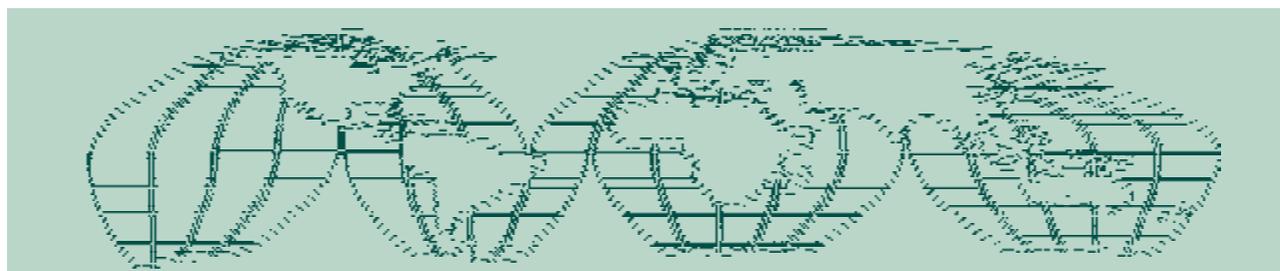

Aftermath: Women's Organizations In Postconflict El Salvador



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Overview

WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS proliferated during and after the civil war that ravaged El Salvador from 1979 through 1991. By war's end, more than a hundred different women's organizations existed in El Salvador, each generating local and regional projects and frequently working in the national political arena as well. Unlike women's movements in other Latin American nations, the women's movement in El Salvador has grown stronger in the postconflict period of emerging democracy. The two movements—democracy and women's rights—appear to be mutually supportive. The case of El Salvador suggests that helping women's groups establish autonomy and stability during, rather than following, a conflict may be crucial to ensuring future women's activism and a vital democratic civil society.

A critical accomplishment of Salvadoran women's organizations during and after the war has been the stimulation of public debate on women's issues. The organizations have sparked discussion of child support, domestic violence, reproductive rights, prenatal and health care, rape and trauma, and unequal economic opportunities and working conditions. These issues had not been raised consistently in the legislature, political parties, town meetings, or private and public settings before the conflict. Working with the attorney general, the Salvadoran Institute for Women's Development, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Agriculture,

and the Ministry of Public Health and Social Assistance,* women's organizations have influenced government policy and trained government employees to integrate gender concerns into their services. But what has earned Salvadoran women's organizations legitimacy is the host of vital services—projects to generate income, to provide health care, to provide child care—they now supply. These programs, many of which began in the 1980s, are now receiving funding from international donors.

In the postconflict period, Salvadoran women's organizations have built national and international coalitions to accomplish their goals. These same organizations have pressed to increase women's participation in electoral politics and to influence the political platforms of the major parties. Some groups have developed and carried out projects using new funding channels, such as solidarity committees, small international foundations, and non-governmental organizations. El Salvador now has a corps of hundreds of articulate, educated, and politically skilled women leaders who can help generate policy. But many remain untapped resources and must be integrated into the larger development process. The involvement of these politically savvy women is essential for the further empowerment of all Salvadoran women.

*The work of Salvadoran women's organizations led to the creation of this ministry.

Six Decades of Conflict

For Salvadorans 1992 marked the end of 60 years of political repression and conflict, including more than 12 years of civil war that cost at least 70,000 lives. Today El Salvador's 6.3 million citizens, half of whom are women, struggle to rebuild economic and political institutions in the post-conflict era.

Under Spanish rule from the early 16th century to 1821, El Salvador would assume sovereign powers in 1841 after a brief period as part of the United Provinces of Central America. Wealthy landowners controlled the economy and political institutions until a 1931 coup placed authoritarian Gen. Maximiliano Hernández Martínez in charge. From the 1930s through the 1970s repressive military leaders excluded most of the population from economic and political participation.

The 1972 electoral defeat of reformist leader José Napoleón Duarte inspired the establishment of a coalition of leftist organizations dedicated to ending military rule. In 1979 the coalition launched a guerrilla movement that became known as the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front.* The FMLN fought against the army, police, and other security forces of the Salvadoran government and the rightist Nationalist Republican Alliance, or Arena, political party.

