

## Women renegotiating power paradigms in Central America: their struggles in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century

**By Lisa Rodan and  
Virginia Lopez Calvo**

### **Abstract**

Since the 1960s the political landscape of Central America has changed drastically, a result of both internal revolutions and externally imposed economic restructuring. These changes facilitated the increased participation of women in public affairs at a time when Second Wave feminist thought was spreading out of the USA into the rest of the Americas as well as the world in general. The result was a shakeup of traditional gendered power paradigms, represented by the birth of an extensive network of women's organisations in the region, supported by solidarity organisations worldwide.

Through bibliographic research and interviews with women involved in solidarity organisations both in Central America and the UK, we aim to give a historical context of how and why this participation was able to flourish in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua from the 1970s until the 1990s. We will simultaneously explore contemporary and historical restrictions encountered by attempts to renegotiate traditional power paradigms.

### **War in the horizon (50-60s)**

The post-World War II trade boom had brought increased material prosperity to the Western superpowers and the elite of periphery countries such as Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua. These elite facilitated the profitable transfer of their nations' natural resources into the international market, living in luxury whilst the majority of the

population languished in social and economic inequality. Such inequality had been present since European colonisation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, alongside a backdrop of afflictions specific to the region- bloody, colonial subordination, diverse ethnic and social identities, *machismo*, conservative religious powers, and economic and political domination first by European colonial powers and then by the USA. Then a significant threat to the status quo surfaced.

The start of the Cuban revolution in 1953 prompted increased economic and military support from the USA to the military dictators of nearby Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua. Democratically elected reformist president Arbenz Guzman in Guatemala was deposed in a CIA/United Fruit sponsored coup, putting an end to his 'communist' land redistribution plans. US military investment in counter-insurgency training all over Central America further increased after the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961. By 1969, after Nicaragua's offer to the US of a military base for invading Cuba and accelerated corruption and economic difficulties in El Salvador after the Salvadoran-Honduran Football War, things were about to erupt.

### **Nicaragua**

The failure of legitimate political efforts towards change saw the inevitable rise of more radical attempts. Carlos Fonseca formed the FSLN (Sandinista National Liberation Front) whilst in exile in Cuba in 1961 and returned to Nicaragua in 1974 to a military autocracy ridden with increased poverty and growing anger against the dictator Somoza for his embezzling of international relief

funds after an earthquake which had destroyed 90% of Managua in 1972. Growing FSLN influence was met with brutal repression and the pillaging of the countryside by the National Guard, leading to thousands of deaths. By the time Fonseca was killed in combat in 1976, full guerrilla warfare was underway against the dictatorship. Three years later, Somoza was overthrown by the Sandinistas.

## **Guatemala**

Guatemala's Armed Rebel Forces (FAR) were also formed after ideological training of exiled revolutionaries in Cuba in 1960-62. In response President Mendez (1966-1970) made use of military funding available through Kennedy's ironically named 'Alliance for Progress'. US Green Berets transformed his army into Central America's most sophisticated anti-insurgency force (Horowitz 1964: 144). Their efficiency was most vividly showcased between 1982 and 1983 with Vietnam style 'scorched earth' tactics which resulted in the deaths of over 4,000 civilians. Complementing official violence, a parallel rise in rightist paramilitary organizations made up of off-duty police and retired military officers took place with Mendez's consent (Petras and Morley 1985: 270). These death squads were to terrorise the country for most of the 1980s in search of the main guerrilla factions but also anyone who supported social change at the expense of elite interests.

## **El Salvador**

Meanwhile in El Salvador the increased corruption and economic inequality suffered by the population was translating into calls for social justice, initially from a liberation theology perspective as espoused by folk hero and priest Monseñor Romero. Under his tutelage, thousands of people, mostly women, became active in Christian Base communities, which encouraged the rural poor to discuss the problems of poverty through biblical teaching. However the outrage after the stolen election of 1972 and the torture and exile of its popular leftist candidates meant organising was about to become increasingly militarised.

