

Women and war: protection through empowerment in El Salvador¹

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The portrayal of war

The human cost of war is something with which all readers of this volume are familiar, albeit vicariously. The international media bring the images of war right into our own homes. The protagonists in these representations are almost exclusively male – soldiers, diplomats, politicians. By contrast, women are assigned one of two supporting roles: either the helpless victim caught in the crossfire, or the pillar of strength in adversity. The men do the talking and strategizing; the women suffer and struggle in the background. The implicit message of this narrative is clear. When conflict breaks out, men prosecute war to defend the homeland, while women bind the social wounds and keep the home fires burning. The statistics are well known, and may no longer have the power to shock:

contemporary wars are fought out not on demarcated battlefields, but in the towns, villages, and homes of ordinary people. The fact that 90 per cent of today's war casualties are civilians, and the fact that four out of five refugees and displaced persons are women and children ... are so often quoted that we hardly stop to think about what they mean.
(Eade 1996:5)

To these, we can add that one-fifth of humanity survives on less than a dollar a day, and that two-thirds of the world's poorest people are women, as are two-thirds of adults who cannot read and write. Women perform most of the unremunerated work in the 'hidden economy', and are disproportionately represented among the world's 'working poor', with lower average earnings than men in every country in the world, significantly so in some. It goes without saying, then, that most of those who become homeless, stateless, and penniless as a result of armed conflict are women (Eade 2001).

Recent years have witnessed renewed interest in the protection of civilians in war, which parallels increasing efforts to contain war-affected populations and prevent them from crossing borders. International humanitarian law (IHL) does, however, afford protection to internally displaced people who are in 'refugee-like situations', and although there is no agency with explicit responsibility for such people, both UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) and ICRC (the International Committee of the Red Cross) have played that role. Indeed, ICRC has played a leading role in both the discussion and the conceptualization of protection, which now encompasses a variety of activities formerly undertaken by human rights bodies, solidarity organizations, UN specialized agencies, humanitarian aid workers, and the ICRC itself.

In its 2001 publication (ICRC 2001), the ICRC defines the three areas of activities to strengthen protection for displaced persons:

- 1 **Responsive actions:** any activity that puts a stop to a specific pattern of abuse and/or alleviates its immediate effects including: information, pressuring, or dialoguing with authorities, and pursuing legal assistance.
- 2 **Remedial actions:** any action that restores people's dignity and ensures adequate living conditions through reparation, restitution, and rehabilitation including: pressuring authorities by public disclosure, helping bring about repatriation and resettlement, and providing direct services by being present.
- 3 **Environment-building actions:** any action that fosters an environment conducive to respect for the rights of individuals in accordance with the relevant bodies of law in their broadest sense. This includes any activity aimed at implementation of international law, any activity that documents human rights abuses, and humanitarian activity given that its ultimate goal is to protect people.

Frequently, these protection activities are ascribed to outside actors not to the affected population itself. However, the experiences of El Salvador in the 1980s and 1990s showed that displaced people themselves developed a whole strategy for protection based on these three types of activities long before they were articulated in the above form. Reviewing this experience can provide a new perspective, and take forward current thinking on protection issues by bringing two unique elements to the debate. First, the measures that most

increased protection for civilians during the brutal 11-year civil war were developed by organized communities of civilians displaced by the conflict, whether on their own or through their relationship with international NGOs and solidarity organizations. The primary actors therefore moved from being 'war victims' to building strategies for their own protection. Second, and what we shall focus on in this chapter, is that it was Salvadoran *campesinas* (peasant women) who played a major role in building and developing these 'protection capacities' for themselves and their communities (see Eade 1991).

Nobody would suggest that standard 'protection recipes' can be replicated across vastly different cultural and political realities. But we do believe that the main ingredients of the Salvadoran experience are relevant to other settings. In particular, then, we shall look at how people usually characterized as victims and aid beneficiaries moved to influence their environment; what factors in the relationship between them and international agencies fostered their empowerment; and what made it possible for women to play such a key role.