During the conflict, both government forces and the FMLN committed human rights violations including rape, kidnapping, and murder. The civil war ended officially in January 1992 after two years of negotiation and mediation by the United Nations. The FMLN demobilized as a military organization and emerged as one of several competing political parties, including the still-powerful Arena. In 1999

*Cuba, France, Mexico, and the Soviet Union all supported the FMLN.

Arena held on to the presidency of El Salvador, but in March 2000 the FMLN gained a small majority in the national legislature.

Women's Groups Strengthened in Conflict

During the civil war, women's organizations in El Salvador mobilized around basic survival, economic issues, and human rights. A few of these groups began to work with battered women and to question women's legal, political, and domestic subordination. Late-conflict and postconflict women's organizations challenged gender hierarchies within mixed grass-roots organizations and put forth a gendered critique of the society that included demands for protection from violence, correction of

labor force inequities, and full political participation. By 1990 the first women's groups to define themselves as feminist emerged. They included Women for Dignity and Life (better known as Dignas) and the Norma Virginia Guirola de Herrera Center for Women's Studies (or Cemujer).

The signing of the peace accords in 1992 created new conditions

for women's organizational efforts. With the end of armed conflict and the increasing support and influence of international feminism, Salvadoran women's organizations openly challenged pervasive discrimination in the FMLN and other organizations, such as labor unions and peasant federations. The peace process also created room for women's organizations to forge a new path by working with opposition sectors, agencies of the government, and women's groups in other nations. Dignas is an example. Soon after its founding in 1990, Dignas had to fight sabotage from party leaders of the Resistencia Nacional, or RN, an arm of the FMLN. By 1992, Dignas leaders had asserted independence from the RN and FMLN. They began working with an array of government agencies and feminists from throughout Latin America to create

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programs to improve child support from negligent fathers.

Not all Salvadoran women's groups have followed the same path as Dignas. Some have chosen to expel militant feminists from their ranks while remaining associated with FMLN party organizations. Most Salvadoran women's organizations have struggled to gain some measure of autonomy from the FMLN but remain connected to the party financially, organizationally, or ideologically.

Postconflict Activism

Women's postconflict activism in El Salvador seeks systemic and institutional reform in four broadly defined categories: political participation; labor, land, and economic relationships; health and the results of violence; and education and outreach.

Political Participation

In the postconflict period, political coalition building and the establishment of a distinctive women's political platform are among the most significant ways Salvadoran women's organizations have exercised influence. Through a coalition known as Mujeres '94 (or Women of '94), more than 30 women's organizations created a common platform calling for agrarian reform, educational reform, reproductive rights, gay rights, women's inclusion in development, improvements in the health-care system, programs to prevent violence against women, elimination of gender discrimination from the legal code, and drastic improvements in working conditions for women in all sectors. The platform also demanded establishment of quotas for women holding political office and positions of authority in political parties. Women's organizations

remain committed to establishing a distinctive women's platform and to integrating women's issues into mainstream party platforms.

Increasing women's political participation at local, regional, and national levels and effecting social and economic change through legislation are intertwined goals of postconflict women's organizations in El Salvador. Efforts to elect women candidates to municipal offices have been more successful than those aimed at national offices. Dignas estimated that 500 women had been elected to municipal councils as of late 1999.

In addition to creating a broad women's platform and electing female officials, women's organizations such as the Mélida Anaya Montes Women's Movement (known as MAM) have lobbied for specific legislative initiatives. Working with several other groups, the MAM Citizen's Initiative for Women generated proposals for labor laws in the free-trade zones

(where most workers are women) and laws requiring political candidates to certify they are current in child-support payments before taking office.

Labor, Land, And Economic Relationships

Many women's groups currently active in a variety of causes began as grass-roots organizations devoted to improving women's lives as workers, consumers, and procurers of household goods and services. Almost all Salvadoran women's organizations have attempted "productive projects" aimed at supporting small-scale activities that could increase household income and raise women's living standards. For example, until 1993, the primary goal of Dignas was to develop projects (such as baker-

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ies, animal raising, and local cooperative stores) that would generate income for peasant women.