Widespread demonstrations provoked a government response of massacres, assassinations (including that of Monseñor

Romero), disappearances and a state of siege. Inspired by the Sandinista victory in neighbouring Nicaragua, clandestine guerrilla groups (which would eventually form the nuclei of the Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation [FMLN]) mushroomed, leading to full civil war by 1979.

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The growing conflict between the populations of El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua and their military, US backed ruling class until the 1960s was generally focused on social discontent, uniting men and women. Specifically gendered demands were as yet relatively unformed, with calls for change being class-based and orientated towards wider social change and basic survival in the face of increasing repression. Nevertheless women's participation in the social arena was becoming more common, especially within the context of El Salvador whose Christian Base communities were made up of mainly women.

## **Revolution: an era for questioning (70-80s)**

Revolutionary activity, massacres and increased social repression by the authorities gave rise to two very distinct forms of women's participation in Central America. 'Motherist' movements came together under the shared cause of searching for missing loved ones and to protest the massacres carried out on their families. Often developed from Christian Base communities and under the tutelage of priests, they had clearly defined roles in their positions as mothers and widows and common grounds for suffering from the political and military situation at the time. The second type of group was significantly more politically grounded through their formal association with the larger combative movements, these women being actively involved in the logistics of the fighting.

## **GUERRILLERAS AND WOMEN'S SECTIONS OF THE REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENT**

The participation of Nicaraguan and Salvadoran women as frontline guerrilla fighters during the 1970/80s insurrections was unprecedented- 30%

of Sandinista combatants, and 40% in El Salvador (Caivano and Hardwick 2008: 273).

Although researchers at the time noted that revolutionary leaders in Guatemala “observed (AMNLAE) carefully” (Blacklock 1997: 5) there is little formal data from within Guatemala regarding women’s formal incorporation into the revolutionary movements, although a more recent European Union study suggests the number could have been as high as 15% (Luciak 2000: 12). Differing strategies and internal logistics in the three conflicts as well as the eventual victory (or not) of the insurgents involved all contribute to the varying demographics of women’s involvement in the three countries.

### **Nicaragua**

During the 60s and 70s the Sandinistas had specifically prohibited that women become involved in the movement, except for minor logistical roles which were usually carried out by family (Garcia and Gomáriz 1989: 88). However women’s participation began to increase as the conflict wore on, until their key role was formally recognized by the creation of the Association of Women Confronting the National Problem (AMPRONAC) in 1977 as a specifically women’s arm of the FSLN. Their role as support for the wider revolutionary movement was clear from the beginning with no specific slogans regarding gender-specific oppression.

The majority of AMPRONAC women performed logistical and bureaucratic roles to support the struggle, although there were a significant number in mixed frontline batallions, especially in the last few months before the victory over Somoza. Nevertheless, women who were hoping to tackle female subordination from their positions within these batallions, where the sexes had fought side by side, were to be disappointed upon the Sandinista victory in 1979. Despite a promising start (Molyneux 1985: 237), the critical eye of Cuban military advisors, who were against female combatants (Garcia and Gomáriz 1989: 89), contributed to the start of a reduction in influence, starting with a segregation of forces.

An acronym change from AMPRONAC to AMNLAE (Luis Amanda Espinoza Association of Nicaraguan Women), cemented their post-revolutionary role as an outreach branch of the FSLN, with a programme limiting female contribution to more traditional women’s work, such as setting up kitchens in combat zones and local administration (Garcia and Gomáriz 1989: 90). Although undoubtedly a step back from the empowering roles on the battlefield where women had lived alongside the threat of death under the same conditions as men, they were to provide valuable experience out of the home and a high setting of the political stakes in the years to come. AMNLAE’s power was about to be questioned by the independent movements based on feminist principles which had begun to flower alongside them, with their critiques of continued patriarchy both within the revolutionary leadership and Nicaraguan society in general (Stephen 1997: 60).

### **El Salvador**

As in Nicaragua, the initial involvement of women in guerrilla activities in the 1970s was within logistics. Female members of the guerrilla groups worked alongside women’s organisations such as AMES (Salvadoran Women’s Association) in making up the female 60% of logistical support at the height of the conflict, undertaking roles such as literacy teachers, administrators, cooks and health workers (Garcia and Gomáriz 1989: 94).

