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

A dissertation presented in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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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

Chapter One - Introduction

*Under the Shadow of El Salvador del Mundo
 One sees the face of the exploiters
 Their grand residences
 With windows that sing the nite
 Illuminated
 To kiss a blonde in a Cadillac.
 There is the rest of the country
 A great pain
 Nightly:
 They are the exploited
 And I with Them
 Those of us that have nothing
 Except a scream,
 Universal and loud
 To frighten the night*

(Oswald Escobar Velado, cited in Armstrong and Shenk, 1982:9).

Background to the Thesis

El Salvador: The Country and its Pre-War History

The history of the small Central American country of El Salvador, has been, as the above poem highlights, one of inequality and conflict. From the time of Spanish Conquest in 1524, Salvadoran society has been structured like a 'squat pyramid' with the oligarchy (the descendants of the Spanish conquistadors and coffee growing elite) forming its tiny apex, the military, its next slightly larger layer and the remainder of the population, its main substance (Thompson, 1996:325). Wealth and resources have been controlled by the oligarchy with the support of the military leaving the remainder of the population, the largest layer of the 'squat pyramid' of Salvadoran society, desperately poor and without any 'official' power of redress.

This situation of inequitable resource distribution and power can be traced back to the time when Pedro de Alvarado, trusty lieutenant of the famous Mexican conquistador

Hernán Cortéz, first stepped foot in that beautiful land the Spanish called the 'land of good fortune', or Cuscatlán in 1524 (Murray, 1997:5). Discovering an indigenous population of successful agriculturists descendant of the Mayan and Aztec civilisations, the Spanish soon realised that whilst El Salvador lacked substantial deposits of mineral resources such as gold and silver, much of the country was mantled by rich volcanic soils capable of sustaining a lucrative agricultural economy (see for example, Browning, 1971:5-8; Pearce, 1986:12; Murray, 1997:6; White, 1973:30-23; Brauer, Smith and Wiles, 1995:5). Thus, after putting down a number of initial rebellions by both the Pipil, the descendants of the Aztecs, and Maya-related groups, the Spanish began to exploit the prizes of Cuscatlán (Browning, 1971:44).

At first, this was achieved through the *encomienda* system. Here, the Spanish exploited existing indigenous production patterns to gain both tribute (from which they were entitled to a percentage) and crops for export. To maintain this system, indigenous people were 'recommended into the charge of a Spaniard', who, at least in the early years following conquest, could exercise discretionary authority over Indian villages in exchange for their Christianisation (Browning, 1971:29).

When the decline of the traditional Indian crops of cocoa and balsam in the 17th century heralded the dominance of indigo and cattle, and later, the new 'golden grain' of coffee, the Spanish began to exchange the *encomienda* system for one of direct control over land and labour (Montgomery, 1995:27). Large *haciendas* or property estates were formed to secure the necessary land to sustain the production of these new agricultural exports and a steady stream of Indian labour was assured through methods of debt peonage (whereby the *hacienda* owner would 'lend' his workers money that they would never be in a position to pay back), and dependency on the company store (whereby the worker was paid wages in the form of vouchers to be spent only at the company store, which had the power to set prices at its own discretion) (White, 1973:41-43; Montes, 1991:271).

As more Indian-held communal land fell into the hands of hacienda owners and as more Indians were enslaved and died under the harsh conditions of the hacienda system, the indigenous population of El Salvador fell into a rapid decline (Browning, 1971:73;

Brauer *et al.*, 1995:6). By the end of the colonial period, this decline had effected the ethnicity of the Salvadoran population to such an extent that *mestizos*, those who were neither Spanish nor Indian but combined features of both, made up almost half of the population (Pearce, 1986:17).¹

Independence from Spain in 1821 did little to alter the desperate poverty under which the majority of the population now lived. In fact, the new *criollo* or elite were even more infamous than their Spanish predecessors in their race to profit from the successful performance of coffee. Through measures such as the abolishment of all communal land holdings and the outlawing of peasant organising (Ready, 1994:188; Acevedo, 1996:20), the coffee barons were able, by the twentieth century, to concentrate all of El Salvador's wealth and land in the hands of only 14 families (Thompson, 1996:325).