In the postconflict period, economic projects for women have encouraged microenterprise and entrepreneurship and provided training in concrete business skills. In 1996 MAM created four pilot projects that taught women how to establish their own businesses. Projects that encouraged women to enter nontraditional fields—such as a Dignas training program in carpentry, masonry, and auto mechanics—met with only limited success. Despite extensive preparation and assistance with child care and emotional support, few graduates were able to find jobs or set up their own businesses in fields traditionally dominated by men.

In a nation still predominantly rural, women's organizations have been challenging land reform policies that largely excluded women's access to land. The Institute for Research, Training, and Development for Women (better known as IMU) has investigated the effect of land reform on women since the peace accords of 1992. Dignas, the Association of Salvadoran Women (known as AMS), and national coalitions such as Mujeres '94 have worked at municipal, regional, and national levels for women's inclusion in postconflict land reform. They have succeeded most often at the local level, capitalizing on connections to local politicians.

Health and the Results of Violence

Postconflict women's organizations in El Salvador have stressed the need for better general health care and health education for women and children. Projects dedicated to nutrition, birth control, reproductive health, maternal health and infant care, and the prevention of AIDS and other sexu-

ally transmitted diseases have brought significant improvements in recent years.

Reproductive health projects sponsored by Dignas have encouraged the Salvadoran government to develop and fund services formerly provided by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). One of the most active organizations in health care has been AMS, which was a leading participant in the USAID-funded Maternal and Child Health Project (or Prosami). In

1998 AMS became the only women's group chosen by the Ministry of Public Health and Social Assistance to work in its new Salud Saludable (Healthy Health) program.

Health-care concerns for Salvadoran women include not only traditional issues such as nutrition and reproductive and prenatal care but also problems arising from the nation's history of violent conflict and human rights abuses. Although federal allocations for health care increased in the 1990s, women's organizations are doing most of the

work to help women cope with the physical and psychological toll of war. These organizations have offered workshops and counseling for abused women that address the impact of rape and torture. A major Dignas project treats extreme trauma cases resulting from women's experiences in the war. With USAID support, Dignas investigators are carrying out research on women who sought sanctuary in the refugee camps.

Domestic violence is a central concern for most women's organizations in El Salvador, as it is in many other nations. MAM organized Casas de las Mujeres (Women's Houses) across the country to provide individual attention to survivors of violence, whether it be family violence, sexual abuse, or workplace harassment. The casas also serve as

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training centers for community leaders and counselors who advise on legal issues, mental health, and women's health. Dignas maintains a center to treat female victims of violence. It also analyzes public services so it can propose and lobby for improvements. Cemujer provides legal, medical, and psychological services (including a telephone hotline) for victims of sexual abuse, rape, and other violence. Work in domestic violence has led women to challenge unequal power relations between men and women and has resulted in a new movement that pressures fathers to pay child support. The Association of Women Seeking Child Support has promoted "irresponsible fatherhood" to a national issue.

As women's organizations in El Salvador worked against domestic violence, they began to recognize how often children, too, were victims of abuse. With USAID support, AMS created a program to prevent child abuse and keep children in school. The project, now funded by other sources, provides psychological counseling to youths at community centers, reports child-abuse cases to authorities, and accompanies victims through legal processes. AMS also works to prevent the trafficking of women and children for sex.

Education and Outreach

Salvadoran women's organizations have developed gender-sensitive educational and training materials for literacy purposes and to sensitize government employees to gender issues. Several groups began developing literacy programs for women when schools were shut down during the civil war. Dignas and other women's organizations founded literacy circles, and MAM developed an education program that recognized differences between young and old women and between women who could read and those who could not. In 1997, MAM education programs embraced 92 groups in 38 municipalities spread over 12 departments.

Educating Ourselves With Sergia is a program AMS created to promote literacy training while also preserving Salvadoran cultural heritage. Through *casas abuelas* (grandmothers' houses), elderly women pass their knowledge to young women who develop teaching materials.

