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**Gendering Trauma and Healing in a Post-  
Conflict Environment: Las Dignas, Mental  
Health, and the Empowerment of Salvadoran  
Women**

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## Abstract

There is no doubt that the experience of war, be it war between nation states or civil war, varies considerably for both male and females. The twelve year civil war in El Salvador was no exception. Salvadoran women who worked in various sectors as combatants, urban collaborators, home-makers, nurses, cooks or radio operators for the guerrilla forces, experienced the war and now experience so-called peace, in ways that relate directly to the construction of the female sex in Salvadoran society. As a result of these gendered experiences many Salvadoran women are suffering trauma despite the cessation of the war in 1992. This trauma acts to disempower these women and to prevent them from actively participating in the important processes of post-conflict reconstruction currently taking place in Salvadoran society

This thesis aims to analyse the approach taken by one Salvadoran organisation for feminist political action, Las Dignas, in healing the trauma of Salvadoran women. Reviewing relevant literature on gender and development theory and gender and conflict theory, and drawing on feminist methods in the fieldwork context, it will show how the healing process employed by Las Dignas is empowering Salvadoran women at both personal and socio-political levels.

The conclusions derived from this research process are as follows. Firstly, by incorporating mental health into their gender and development programme, Las Dignas has recognised the importance of a gendered approach to healing in the post-conflict context. This form of approach has the potential to empower women to reconstruct their gendered identities so that they are able to actively participate in efforts to eradicate the *machismo*, inequality and poverty that continues to plague Salvadoran society. Secondly, because it is evident that a gendered approach to healing has been successful in empowering women in post-conflict El Salvador, there is a need to integrate the concept of empowerment into mental health interventions for women in the numerous post-conflict environments that also exist in today's world.

## Preface

Coming from a country that has no relations with El Salvador beyond the trade of dairy products, I am often asked why I chose El Salvador as a topic for my thesis. To answer this I am compelled to relate the course of events that led me to become interested in a country so far away and so removed politically from the country of my origin, New Zealand.

The cycle of events began, when, after returning from a period of overseas travel from 1989-1993, I experienced a form of political awakening and decided to undertake post-graduate study in development studies. In some ways this reflected a desire to understand the issues of development and underdevelopment I had observed during my travels, but in others, it was a search to *do something* about the appalling state in which the majority of the peoples of our world live.

In finding that studying development fulfilled only a percentage of this desire, I sought also to become involved with development practice. In this vein, I began working as a volunteer for a progressive New Zealand justice and development organisation by the name of CORSO. Through CORSO I had the privilege of meeting a number of development practitioners from around the world, including Ofelia Lopez.

Ofelia came to New Zealand from El Salvador in 1995 as a representative of *Las Dignas Mujeres por La Dignidad y La Vida* (Women for Dignity and Life). As CORSO had been involved with funding some of Las Dignas' programmes from the early 1990s, we, along with several other New Zealand international development Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs), hosted Ofelia's visit. This involved organising public meetings and media coverage to raise awareness of the development issues facing El Salvador following the signing of the peace accords which ended the civil war in 1992.

When Ofelia came to stay with me in Palmerston North I was simultaneously shocked and inspired by our meeting. Here was a woman with a recent history of incredible

suffering. Having been involved with the opposition movement both before and during the civil war, Ofelia and her family were subjected to continuous repression at the hands of the Salvadoran military. Ofelia's husband, father and four brothers were assassinated by the military and Ofelia herself was incarcerated for 26 months. While in prison, Ofelia gave birth to one of her daughters and endured constant physical and psychological torture.

Ofelia's commitment to her people and in particular, the rights of women in El Salvador, did not end, however, with her eventual release from prison and her four year exile in Australia. After acting as a representative of the Committee of Mothers and Relatives of Political Prisoners, Disappeared and Assassinated of El Salvador (COMADRES) in Australia, she returned to El Salvador following the signing of peace accords to begin assisting Salvadoran women, 'to change things for themselves and then for others' (Ofelia Lopez, cited in *The Age*, 19 August:1992). This commitment saw her become involved with the newly formed Las Dignas and Ofelia spent the next few years training traditional midwives and promoting women's participation in the local democratic process.

Of all the activities of Las Dignas Ofelia spoke of during her time with us in New Zealand, it was perhaps their mental health programme to assist women with healing the trauma of the war, that I found most inspiring. It seemed to me that here was a programme that not only recognised women's gendered experiences of war, but also, assisted women in reconstructing their gendered identities into ones that would see them as strong and capable citizens of Salvadoran society. As it has been well established that women's active participation is essential to the sustainable development of a nation, I felt that the potential of such a programme was enormous.

While I had viewed the study of development as a departure from my background in nursing, it was, perhaps, my nursing background that lead me to focus on Las Dignas' mental health programme. I had worked previously as a mental health nurse and I felt that my years of sitting next to patients' beds listening to the stories of their lives, would place me in good stead for undertaking a research project that required empathy, adaptation and the ability to relate to women from a different culture to my own.

Thus, after keeping in contact with Ofelia and gaining permission from Las Dignas to conduct research in El Salvador, I enrolled in a PhD programme in development studies. My journey of discovery had begun.

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## List of Acronyms

ACISAM	Association of Training and Research for Mental Health
AMES	Association of Salvadoran Women
AMIS	Association of Indigenous Salvadoran Women
AMPRONAC	Association of Nicaraguan Women Confronting the Nations Problems
ANESAL	Salvadoran National Security Agency
ANIS	National Association of Indigenous Salvadorans
ARENA	Nationalist Republican Alliance
CEF	Centre for Feminist Studies
CEMUJER	Norma Virginia Guirola Herrera Centre for Women's Studies
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
COM	Coordination of Women's Organisations
COMADRES	Committee of Mothers and Relatives of Political Prisoners, Disappeared and Assassinated of El Salvador
CONAMUS	National Coordinating Committee of Salvadoran Women
CONAVIGUA	National Coordinator of Widows of Guatemala
COPAZ	National Peace Commission
DAWN	Development Alternatives With Women for a New Era
ERP	Revolutionary Army of the People
FAES	Salvadoran Armed Forces
FDR	Democratic Revolutionary Front
FMLN	Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front
FPL	Popular Forces of Liberation
FUNDE	National Development Foundation
FUNDO	Fund for the Protection of War Wounded and Disabled
IMU	Institute for Research, Training and Development of Women
MAM	Melinda Anaya Montes Women's Movement
MSM	Salvadoran Women's Movement
ONUSAL	United Nations Observer Mission in El Salvador
ORDEN	National Democratic Organisation
ORMUSA	Organisation of Salvadoran Women
PPL	Local Popular Power
RN	National Resistance
UNESCO	United Nations Education Science and Culture Organisation
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
URP	United to Reconstruct Plan
USAID	United States Aid for International Development