In the face of such power, peasant resistance became almost futile. Nevertheless, in the early 1930s, when the effects of the decline in world coffee prices saw food prices and unemployment soar, widespread insurgency occurred culminating in a mass peasant revolt in 1932. With most of their leaders imprisoned at the time (including the leader of the newly formed communist party, Augustin Farabundo Martí), however, the peasant revolutionaries were quickly overcome by the military. Widespread indiscriminate, and what is believed to be ethnocidal, killing followed. It is estimated that among 10,000 and 30,000 peasants were massacred by the military in the space of a few weeks (Ready, 1994:191; Ching and Tilley, 1998:122). The uprising came to be known as *La Matanza*, the Slaughter.

The significance of *La Matanza* in shaping contemporary Salvadoran society cannot be understated. It signalled not only the near total destruction of what remained of indigenous culture by the early 20th century, but also, as Acevedo explains, 'a change in the system of oligarchic domination as the military took direct control of political power in exchange for defending the interests of the agricultural elite' (1996:21). Apart from a small number of reformist groups (Anderson, 1971:151-155; Bland, 1992:165), it was

¹ African slaves who had been imported to complement Indian labour in the thriving indigo plantations, had, by the start of the 20th century, almost completely assimilated and ceased to exist as a separate ethnic group (Montgomery, 1995:20)

the authoritarian ideologies of military governments that conditioned relations between the state and civil society in El Salvador for the 50 years following *La Matanza* (Acevedo, 1996:21).

These were the conditions that culminated in the civil war of 1980-1992. Political repression against opposition movements, the continuing rise of poverty and inequality, and the consolidation of wealth by the stake-holders of the now modernised agro-export industry, led the poor majority in El Salvador to take up arms in a broad-based revolutionary alliance (the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN)) against a United States supported Salvadoran Armed Forces (FAES). This was the beginning of the civil war in El Salvador that provides the context for my thesis.

In the late 1990s, El Salvador is the most densely populated country in the continental Americas (Murray, 1997:4). It has a relatively ethnically homogenous population of five million people comprising three dominant ethnic groups, Indigenous, European and *Mestizo* or Mixed, with the later group making up 89 percent (Brauer *et al.*, 1995:34; Photo 1). Population density is quite high for a largely rural economy with 250 persons per square kilometre over a land mass of 20,935 square kilometres (Montgomery, 1995:24; Figure 1). Topographically El Salvador is characterised by a landscape of chain like volcanic peaks that run west-east, dissected volcanic massifs that run north-south, and broad fertile valleys that extend to coastal plains (Browning, 1971:1; Photo 2). As a tropical country, El Salvador has a varied climate with the rainy and dry seasons falling from May to October and November to April respectively (Brauer *et al.*, 1995:32-33)

Figure 1: Context Map of El Salvador



Source: Cartography Unit, Geography Programme, School of Global Studies, Massey University, 1999.



Photo 1 El Salvador has a relatively ethnically homogenous population



Photo 2 San Vicente volcano:
one of El Salvador's numerous volcanic peaks

Contribution to Knowledge

Within the political, social and economic context of El Salvador introduced above, my thesis will answer the following research question: *What has been the importance of Las Dignas' mental health programme for gender and development practice in post-conflict El Salvador?*

Before I can begin investigating this question, however, it is first necessary to establish how such a research proposition could add to existing knowledge in the fields of gender and conflict and gender and development. Given that the literature concerned with gender and conflict in the Latin American context will be discussed in Chapters Three and Four and the literature concerned with gender and development in Chapter Two, below I present a synopsis of exemplary research to date in these fields and how my thesis attempts to add to this body of knowledge.