The move into civil war during the 1980s however had also led to a much higher integration of female combatants in both single sex and mixed batallions, the latter instilling strict measures to protect female combatants, such as the death penalty for rape (Garcia and Gomáriz 1989: 94).

As the war was winding down in 1990 a women’s faction of the FMLN was formed to provide support to the soon-to-be political party. The Association of Women for Dignity and Life (Las Dignas) soon became notorious for challenging the male based authoritarianism of the left with their focus on popular feminism, in contrast to many of the other women’s groups of the late 1980s whose similarly strong connections with the FMLN (Stephen 1998: 68) led to feminist leanings were promptly quashed

as being "influenced by the foreign ideas of the petite bourgeoisie" (Stephen 1997: 69).

By the beginning of the 90s however, the influence of international feminist meetings around Central America had taken off. Combined with the appearance of specifically feminist groups and research centres, it was clear within two years of its inception that that ideas between women throughout the ranks of Las Dignas and the male dominated guerrilla leadership of the FMLN had diverged. Unlike their AMNLAE counterparts in Nicaragua, Las Dignas managed to make a full (although as in the Nicaraguan case, bitter) break from the revolutionary party and became autonomous in 1992.

## **CHRISTIAN BASE COMMUNITIES AND MOTHERIST GROUPS**

### **El Salvador**

Initial movements in El Salvador had started in 1975 with groups of widows and mothers searching the jails and dumps of San Salvador for the bodies of missing relatives. Increasing repression in response to swelling insurgency groups had seen a boom in 'disappearances' and the discovery of mutilated bodies in public areas.

The women formally came together as the CoMadres in 1977, united in their roles as bereaved mothers and widows, to openly denounce the government's atrocities through demonstrations, occupation of public buildings, and hunger strikes. It had become increasingly dangerous to be seen as part of any type of civilian opposition group at this time, as all were being targeted as 'subversive' by government forces and the CoMadres first permanent headquarters saw the first of several bombings a year after its opening in 1979. Members also paid a heavy personal price- in her interviews with various CoMadres, Lynn Stephen records that most had been detained, tortured and raped (Stephen 1997: 40).

Other movements soon followed as government oppression increased and significantly contributed to the war effort. These organisations include AMES (mentioned above as a key contributor to

insurgent logistics), the Unitary Women's Committee (CUMS), the Salvadoran Women's Committee (ASMUSA), the Federation of Salvadoran Women (FMS) and the Organization of Salvadoran Women (ORMUSA). All were formed during what Stephen calls the "first phase" of Salvadoran women's organising (Stephen 1997: 67) which lasted from 1975 to 1985 and united in their focus on economic issues, human rights and surviving the war around them as opposed to a significantly feminist ideology.

Ironically it was the US's increased funding of the death squads against civil groups such as the CoMadres that would open the eyes of the rest of the world and lead to a strengthening of the groups through international support. Protests of human rights abuses in the region were growing louder so that by 1984 there were El Salvador solidarity organisations around the world and it is estimated that 5/6000 USA based human rights delegations, which included many committed feminists, visited the country between 1980 and 1994 (Stephen 1997: 66).

Apart from increased international pressure on the Salvadoran government to conform to international human rights standards, the relatively high proportion of women in both the insurgents rear guard, who coordinated the visitors, and within the foreign visitors themselves, significantly contributed to the dissemination of a "range of U.S feminisms...to Salvadoran women, and the ideas of Salvadoran women were introduced into Europe and the United States", setting the groundwork for a continuing relationship of international solidarity that would continue to the present day.

### **Guatemala**

It has been estimated that 50,000 women lost their husbands through state and US backed repressions from the early 1970s to the late 1980s, the majority of them indigenous (Kuppers 1992: 111). Coming together to discuss issues that were specifically affecting them, the Guatemalan widows had hoped that the country's first freely elected president, Cerezo Arevalo, would implement them into policy.

