correlation between a woman being an active participant in the FMLN and excelling after the conflict. While there were exceptions, those could be a result of these women displaying leadership qualities that would have surfaced whether they were involved in the guerilla fighting or not. Interviews did find that a segment of the women actively sought out quiet traditional roles denied them during wartime once the conflict ended but this segment was not large enough to skew the results. It is an attractive narrative to claim the civil war in El Salvador had the benefit of producing an entire generation of strong female leaders in that country but as the author's research indicates, it would not be factual.