Gender and Conflict

In recent years, there has been considerable discussion in the literature concerning the role women play in armed conflict throughout the world. The myth of non-participation of women in times of conflict is refuted by this literature which suggests instead, that not only are women active participants in conflict (Eisen, 1984 on Vietnam; Ngwenya, 1983 on Zimbabwe; National Union for Eritrean women on Eritrea, 1983), but also, that women's experiences of conflict and its outcomes will be decidedly different from those of men (Enloe, 1988; Nordsturm, 1995; Zalewski, 1995).²

² El-Bushra and Piza Lopez (1994:9-10) distinguish between two types of conflict; international conflict involving wars between states and intra-state conflict caused by internal tension. The later conflict, according to these authors, is generally characterised by low-intensity conflict, involves the vying for control of the state by one of more parties, and may or may not be confined to formal military operations (generalised repression such as that which occurred in Chile or Argentina are thus party to this definition of conflict). International conflict, on the other hand, is generally characterised by high profile, formally declared wars involving organised armies trained in the used of sophisticated weaponry. Citing the recent Gulf War, however, the authors argue that rigid classifications of conflict should not be pushed too far. Rather, conflict should be seen as a process which 'evolves over time in response to a shifting kaleidoscope of underlying factors, which are, in turn, changed by it' (El-Bushra and Piza Lopez, 1994:13; see also, Vickers, 1993:2).

Gender, therefore, has become an important tool of analysis in the struggle to identify how conflict has patterned and reproduced both the identities of, and the relations between, men and women in various contexts (Zalewski, 1995; Cooke and Woollacott, 1993; Taylor and Beinstein Miller, 1994).³ It has been shown, for example, that while women's participation in conflict has in many instances undermined sex role stereotypes, discourses of gender in times of conflict have also, paradoxically sought to entrench traditional expectations and stereotypes (Lake and Damousi, 1995; Byrne, 1996; El-Bushra and Mukarubuga, 1995; El-Bushra and Piza Lopez, 1993; Ridd, 1986; Turshen, 1998 on Africa; Sy, 1993 on Chad; Gettleman, 1995 on Ethiopia; Peteet, 1991 on Palestine; Jorgensen, 1994 on Israel; Park, 1994 on China; Ong, 1995 on Cambodia; Aretxaga, 1995 and Edgerton, 1986 on Northern Ireland; Elshtain, 1987 on USA and Montgomerie, 1996 on New Zealand). Thus, just as 'Rosy the riveter' that famous World War Two American icon was exalted for her contribution to the war effort, a conservative lexicon stressing the importance of women's place in the home existed alongside this emancipatory discourse to define and undermine women's war work outside the home (Montgomerie, 1996:113; Anderson, 1981; Hartmann, 1982).

This need to reinforce traditional gender roles in wartime can be clearly seen in the ideology of militarisation. 'That militaries are masculinized', Zalewski (1995:351) notes, 'is a truism'. In basic training traditional values of (Westernised) masculinity are encouraged and recruits learn that to be a soldier is be everything that a woman is not (Hartsock, 1989:134). Eliminating all that is feminine out of the male recruit does not come easily, however, it requires a whole series of humiliations, insults and abuse to achieve the form of aggressive masculinity required to sustain the military machine (Enloe, 1993; MacDonald, 1987; Segal, 1987; Chinkin, 1993).

³ While the sex of a person is determined by biology, gender is a culturally and socially constructed phenomenon from which arises the categories of masculinity and femininity (Abercrombie, Hill and Turner, 1994:180). These categories have been shown to differ across cultures but, according to Peterson and Runyan (1993:7) the relationship between the two appears to be constant in, (a) the greater value that is placed on masculinity and (b) the oppositional relation that appears between the two such that to be masculine is not to be feminine and vice versa. Gender roles, therefore, are those which act out social and cultural constructions of masculinity of femininity and it is gender roles through which women's subordination is thought to be maintained (Eisenstein, 1984:10, citing Millet, 1970 and Janeway, 1971).

The consequences of this form of aggressive masculinity for women, are well documented (Brownmiller, 1975; Chinkin, 1993; Seifert, 1993). For centuries, the rape and sexual torture of women have become the ways by which a soldier can not only prove his virility but also, 'systematically surmount the feminine characteristics he has been made to denigrate' (MacDonald, 1987:16). Rape is neither simply an unfortunate by-product nor an inevitable consequence of conflict which renders violence permissible then, but rather, as Brownmiller (1975:32) argues, 'a familiar act with a familiar excuse':

War provides men with the perfect psychological backdrop to give vent to their contempt for women. The very maleness of the military - the brute power of weaponry exclusive to their hands, the spiritual bonding of men at arms, the manly discipline of orders given and orders obeyed ... confirms for men what they long suspected, that women are peripheral ... passive spectators to the world that counts In the name of victory and the power of the gun, war provides men with a tacit licence to rape. In the act and in the excuse, rape in war reveals the male psyche in its boldest form without the veneer of 'chivalry' or civilisation (ibid: 32-33).