His failure to fulfill his election promises amidst a declining economy and protests of corruption and continuing social problems, prompted the widows into taking things into their own hands by the calling of the First National Meeting of Widows which led to the formation of CONAVIGUA in 1988. The high proportion of indigenous people and their role as specific targets of state atrocities (more than 83% of the final casualties) made the movement significantly more homogeneous than in El Salvador or Nicaragua, with members being mainly non-Spanish speaking and illiterate. Nevertheless, although this meant they were initially disregarded as a political force (Kuppers 1992: 111), within its first four years membership grew to over 9,000 and CONAVIGUA was soon recognised and supported internationally.

## Nicaragua

Nicaraguan mothers also came together to protest the incarceration and torture of their Sandinista children, although in contrast to their Guatemalan and Salvadoran sisters, they were from the start under the banner of the revolutionary party. Established in 1979, The Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs served the twin goals of consoling bereaved mothers and providing a moral justification against the Contra war, led by the Catholic Church.

Nonetheless, although bonded by a sense of identity and emotional support, the Mothers were also playing a significant role in the mobilisation of a Sandinista propagated image of the “noble suffering Sandinista mother” with no feminist-specific ideology. The “political activities of these women now were completely bound up with their identity as mothers” (Rosset and Vandermeer 1983: 161) and the group did not allow membership to non-Sandinistas until the party’s defeat in 1990. Being deprived of its patron after this point, the organization became independent from party doctrine, which “to a degree revitalized it” (Molyneux 2003: 421) but due to its NGO status simultaneously saw it beholden to a new set of foreign, rather than state, donors. Molyneux notes that the Mothers “may not have achieved much in terms of broader social and gender transformation, and indeed affirmed and dignified conventional gender roles” (2003: 421). Nevertheless, on a

micro-political level, their achievements can be measured in terms of increased solidarity and self-confidence which would contribute to challenging patriarchal structures as feminist thought started to affect Nicaraguan women’s groups.

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The revolutionary activity of the late 70s and early 80s provided women in the region with a previously non-existent space to widely participate in public life via resistance and activism. At this point however their activity was generally limited to continuations of traditional gender roles such as fulfilling a typography of caring mother/wife and carrying out domestic labour in the public sphere.

Although a minority of women broke out of these stereotypes in their roles as combatants, their positions as actual fighters were short lived and once immediate logistical need for their combative participation was reduced, many found themselves opposed and discriminated against by their male colleagues, with both social attitudes and official bodies pressuring them back into more traditional domestic support roles. However the wars had attracted international condemnation, and the agendas of many motherist groups were beginning to morph into a more structured human rights based approach, attracting both financial support from solidarity groups around the world as well as delegations of activists, trainers and general supporters.

## A move towards feminisms: The Role of International Solidarity and Sisterhood (82-92)

Second Wave Feminism had hit Latin America in 1975, with the launch in Mexico City of the UN Decade for the Advancement of Women and the emergence of middle class, intellectual movements in Mexico, Peru and Brazil (Molyneux 1985: 236). However the violent conflicts of Central America permeated everyday life to the extent that feminist organising at this time was concentrated on the ‘motherist’/ survival groups and women’s arms of wider revolutionary movements mentioned previously. Significantly neither type was based on the feminist ideals prevalent in the North American

and European liberation feminist theory that was being espoused in the first Latin American Feminist *encuentro* which was held in Bogota, Colombia in 1981.

The first *encuentro* signaled saw the start of a bitter, long term wrangling over feminist definitions through accusations of a divided class struggle, the importation of bourgeois western values and marginalisation of the rural/ indigenous/ poor. Initial 'feminist' issues such as reproductive rights, economic empowerment and a changing of traditional patriarchal attitudes were debated as the domain of the middle classes and irrelevant to working class women who had issues with day to day survival, either through civil war or damaging neoliberal policies which intensified the daily struggle for food and shelter.

What the first *encuentro* did achieve was to sow the seeds of feminist awareness. Within a couple of years specifically feminist theory started to manifest itself in an escalation of women's movements around the region. This had a great deal to do with international recognition, connections made with international visiting feminists and increased participation in regional meetings.