It is well documented that women are particularly vulnerable to the depredations of war. [For an annotated bibliography of the contemporary literature, analytical, testimony-based, and policy-focused, see the Resources chapter in this volume.] All too often, however, this knowledge fails to inform humanitarian policy and practice. Existing inequalities and gender imbalances are characteristically heightened by war, as women continue in highly adverse circumstances to combine their domestic and other roles, often assuming those of absent husbands and sons as well. Basic supplies run short, normal services are disrupted or suspended, sources of income dry up, and displacement becomes the key to survival. Fear is omnipresent, both of the known, and of the unknown. Terror is a deliberate tactic of war, and includes the constant threat of attack as well as actual violence. The social fabric begins to unravel as trust is undermined. And yet, it has become an aid-agency truism that social disruption can sometimes create new opportunities for women, enabling them to break out of restrictive gender norms. Precisely because of this, it is worth looking more closely at what took place during the war in El Salvador.

The 1980–92 civil war in El Salvador

By 1980, El Salvador had some of the most dramatic social and economic inequalities in Latin America. The whole system was shored up by state violence and the brutal repression of dissent or any democratic reform. The 1980–92 civil war was the eighth armed uprising in 200 years that had torn apart this small agricultural country. It was a particularly cruel war for the civilian population. The government maintained a system of structural violence that targeted any organized opposition to the status quo. Human-rights groups estimate that of a population of five million, some 80,000 people, mainly non-combatants, were killed.

When this polarized situation exploded into civil war in 1980, the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) had widespread support from economically marginalized groups, particularly those who had been influenced by liberation theology, as well as labor unions and peasant organizations. The military targeted all civilians it viewed as supporting the FMLN. In the cities the armed forces arrested, disappeared, tortured, and killed tens of thousands of people, professors, union organizers, healthworkers, slum dwellers, students, lawyers, and churchworkers. By 1984, the popular movement had been wiped off the streets and almost a generation of civil society leaders had been assassinated.

In the countryside, military led a brutal scorched-earth policy to depopulate the zones in the north and east of the country held by the FMLN. They razed homes, massacred entire communities, destroyed crops and livestock, and carried out 'carpet bombing'. By 1985 the FMLN-held zones were largely depopulated and one in five Salvadorans was displaced within the country or had sought refuge abroad. Those who sought refuge outside El Salvador at least had the possibility of applying for refugee assistance and protection, while the internally displaced were more vulnerable in terms of both security and livelihoods.

Yet by 1986, in spite of the war and major US military and humanitarian aid to 'win hearts and minds', groups of organized displaced within the country were beginning to agitate for the right to return. 'Repopulation', signifying organized community returns back into their places of origin in the conflict zone, became a new rallying cry within the popular lexicon. By 1988, the popular movement had reorganized and was protesting against the government; and the repopulation of the conflict zones was well underway. This recovery is

doubly impressive because it happened in the very teeth of war, and was carried out by the same people who had been military targets. The repopulation movement was characterized by strong, decisive action by the ‘victims’ of war. They were the actors in this movement and collaborated with international agency workers in ways that enabled them to work for their own protection.

Significantly, women were at the fore of the two most audacious initiatives of this movement. It was a women’s organization, the Co-Madres (‘mothers of the disappeared’), which led the public recovery of the popular movement, and women were prominent in organizing the repopulation of the conflict zones. In fact, 80 per cent of the leaders of the National Coordination for Repopulation (CNR in its Spanish acronym), which spearheaded the repopulation movement into the conflict zones, were women under 30 years of age.

Women in pre-war El Salvador

The women who were prominent in the leadership of the repopulation movement and the many others who organized to confront the military in the conflict zones were people who had always been at a disadvantage. *Campesino* culture was intensely patriarchal and *machismo* reigned in the household. Women were under the control of their husbands; they had little access to education, and the concept of women’s rights was unknown. Gender roles were fixed – women gathered firewood and water, looked after the children, cooked for the household, cared for small animals, and supported men in the production of basic grains. Motherhood was women’s major claim to dignity and respect, but that dignity was sentimentalized and devoid of economic rights or any legal claim.

Not surprisingly, rural women did not have high self-esteem. The absence of any strong role models for them (apart from wealthy men’s wives, who are almost universally portrayed as uncaring and lacking in any compassion) deepened this lack of self-worth. In addition, El Salvador was a country of profound economic and social inequities buttressed by deep prejudices against poor people, casting them as ignorant, undeserving rabble. The exception to this general picture was the gradual incorporation of women as delegates of the word in the Christian Base Communities organized by priests who promoted liberation theology. This unique venue provided poor rural women with a chance to learn, to build a sense of self-worth through their religious faith, and to assume leadership positions.