Thus, rape is not only a consequence of conflict, it is also, in the eyes of many feminists, an *instrument* of conflict (Chinkin, 1993). Rape signals metaphorically the destruction of a man's property. It is a message to the enemy or an act of retaliation. Rape is culturally ingrained misogyny acted out and legitimated by conflict (Seifert, 1993:6,12). Rape is a deliberate weapon of humiliation and destruction and its usage in conflict reinforces cultural beliefs about the dirtiness or cleanliness of sexuality and ethnic identity (Olujic, 1998:39). In the recent conflict in Bosnia, for example, Muslim women were raped and impregnated in their tens of thousands by Serbian soldiers in an attempt to create an ethnically pure nation state of Great Serbia (Drakulic, 1994:180; Vickers, 1993:23; MacKinnon, 1993:25; Olujic, 1995:43). It was only after these women had given birth to 'little Chetniks' that they were released by their captors (Drakulic, 1994:180).

It can be argued, therefore, that women are targeted in conflict situations because of their position in the community as bearers of cultural identity (Byrne, 1996:34; Seifert, 1993:10-12; Moghadam, 1995:137). Consequently, as Byrne (1996:34; see also Olujic, 1998:39) stresses, 'The rape of women in conflict situations is intended not only as

violence against women, but as an act of aggression against a nation or community'. Thus, rape in Bosnia, as with a large number of other conflicts throughout the rest of the world, became a deliberate tool of genocide (Olujić, 1995, MacKinnon, 1993:26).

The lack of an official voice in condemning or punishing rape in conflict results in an overt political sanction of this practice. This, in turn, contributes to its continued use as a tool of military strategy (Vickers, 1993: 21). Until recently, women enjoyed no international protection against rape in the context of conflict. With the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women in 1994, however, the use of rape as gender-related violence has been recognised for the first time in international conventions. While this is a positive step towards correcting historical oversights on the impact of conflict on societies, to date, the UN has no mechanisms to enforce such a declaration (Turshen, 1998:11).

When highly complex and historically charged conflicts are presented in the mainstream media in simplistic 'ethnic conflict' or 'civil war' terms, there is, moreover, a further tacit sanctioning of the use of rape in conflict (Enloe, 1995). Failing to acknowledge 'who did what to whom in 'ethnic' and 'civil conflict' is therefore, 'reminiscent of the mentality that blames women for getting ourselves raped by men we know, and then chides us for having a bad attitude about it' (MacKinnon, 1993:26). Such lack of official recognition adds to the silence of victims whose stories remain untold amidst fears of reprisal and family shame (Olujić, 1995:43).

The consequences of conflict for the female gender, extend beyond the perpetration of rape and other forms of sexual violence by the military. As the majority of civilian and refugee populations, women are also particularly vulnerable to domestic violence and the economic deprivation that results from the conditions of war and diaspora (Heise, 1993:178; Colson, 1995 on Zambia). While it would seem only humane for women to have the choice to restrict their fertility in the face of such adversity, the pressure for women to produce the next generation becomes, nonetheless, yet another way of controlling women's bodies in conflict situations (Byrne, 1996:34). Witness, for example, the plight of Palestinian refugee women for whom attempts to restrict their

number of children is seen as undermining the cause of Palestinian self-determination (Morgan, 1989).

Not every consequence of conflict for women, however, should be viewed in this negative light. Indeed, as was stated earlier in this review, conflict not only challenges the 'naturalness' of gender difference but also, opens doors to women's emancipation. Women have thus been active in armed struggles for national liberation and self-determination throughout the developing world, in popular resistance movements, in state armies in Western and Eastern nations and in movements to bring about an end to conflict (Hensman, 1992, on peace initiatives in Sri Lanka; Cambridge Women's Peace Collective). Through their participation, women have redefined the binaries that have positioned them as 'beautiful souls', vis a vis the 'just warrior' (Elshtain, 1987:4).