From the beginning of the conflict in El Salvador, solidarity groups "were arriving from all over the world, working with and training women in Salvadoran NGOs" (M Carballo 2013: 1), and in 1984 the CoMadres received the Robert Kennedy award in recognition of their human rights work. In the years following Sandinista victory Nicaragua received waves of international, grassroots volunteers. Although there was a significant North American/ European contingent, most were from Latin America who had a certain legitimacy to their presence, it was "not like the rich world telling us what we were doing" (Campanile 2013: 3). The atmosphere has been described as "an amazing cross- fertilisation of learning and growth" (Dixon 2013:1), the continent wide solidarity an "incredibly powerful experience" (Campaile 2013:3) made unique by the diversity of opinion and experiences from different countries sharing a common language. At this point Guatemala still did not have an equivalent feminist identity, but it has been suggested (Blacklock 1997: 5-6) that

observation of these comparatively more established women's movements in its neighbouring countries was about to be sparked into life by a highly significant regional event.

The Fourth Latin American Feminist *Encuentro* of 1987 was the first to be held in Central America, taking place in Taxco, Mexico. Its relative proximity heralded the first widespread attendance of women from all over the region. Through discussions and workshops women with little prior interaction with other groups took home new ideas and an increased sense of regional unity, with many who had reportedly started the event not considering themselves feminists ending the final plenary with shouts of "*Todas somos feministas*" - we are all feminists (Stephen 1997: 17).

## **THE EFFECT OF THE FIRST CENTRAL AMERICAN ENCUENTRO ON REGIONAL FEMINISM**

### **Guatemala**

Guatemala's body of feminist groups expanded immediately after the 1987 *encuentro* with the widows who had unsuccessfully petitioned Cerezo Arevalo for change two years previously formally coming together into CONAVIGUA, as well as the formation of Tierra Viva and the Guatemalan Women's Group (GGM). Guatemalan women were represented at the first Central American Women's *encuentro* in 1989, which resulted in the formation of the Coordination of Women's Groups of Guatemala (COAMUGUA) in 1989. Their purpose was to create political space for Guatemalan women to participate in discourse regarding specific gendered issues and to coordinate representation and participation of women in government. CONAVIGUA soon became the focus of international financial support and training (Blacklock 1997: 8) whilst Tierra Viva also gained a lot of support from abroad for its specifically feminist stance. This led to inevitable criticisms from smaller organisations regarding the distancing of internationally supported groups from marginalised sections of society in favour of embracing middle class feminist values, as well as resentment over funding (Blacklock 1997: 8-9).

Funding from international donors, even if not yet accessible to all, was certainly able to empower a great number of local women at a time of escalating violence. However this external influence along with the central role played by key women leaders in the formation process contributed to reproducing hierarchical structures, with highly politicized women at the top, lending weight to the criticisms from grass roots organisations.

### **Nicaragua**

The Nicaraguans particularly benefitted from discussion in Taxco with fellow post-revolutionary women from Cuba regarding issues of autonomy versus full integration in the wider revolution. Increasing dissent inside AMNLAE regarding its role in the social revolution had been growing since the official formation of the Sandinista government in 1985 after a five year wait between revolutionary success and a shift to elected government. Despite widespread calls for a more democratic, independent structure, the FSLN leadership then announced in 1989 that they would elect the next head of the organisation.

However, although radical feminist splinter group the Party of the Erotic Left (PIE) had broken away from AMNLAE in the mid-80s (and both had attended the workshops in Taxco), continued CIA sponsored *Contra* attacks were dragging the war on and feminist issues had taken a backseat to defending the revolution. Those who had been attempting to insert a feminist dichotomy into AMNLAE proceedings were labelled radical, sectarian and influenced by foreign ideas, with conservative females being accepted as 'more revolutionary' and thus more able to maintain their position within the wider movement (Kuppers 1992: 99). The Sandinista leadership's continued rejection of proposals of democratization and autonomy of AMNLAE seemed to confirm its interest as keeping women obedient to a conservative *machista* status quo. As the leadership became more and more fragmented, the Party was seen as increasingly out of touch with changing gender paradigms, one activist commenting "how was it possible they didn't take domestic violence seriously, then with the issues

with Daniel Ortega<sup>1</sup>, the answer was obvious, they couldn't have" (Campanile 2013: 5). By 1992 several smaller groups had left AMNLAE in protest.