Thus the women who became involved in building civilian protection had overcome major obstacles in order to play the significant roles that they did. The opportunity to act was also an opportunity to act politically. Every public civilian action in the counter-insurgency war was heavy with symbolism and the repopulation of the conflict zones was perhaps the most symbolic act of resistance of all. And it was pivotal in changing how the war was fought, because the military strategy depended on separating the civilian population from the FMLN and penning the FMLN up in the mountains. Furthermore, the low-intensity warfare practiced by the Salvadoran military relied upon state-sponsored violence and on terrorizing the civilian population. The repopulations were an open defiance of the armed forces and the measures the returnees took to defend themselves were a remarkable illustration of this civilian challenge – a challenge which *attacked* the very root of the fear through which the military exerted social control.

The development of protection strategies

By 1983 there were about 20,000 refugees in camps in Honduras and several thousand in 27 camps of internally displaced run by the Catholic church in El Salvador. These ‘victims of war’ had a unique opportunity to develop protection skills in an environment that was far from secure, but less dangerous than what they had been through. They learned how to develop responsive actions to build their own protection capacities. In doing so, they gradually became protagonists rather than victims. There were a number of specific reasons for their success – not least, a cohesive political project which had popular support, a concept of a new society, and growing external political pressure on the Salvadoran government. Nonetheless, there is a great deal to be learned from this about how aid agencies can interact with civilian populations.

Telling their stories

In their respective camps in Honduras and El Salvador, the refugees and displaced were able to tell the stories of what had happened to them to the steady stream of visiting journalists, human-rights workers, international delegations, and agency representatives. Since the conflict zones were ‘no go areas’, the best way to get information about them was to listen to these stories and hear the news from the most recent arrivals. The only witnesses of the many rural massacres

were the survivors. And only in the church-run camps in El Salvador or the refugee camps over the border did those survivors feel safe to tell their story.

Women who had seen their houses destroyed, children hanged from eaves, men chopped up, and women bayoneted, felt the despair of abandonment. They felt that the military could do this to them with impunity because they were poor. Often, the women in the camps formed mothers' groups to find some comfort in this despair. They shared their stories of what they had seen – neighbors' children, wounded by gunfire, that they'd had to abandon because they couldn't carry them along with their own, their husbands killed, their children dying of disease or exposure as they fled. They gained comfort in sharing their experiences and the awful loneliness was somewhat alleviated as they felt each other's understanding and pain.

From telling stories to reclaiming human rights

From these mothers' groups came many of the testimonies that began to paint for the outside world a picture of what was happening in the war zones, accounts that belied what the official sources were saying about military operations there. For the refugees and the displaced, testimony first meant simply telling their stories. But in the process of doing so for various audiences, they began to understand that what had happened to them was important, and that it horrified people. As one man said: 'We began to learn about this thing that they call human rights, we wanted to hear more about it'. What they learned is that there were people around the world who believed that *campesinos* had human rights and who felt those rights had been violated. They learned that some people had no intention of letting the official version of events erase the atrocities, and that there was power in the victims' testimony.

The displaced and the refugees slowly began to understand that there was a legal framework of IHL law through which they could articulate their experiences as victims of military attacks. In the capital city San Salvador, Tutela Legal, the legal office of the Catholic Archdiocese, helped people recall dates and names – details that would turn a story into a legal denunciation. The women's groups were repositories of so many stories, and from these came our understanding of the war in the rural areas.

Once they grasped the idea of framing their experience in the context of human rights, a transformation process began. From

feeling that, as victims, they had no rights and that no one cared about what happened to them, they moved to learning about and articulating their rights, and then to demanding that those rights be respected. Through the human-rights workers in El Salvador, the priests that ministered to them, and the aid-agency workers in the camps, the refugees learned about the 1997 Second Protocol of the 1949 Geneva Conventions, which delineates the rights of civilians in situations of armed conflict.

Becoming human-rights reporters

Initially, it was international workers and visiting delegations that would record the stories and translate the testimonies into denunciations of human-rights violations. Later, agencies and human-rights workers trained the refugees to take down the details needed in human-rights reporting. When people returned to the conflict zones, they were already aware that reporting human-rights violations was a way of enhancing their protection. If the military captured someone, the community leaders would send a delegation to report it to Tutela Legal, the Salvadoran Human Rights Commission, and/or America's Watch Human Rights office. This became increasingly dangerous, however, because the offices were under surveillance and the delegations were not too hard to identify.