The opportunity conflict offers to discredit traditional gender roles notwithstanding, it represents something of a special period in the advancement of women's rights (Callaway, 1986:228). Hence, when conflict is over, there is most often a return to 'business as usual' as far as the construction of gender roles is concerned. This may be because the state is weak, or subject to outside interference and thus unable to fully implement its emancipatory discourse on women (Tétreault, 1994; Moghadam, 1995 on Afghanistan and Yemen; Lutjens, 1994 on Cuba), or as is often the case, it may be because gender equality in the post-war period is seen as a threat to the achievement of peace.

During the post-World War One and post-World War Two periods in Western Nations for example, this exact scenario took place where, as Lake and Damousi (1995:9) explain, 'the threat posed by the changes in the relations between sexes generated strong demands for the return to the pre-war order, the crucial signifier of which was "women's place in the home"'. Western feminist demands for the continuation of egalitarian relations between the genders during these periods were thus subsumed to the dominant post-war ideology of re-establishing peace and security:

The most fundamental step in that direction appears to have been an insistence upon gender peace: a relationship of male-female complementarity in which

women did not compete with men in the public sphere, did not thereby provoke men to anger - the world as envisaged by anti-feminists (Kingsley Kent, 1993:113).

Similarly, in the long-time site of popular-culture reflection, the Hollywood movie, such pressure for a return to 'business as usual' for gender roles was enacted in the 1950s through the 'film noir' genre. Here, the dominant and self-supporting female was constructed as the 'femme fatale'. In the 1990s, this trend continues through the dominant film genre identified by Boose (1993:73-74) as 'technomuscularity' (films which symbolise 'masculine dominance made invulnerable by the arsenal of high-tech killing devices' and which feature 'incredible hulk' stars such as Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone, and Chuck Norris). As Hollywood had flirted briefly in the early post-Vietnam period with the masculinity of the 'new sensitive male' embodied in Vietnam movies with anti-war sentiments, the latter film genre was thus crucial in securing a masculinity of dominance and aggression in a post-Vietnam War context of anti-war sentiment and contested masculinities.

Women's intra war and post war experiences are not as uniform as they may appear, however (Bennett, Bexley and Warnock, 1995). What may represent an empowering opportunity for some may just as easily represent disempowerment for others. Correspondingly, while some women may not have gained power in the post-conflict context, others obviously have (Ridd, 1986; Moghadam, 1995 on Yemen, Turkey and Afghanistan).

For all the diversity of women's experiences of conflict, however, it is clear that conflict adversely impacts on women's mental health almost universally. While the trauma of conflict is certainly not restricted to the female sex, there are, nonetheless, gender-specific factors which predispose women to mental health complications in conflict situations (Dirasse, 1995:217). We discussed above, for example, how women are particularly vulnerable to rape and domestic abuse in times of conflict. Coupled with these gender-specific factors we could also add the stress engendered by increased responsibilities and the guilt women experience because of their inability to care for their families in wartime (ibid.).

In view of the impact of conflict on women's mental health status, the area of women's psychosocial health needs is becoming an increasingly important concern (Dirasse, 1995:217). Despite this concern, there is a dearth of information on women's experiences of conflict and the impact of these experiences on women's mental health status (see Chapter Four). Thus, my first aim was that my thesis should add to the literature on gender and conflict by examining women's diverse experiences of the recent civil war in El Salvador and by outlining the impacts of these experiences on women's mental health.

As an understanding of women's experiences of conflict is crucial to the planning of appropriate development strategies in the post-war context, this contribution should not be restricted to the realm of theory. Rather, I also hoped that in examining an innovative programme which focused on women's health concerns in the post-conflict environment, lessons may be learned which could apply to the rebuilding of just and equitable nations in other parts of the world.

The second aim of my thesis arises in relation to the existing literature on gender and development briefly discussed below.

Gender and Development

From the mid 1980s, Gender and Development (GAD) has emerged as the predominant approach to both development theory and practice. Prior to this period, approaches and theories concerned with the 'women's question' in international development regimes had focused solely on women, ignoring the relations that exist between men and women in a given cultural context and the corresponding effects that these have on women's social and economic development.