### **El Salvador**

At least ten movements were created in El Salvador in the years following the 1987 *encuentro*, which has been described as a "golden age" (Stephen 1997: 66). There was a move away from the war-inspired, basic human rights demands of the motherist movements towards specifically gendered projects. CONAMUS opened women-only clinics, a refuge, and started a magazine and radio programmes. Its results were in stark contrast to the government's programmes within the *Departamento de la Mujer* which were described as a 'band aid job on the worst sores' (Kuppers 1992: 26).

CONAMUS was instrumental in the creation of the National Women's Forum for Peace and Democracy in 1990, a meeting of 60 Salvadoran women's organisations to discuss issues pertaining to the human rights and the end of the war but also specifically feminist issues such as legislation regarding violence against women and changes in penal and civil codes. At this point, despite the proliferation of women's movements, CONAMUS was one of few that openly declared themselves feminist.

### **INTERNATIONAL ATTENTION AND NEOLIBERAL REFORMS: 1981-1994**

The UN Decade for Women had facilitated the release of funding from international NGOs for specifically women's NGOs, and hundreds had been created in Central America during the 1980s (Dixon 2013:4). Structural adjustment policies in the 90s further reduced the already minor state contribution to women's projects (Dixon 2013:4, A Carballo 2013:2), leaving the way open for even more externally funded bodies to provide services. There was "an amazing amount of resources and funding pouring in from international development organisations all over the region" says one

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<sup>1</sup> The Sandinista leader who was accused of raping his stepdaughter

international activist, leading to “an upsurge of energy” (Campanile 2013:5).

However divisions soon surfaced between grassroots groups, who were being forced to adapt to “an NGO legalized model” (Dixon 2013: 4), and what they described as “international development [workers] who were sitting in comfortable air conditioned jobs and not placing themselves side by side in the same way” (Dixon 2013:3). Internal ideological conflicts within grassroots groups themselves began to drive many women away (Campanile 2013: 5). Many former grassroots volunteers took advantage of increased funding opportunities to found their own organisations which soon took on “a fairly hierarchical culture which meant many women, including foreign born women, took on the role of directors and were not willing to relinquish sole power as the organisations grew” (Dixon 2013: 4). Nicaragua’s National Feminist Committee, formed in 1992 of groups who rejected AMNLAE’s tutelage, only lasted two years before it dissolved due to internal conflict. Conflicts over who would receive funding also took on a class tinged base, with conformist, middle class city based organisations perceived to receiving preferential treatment (Dixon 2013: 1).

## Conclusion

A wider global dialogue of feminism, backed up with increased funding opportunities, propped up the Central American movements which had risen out of the human rights abuses and militarism of the region's revolutionary conflicts of the 70s and 80s. Differences in terms of pace and dynamics in the incorporation of feminism as the ideology of women's liberation between Central America and other parts of the continent due to the conflict led to a diversification and subsequent tightening and shrinking of the hundreds of groups which had initially popped up.

Tensions inevitably rose between the groups who organised en masse but reflected more traditional gender roles as opposed to challenging the patriarchal paradigm, and those who developed a feminist consciousness (partly as a result of international solidarity and exchanges) and broke away from these mass movements.

Further tensions also grew as different groups developed different agendas/ priorities/ modus operandi, incorporating not just notions of gendered activism but also rural vs urban issues, grass roots vs NGO organisational structure, and socialist vs liberal dichotomy. As the 90s drew to a close, women's organising was a fundamental part of civil society, especially in the context of decreasing involvement from the government in terms of service provision and dedication to gender issues. Although in one sense fragmented in comparison with the mid 80s heyday, the women's movements of Guatemala, Nicaragua and El Salvador also reflected a wider diversity in agenda and structure, especially regarding their autonomy as regards to the state, donors and other external influences. The dawn of the new millennium would bring new challenges, issues and social change.

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