In order to minimize the risks, the returnees began to produce written reports for the human-rights offices. At first, men seemed the obvious choice to make the long trip past the military checkpoints to take these reports to the capital. Soon, however, communities realized that they could manipulate the cultural gender stereotypes to their advantage. The military viewed women as less important and less intelligent than men and so were less likely to stop and search them. So women were increasingly chosen to carry the information, folding the report up into a tiny triangle and braiding it into their hair. With a basket of fruit balanced on her head, the courier would go through the checkpoint, humbly asking permission to go and sell her wares. Once through, she would take the bus and get the report through to the human-rights office.

Over the years, people in the conflict zones delegated community members to be human-rights workers. These individuals would visit people who had suffered military attacks and record the incident, analyze the overall situation, and later work with internationals from NGOs or church organizations based in the area to send information

out by computer. Young women were often chosen for this task because they were literate, had fewer household responsibilities, and could move around more easily because the soldiers took them less seriously. This is not to say they were not vulnerable to rape or abuse if soldiers caught them alone on the road. But women found that adopting the guise of a simple *campesina* often enabled them to escape notice and blend into crowds without raising the soldiers' attention.

Organization

The refugees and the internally displaced learned a great deal about community organization during their time in the refugee camps. The lack of traditional authority figures coupled with NGO encouragement enabled them to take on new responsibilities. The preponderance of women in the camps meant they had to take on new roles. In Honduras, the refugees formed self-governing structures with refugees in charge of health, education, day-care, agriculture, sanitation, construction, and production workshops. These structures worked closely with the NGOs in the camps, allowing the refugees to develop leadership and organizational skills in a relatively protected environment. In addition, the constant pressure from the Salvadoran military together with UNHCR's presence gave real impetus to the refugees' will to defend themselves. They faced real adversity but also had recourse to an international organization whose role was to protect them, a combination that helped them develop a strong communal organization against military harassment based on a human-rights discourse. This in turn led to highly organized communities with the real capacity to carry out their own political project.

In Honduras, perhaps the most dramatic change in women's roles took place as part of the social organization of the camps. Women increasingly took on roles of leadership, gaining valuable experience, providing role models, and challenging old stereotypes. When the camps were first established there were no women section leaders, but by the time the refugees returned, women held many positions of leadership, right up to highest level. The collectivization of domestic tasks and the provision of water and firewood were what made this transformation possible (Cagan and Cagan 1991).

In the camps for the displaced in El Salvador, women got a degree of training and opportunities to take on new responsibilities and some leadership positions. These camps were overcrowded and afforded

little freedom of movement. But the fact that food and water as well as childcare were provided generally freed women up for literacy classes, training, meetings etc. In 1984, the church in El Salvador decided that the overcrowded camps were inadequate and proposed incorporating the displaced in existing co-operatives and on to lands that it had purchased. Four hundred people from the various camps met and formed their own organization, the Christian Committee of the Displaced (CRIPDES). Over the next two years CRIPDES represented the displaced, negotiated with the church, and helped organize people in their new sites (Edwards and Siebentritt 1991).

When the displaced were relocated to co-operatives, the women lost ground. The co-operatives were run along traditional gender lines, and women's time became largely taken up with individual household duties. When the displaced set up their own communities, there was more funding, more collective practices were instituted, and women tended to fare better.

Despite these setbacks, CRIPDES was increasingly led by single young women without children. Many of them had spent time in the camps and had experienced military aggression firsthand, and most came from families with a history of organizing. As CRIPDES moved into the dispersed communities in the central and southern regions of El Salvador, these young women traveled by bus around the country organizing, exhorting, and building a movement.

Audacity

The strongest leaders among the young women who had cut their political teeth in CRIPDES went on to play a prominent role in the next stage of the struggle. In 1986, when few of the male labor-union or *campesino* leaders were taking prominent public positions, these young women led one of the most audacious movements of the war – the repopulation, or return to their places of origin.