Although the efforts of women's literacy programs are important, women's organizations consider improving the overall level of funding for education in El Salvador and integrating a gendered perspective into the general education program their most important goals.

A Need for Assistance And Autonomy

Many women's groups currently active in El Salvador formed before the peace accords were signed. But because they achieved clear identities and agendas that went beyond the needs generated by the war, the end of conflict did not threaten their existence. Some clues to these organizations' longevity and lessons for the development community may be found

by examining past funding patterns, contacts with international women's groups, and funding options for building credibility and sustainability.

Past Funding Patterns

In the late 1980s international development agencies made funding available for women's projects. The FMLN, hoping to take advantage of this funding and to recruit as many women as possible to its cause, created women's committees in its various branches. Women FMLN members then proposed projects to potential funders. By allowing projects that specifically addressed women's needs, the FMLN provided women opportunities and incentives to investigate the roots of their own subordination. Women's organizations soon evolved from clandestine groups to open, legal entities re-

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sponsible for a variety of nonmilitary development projects.

International assistance to Salvadoran women's organizations has significantly influenced both the organizations and the women they serve. Small, progressive foundations committed to spotlighting gender have developed better lines of communication with their Salvadoran counterparts than have large international donors. Salvadoran women's organizations currently subsist primarily on donations from private foundations in Western Europe, Canada, and the United States. Most of the funding is for short-term projects. USAID has provided funding to five of the organizations surveyed, but funds have often been channeled through umbrella organizations such as the Salvadoran NGO Prosami.

Since the peace accords were signed in 1992, Salvadoran women's organizations have had access to funds from bilateral or large international donors, such as USAID, the United Nations, and the European Union. The large bilateral donors have encouraged Salvadoran women's organizations to professionalize their accounting controls, report writing, and legal status. Though positive, this has limited the autonomy women's organizations have to set their project agendas. The current strength of women's organizations stems from the period before they received funding from large international donors. Smaller amounts of aid but greater control over its allocation in the early years allowed groups to develop strong, independent profiles.

Most funding that Salvadoran NGOs receive is earmarked for specific projects and cannot be used for general organizational needs such as staff training, accounting controls, management systems, professionalization of governance structures, develop-

ment of plans for financial sustainability, or administrative and operational overhead. Thus, Salvadoran women's organizations face obstacles in meeting their administrative costs and structural needs, as well as in establishing long-term financial sustainability. Funding organizations want to support projects, not organizational costs. Ironically, the institution building needed for future stability often becomes a low priority.

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International Contacts

Another important contribution to the autonomy of some FMLN women's organizations was their contact with international women's solidarity committees through tours, sister-city programs, and idea exchanges. From 1980 until the Salvadoran elections in April 1994, some 5,000 Americans went to El Salvador as part of solidarity delegations. Such delegations continued in smaller numbers after 1994. Women made up a majority of participants in the U.S. solidarity tours. Europeans, Australians, and New Zealanders also sent tours and formed support committees.

Although no systematic study has been conducted on the politics of women involved in solidarity organizing, it appears that a significant number identify themselves as feminists and have a special interest in women's issues. In many cases, tours that brought women together resulted in American

or European women inviting Salvadoran women to their countries for extended tours and to exchange ideas. In some cases, solidarity committees funded Salvadoran women's organizations. In other cases, they introduced Salvadoran women to alternative funding sources such as Oxfam International and the Ford Foundation. This funding allowed women's organizations more autonomy in setting up projects than did larger, multilateral donors or the FMLN parties. Many Salvadoran women's organizations have received support from small women's groups throughout North America and Europe.

Many directors of women's organizations acknowledge benefits from training in accounting, administration, and management procedures, particularly the help received from USAID. Donors have provided guidance and funds for increased oversight capacity, adding to the administrative efficiency and professional growth of AMS and other women's groups.

Funding to Build Credibility and Sustainability

Women's organizations in El Salvador have endured the difficult and dangerous transition from conflict to postconflict society. They have discovered that their sustainability depends on building credibility, developing stable internal structures, and maintaining funding. The sustainability of Salvadoran women's organizations will depend on obtaining long-term project funding that includes money for institutional strengthening. The women's organizations analyzed currently depend on international funding, with none generating more than 15 percent of their own annual budgets.