This audacity was a creative response to the desperate situation of the displaced. In December 1985 and January 1986, the armed forces launched Operation Phoenix and Operation Chávez Carreno, offensives aimed at forcibly displacing civilians from war zones in four provinces. As part of this campaign, the military took over 1500 civilians off the Guazapa volcano, only 19 miles north of San Salvador. Times had changed: international pressure about the massive human-rights violations had by then produced some limited effect. The government felt that there was too much international attention

focused on El Salvador to allow these civilians to be killed. So they were turned over to ICRC and many ended up in the church camps. Here they met others who had learned about framing a human-rights discourse, agency resources, and the potential and protection of church support. It proved a combustible combination. In May 1986, CRIPDES called a national conference to discuss the problems of the displaced, in particular the lack of land for their relocation and concluded that the only durable solution was return to their places of origin. They formed the CNR to facilitate a movement of organized returns to the conflict zones, in spite of the war (Thompson 1996, 1997).

There were several lessons to be gleaned from these experiences, and the refugees and displaced learned them all. They saw that reporting their testimonies had helped build a body of legitimate information about the massive violations of human rights during the war. They saw that this information could be used to build a case against the government, and that it was a key factor in increasing and maintaining the pressure that had forced the government to realize that the military could no longer act with such blanket impunity. The Guazapa incident was the first time that the government recognized it could not afford a massacre and decided instead forcibly to remove civilians from a conflict area. The major lesson drawn from this was that the rules of survival in a conflict zone might have changed for the better.

Building legitimacy for a political project

Initially neither the military nor the government took the call for repopulation seriously. Perhaps the fact that the CNR was largely led by young women made them easier to dismiss, as they are not perceived as powerful actors in a wartime situation. But these young women had done their homework. Their essential building block for creating a safer environment was to build legitimacy for the return to the conflict zones. CNR leaders insisted that the repopulation be high-profile, collective, organized events – and that these be recognized as civilian communities whose residents had the right to live in their place of origin, free from attack, detention, or removal (Edwards and Siebentritt 1991). As the repopulations gained momentum, the returnees couched their demands for return, protection, and assistance in the framework of the Second Protocol to which El Salvador was a signatory. Together with agency workers and human-rights organizations, they hammered out the main tenets of their rights as returnees (Thompson 1995:129):

- a right to be in their places of origin, and carry out daily life. This included the right not to be bombed or militarily harassed.
- a right to access to the supplies and materials they needed to carry out their daily lives (therefore the military checkpoints were not acceptable).
- a right to humanitarian aid from NGOs and international agencies, who therefore had right of access.

The refugees in Honduras had no intention of returning only to become internal refugees (Weiss-Fagan and Yudelman 2001). They used the above arguments in 1987, 1988, and 1989 in order to justify their collective repatriations to the conflict zones. If the victims of war can claim legitimacy under international law in establishing human-rights benchmarks against which any violations can be measured, they can thereby enlist allies to advocate for them. The repopulated communities did exactly this. The Catholic, Episcopal, and Lutheran churches in El Salvador provided funds and ministry to them in the conflict zones. National NGOs and the national popular movement also supported the repopulations with their presence, solidarity, and project assistance. Because the repopulations were based on an IHL discourse, these outside groups could legitimately claim that they had a mandate to work with them. Ten international agencies in El Salvador developed their work on this basis. Founded on a relationship of mutual trust and respect, the agencies and the communities developed complementary roles in constructing protection. The agencies provided funding, presence, and projects, but any advocacy work was done in conjunction with the communities. They employed a person to do investigation and reporting on violations of human rights and problems with humanitarian work in the repopulations (Thompson 1997). That information along with analysis and recommended action was sent on a regular basis to a network of agency and human-rights organizations in North America and Europe.

Building visibility

The major massacres had taken place hidden away from international eyes and the cameras and notebooks of the press. However, returnees were clear that they had to build a safer environment if they were going to return to the conflict zones while the war was still on. They had to reduce the military's sense of impunity to kill and torture people in these areas. Once they established their legitimate right to return, they had to increase the political cost of any military attacks

against returnees. That meant raising the visibility of the communities.