Organizations may pursue income generation for financial stability, building on fees for service. For instance, a microcredit organization can earn income from the loan interest it charges clients. AMS

is considering selling health-care services to the Ministry of Public Health and Social Assistance. But this is problematic. Even though its creation was prompted by women's organizations, the ministry does not stress gender or consider domestic violence a public health problem.

Little progress has been made in encouraging donations to women's organizations within El Salvador. Some Salvadoran businesses and wealthy individuals donate significantly to their own charities or interests but not to women's organizations—

especially not to those viewed as feminist. The only women's organizations the CDIE team interviewed that are generating domestic donations are the Organization of Salvadoran Women for Peace Association (Ormusa), the Foundation for the Development of the Salvadoran Woman (Fudem), and AMS. Ormusa is approaching banks and the newly privatized telephone company, while Fudem has built a network of doctors who donate time to the organization's vision

but steady income from individual Salvadorans.

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Recommendations for the International Community

1. Integrate the projects of women's organizations into large-scale development initiatives. Do not treat them as peripheral. Salvadoran women's organizations are carrying out development work that needs to be integrated into the overall process of recovering from the conflict and constructing an economically, socially, and politically sound country. When important national projects are defined in health, education, democratization, rural development, and the environment, Salvadoran women's organizations should be part of the planning and evaluation process.

2. Encourage government institutions and the private sector to support, acknowledge, and work with women's organizations. Many Salvadoran women's organizations have existed for almost a decade, some much longer. They have a wealth of experience and expertise in many areas important to government institutions. These include literacy, domestic violence, reproductive health, child-support payments, and gender-sensitivity training. The expertise should be recognized and used as a resource in reconstructing Salvadoran society. Comprehensive gender-sensitivity training and gender-oriented programs are needed in almost every branch of government and in many private-sector institutions.

3. Support coalition efforts between different women's organizations and different sectors. Donors should build on successful funding efforts that bring women's organizations together. Such links are a key to empowering women in the larger Salvadoran society.

4. Provide greater autonomy in funding models that permit women's organizations to build projects in relation to their own agendas. Until the early to mid-1990s, many Salvadoran women's organizations received their funding from small foundations and international support committees. That afforded more egalitarian relationships between women's organizations and their supporters and allowed the organizations to develop an autonomous vision for their work. Future funding should follow that model.

5. Support financial stability and institution building among Salvadoran women's organizations. Salvadoran women's organizations often

overlook financial sustainability because of the more immediate problems they confront. Major donors interested in promoting the financial sustainability of Salvadoran women's organizations need to free up funds for institutional strengthening so the organizations themselves can decrease their dependence on donors.

6. Permit women's organizations to negotiate project time lines and funding cycles. Treating women's organizations as planning partners and allowing them to help determine project time lines and funding cycles could result in better projects and more consistent outcomes. USAID and other donors should consider permitting multiyear funding and longer project time frames.

7. Streamline use of third-party intermediaries in channeling funds. Women's organizations have many concerns about receiving USAID funding through third parties—often other NGOs or government-sponsored programs. Some organizations reported that they often had to negotiate project details, including funding, twice—first with the donor agency and again with the third party. While direct funding of women's organizations is preferred, USAID may be unable to handle the associated management burden. Alternatively, the Agency could give more attention to the selection of the third party and establish streamlined procedures for subgrant approval and implementation.

8. Continue to provide women's organizations with accounting, monitoring, and evaluation training. Many women's organizations have responded positively to the training USAID and other donor agencies provide. Such training should be expanded to reach new organizations.

*This Highlights, by Shelley Sperry, summarizes the findings of Working Paper No. 309, "Aftermath: Women's Organizations in Postconflict El Salvador," by Kelley Ready, Lynn Stephen, and Serena Cosgrove. Editorial services provided by Conwal Incorporated. To access this Highlights or other CDIE documents from the Internet, key in www.usaid.gov. Click on *Publications/Partner Resources*, then on *USAID Evaluation Publications*.*