The first CNR caravan of buses that carried the displaced back to Chalatenango in July 1986 arrived at the army checkpoints accompanied by a lively medley of journalists, church leaders, humanitarian NGOs, and solidarity delegations. Bewildered by this bold move, the military actually let them past, up the dirt roads into the weed-grown ghost town of San José de Las Flores. All the repopulations followed suit with highly visible caravans accompanying people back to their homes, making it very clear that these communities were in the public eye. The church and the humanitarian agencies demonstrated that they intended to have access to them, and internationals linked to the agencies were placed in each community to establish a visible international presence. The communities themselves conducted a program of communication outreach, cultivating relationships with journalists, embassy representatives, and human-rights groups. Meanwhile, the agencies sought official funding, bringing in diplomatic representatives when the communities were attacked or projects destroyed.

The communities were also helped to send their human-rights reports out to an international rapid-response network of individuals who had agreed to do advocacy on their behalf. These individuals would send telegrams, faxes, e-mails, or letters to the President, the head of the military, and the military barracks responsible for those specific violations – and this increased visibility helped the protection effort in very tangible ways. A community leader from Morazán recalls:

‘After I was in my cell for two days, they took me to see the colonel. He was very angry, throwing some papers at me, “Who do you know in the USA?” he was shouting. “How is it that all these people know you are captured? They are sending these faxes here.” He was very angry at me, but after four days he let me go; he said that they were making too much fuss.’
(Thompson 1997:53)

Collective action for access

By 1990, there were 94 repopulated communities in northern Morazán and northern Chalatenango. Access was the key factor for their survival. The communities needed to get materials and supplies past the military checkpoints and they needed to ensure that outsiders could visit them in order to guarantee their visibility.

An early struggle on the issue of access was won by women in Morazán (Thompson 1996:329). The church had sent two trucks of dried milk for children in the war zone but the military wouldn't let the trucks out of the provincial capital, San Francisco Gotera. Several mothers' associations got together and sent a delegation on five separate occasions to make the seven-hour trek down to the military barracks to request the milk. Unexpectedly, after the fifth visit, the colonel gave in and let the trucks through. The women claimed their legitimacy as mothers and quietly insisted on their right as mothers to feed their children, again choosing to use a cultural gender stereotype to their advantage.

Women were extremely effective in persuading soldiers to grant access and were chosen to intercede for that reason. Men went along but it was often the women who did the talking. Esperanza, a leader from one of the Chalatenango communities, would accompany trucks of supplies up to the conflict zones and argue them through the checkpoints well into her eighth month of pregnancy.

Women also used a gender stereotype to confront military incursions into the communities. Women and children would quickly surround the soldiers, and the women would talk to them as mothers and grandmothers: 'How can you take action against us, we could be your mother or your grandmother. You are peasants like us, so why do you try and hurt us? Would you do this to your sister, your mother?' Salvadoran custom has it that it is unmanly to strike a woman with a child in her arms. In some of the testimonies of the massacres, the survivors would repeat unbelievably that 'they would even shoot women with children in their arms', an unusual spin on Susan McKay's 'womenandchildren' nexus (cited in Karam 2001). Some recounted that the military would yell at the women to put the children down so they could shoot them. This image of a mother with a child in her arms is a powerful one in El Salvador and the women in the repopulations would constantly use it to plead with the soldiers, to ask that they leave them alone, to rebuke them for harming community members. They chose the one powerful image of women in their society to protect themselves and their communities.

What enabled women to play such a major role?

Almost all of the women who played leadership roles in the repopulation movement had spent some time in the refugee camps in Honduras. This experience gave them tools to address some of the triple obstacles they faced as poor peasant women.

- As we have seen, the mothers formed mutual support groups where they could share their stories, take comfort from each other, and reflect on what had happened to them in terms of justice and rights. This broke down tendencies to isolation and despair. When delegations started coming to hear their testimonies, the women learned that their experiences were important, and this in turn began a process of reaffirming their self-worth.
- In the camps, particularly in Honduras, women had the means and opportunity to develop leadership and acquire new skills, including literacy. They were able to take advantage of the training and education offered because the domestic burden was reduced by simple technology and collectivization. Firewood and water were provided, and they organized communal childcare. Health and education were free. In one refugee camp, communal kitchens provided food for everyone. Although the situation to which they returned provided less practical support for women, they still had childcare, water close by, community corn mills, food for the vulnerable population, and health and education facilities. These factors reduced some of the class obstacles that had always kept women back. In the camps, women outnumbered men, because women and children had been sent to the camps for their protection. But this gender imbalance created the space and opportunity for women to change their conventional gender roles, as the absence of traditional authority figures removed some of the cultural constraints on their active participation in public life. Once women took on more responsibilities and more leadership roles, they became new role models for other women.
- The young women who led the CNR drew a great deal of strength from each other and their similar status as single childless women who nonetheless had a strong community. They were able to discuss the merits of having children, getting married, etc. with each other and figure out what would be best for them. These women were extraordinary role models for other young women who saw them up on the platforms of rallies, rebuking the military, being defiant. Their lack of family responsibilities and their political commitment gave them both freedom and a social structure. Although most of them were held in military detention at one time or another, and some were tortured and raped, they continued their work.

- Women took strength from collective action and from playing an active part in a wider political project. This community strength was palpable. It enabled women to shake off the image of victim while at the same time their sense of belonging helped to give sense and meaning to their suffering. Women saw that by working together to confront the armed forces, they actually made advances. This was not a linear journey. Sometimes they were successful and sometimes the soldiers ended up achieving what they set out to do, capturing someone or refusing to let goods through the checkpoints. They did not win all the time, but enough to see progress, and they drew strength from each victory.
- Women were shrewd in exploiting the cultural prejudice that women were not as intelligent as men and so were not watched so closely as men were.
- They were able to build on and also exploit the only source of dignity poor women had in El Salvador, motherhood. They used it to protect themselves, justify their defiant actions, and pressure young soldiers.
- As people strengthened their capacity to protect themselves, they also made it more possible for the wider community to participate in creating that protection.

Conventional understandings of conflict pay rather scant attention to grassroots political agency, to the capacity of ordinary people to act for the common good in pursuit of what they consider to be a just society. We hear much more about civilians as innocent and helpless victims, or even as cynical and manipulative aid-grabbers, than we do about their acts of courage, their capacity to bring about and respond to positive change, or their own ideas about how to build a new society. To quote Jenny Pearce

... a real appreciation of how gender relations affect the ability of poor and powerless women to play their full role in the post-conflict situation (as opposed to a knowledge of the discourse) is essential. In my experience, few of the professional men involved in external assistance programmes ... have that real appreciation ...
(Pearce 1998:85)

Victims of society, or social actors? A concluding reflection

Women frequently *are* victims of violence, of gender-inequitable public policies, and of discrimination. To take but one example, one in two women in the world have experienced some form of male violence, usually in the home. This so-called 'domestic' or 'culturally condoned' violence remains largely invisible: too mundane, too shameful, or too frightening for the survivors to talk about in public; and too private or intimate for outsiders to get involved (Pickup 2001). But to regard women simply as victims of patriarchal social forces, never able to challenge and overcome them, would be to wrong them – us – further: there is a critical difference between *experiencing* injustice, and being *defined* by one's victimhood.

The use of rape as an instrument of war seeks to undermine the victim's personal and social identity and the integrity of her person, by torturing and humiliating her. The practice of 'political disappearance', used extensively throughout Latin America, seeks to terrify and paralyze the victims' families, their communities, and everyone known to them. Both mechanisms are immensely effective in sowing terror and a sense of moral chaos. But, what is truly remarkable is the way in which – as we have shown – the intended victims can together grow through such brutality, and find the strength to denounce and fight against it. That Pinochet came as close as he did to facing trial for atrocities committed under his dictatorship, for instance, owes more to the resolve and courage of human-rights groups and families of the disappeared than it does to international law. That rape is now formally recognized as a crime of gender in indictments of suspected war criminals owes more to the collective bravery of women in speaking out than it does to the judicial system. Having once broken the silence, survivors of rape may well move on to question the prevalence of male violence against women *outside* the context of war, and so to challenge gender–power relations within their own societies. Similarly, having once lost their fear, Salvadoran *campesinos* were able to challenge the structural violence that had oppressed them for generations, and to develop their own protection capacities. The real question, in both cases, is whether the shift from victim to social actor will also give women the capacity to take their new-found confidence from the conflict to the development agenda, and whether international agencies are ready to help them to do so.

Notes

1 Disclaimer: this paper is based on the authors' extensive experience in Central America and has been shaped by their collaboration with agency colleagues and by their own involvement in local organizations throughout the region. The views and interpretations expressed are, however, those of the authors alone and should not be attributed to any agency for which they have worked.

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