At first it was thought, for example, that simply integrating women more fully into the (modernisation) development process would allow women to reap its benefits (Boserup, 1970; Tinker and Bo Bramsen, 1972; Huston, 1979; Rodgers, 1980). Popularised

through a myriad of development programmes such as mother and child health programmes, the women in development (WID) approach became the foremost method in international development regimes for improving women's deprived status throughout the Third World (Tinker, 1997; Moser 1989; Rathgeber, 1990).⁴

It soon became obvious, however, that women were already an over-utilised resource and that measures to integrate women only served to reinforce and increase existing inequalities of gender and class (Benería and Sen, 1997; Elson, 1991; Young, 1993; Tinker, 1990; Mwau, 1991; Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1991; Sen and Grown, 1987). Hence, the empowerment approach, one which is rooted in the particular experiences of men and women in the Third World, was put forward by grass-roots development activists and Third World feminists as the key through which the political will needed to implement social change in most societies, could be unlocked (Chowdhry, 1995:36; Sen and Grown, 1987:89; see also, Moser, 1993; Kabeer, 1994; Rowlands, 1998; Cleves Mosse, 1993).

In the late 1990s, the empowerment approach is at the forefront of GAD practice in many nations of the Third World. Given this fact, and given the considerable push to incorporate gender into analyses of women's experiences of conflict, it is perhaps surprising to note that there has been very little attention given to women's empowerment in the context of mental health interventions in post-conflict environments. In view of this situation, the second aim of my thesis was to add to the literature on gender and development by examining the approach taken by Las Dignas in assisting women to overcome their gendered experiences of conflict in El Salvador, the disempowerment caused by trauma and despair. I assumed that by healing the wounds of war, Las Dignas was empowering women to overcome their subordination in familial and community settings and that this, in turn, was contributing to a fundamental and

⁴ The term Third World, originally formulated by Alfred Sauvey to refer to those countries who were outside of the capitalist and socialist nation groupings, is now used to loosely denote underdeveloped countries in general (Johnson, Gregory and Smith (eds), 1994:623-624; Hadjor, 1992:10). As it has been criticised for both suggesting oversimplified and false similarities between countries labelled Third World and reinforcing pre-existing cultural, ideological and economic hierarchies (Mohanty, 1991:74-75), it is used with reservation in this thesis in the absence of a more satisfactory term.

new force of social change in Salvadoran society: the desire for long-term peace and stability. My field research, therefore, focused upon the examination of this assumption

Outline of Thesis

Having outlined the background to the research, stated the research question and positioned the research within the relevant literature in this chapter, *Chapter Two* commences with an outline of theoretical material relevant to an analysis of Las Dignas' gender and development (GAD) practice. The GAD theory introduced above is reviewed in detail and emphasis is placed on a thorough analysis of the concept of empowerment as it is conceptualised in the field of gender and development.

Chapter Three examines both the mechanisms and the outcomes of women's efforts to empower themselves in Latin America. Placing the activities of women's organisations in Latin America within the context of New Social Movements theory, it discusses the diverse forms women's organising has taken in Latin America. The empowering /disempowering impacts these forms of organising have engendered are then analysed and emphasis is placed on the gender-related violence that has been used by the Latin American state to subvert these processes of women's empowerment.

Chapter Four examines the psychological effects of gender-related violence on individual women and on society in general. It establishes that the healing of the trauma of gender-related violence should be a priority for GAD practice in Latin America and argues that there is presently little in the way of gender-specific approaches to healing such trauma in the post-conflict environment. In attempting to fill this apparent gap in the literature, Chapter Four closes with a theoretical model of healing appropriate to Latin America which draws on fieldwork insights, as well as theories and ideas discussed in this chapter and the previous.

Chapter Five represents a shift in the emphasis of this thesis from discussion on the background issues related to gender, development and conflict, to discussion on my

fieldwork context specifically. By outlining the main tenets of feminist research and the methodological techniques which support its research philosophy, Chapter Five outlines how I researched the importance of Las Dignas' mental health programme for gender and development practice. As reflexivity is of crucial importance to the feminist research process, Chapter Five then considers how my chosen research method operated in the fieldwork environment.

Chapter Six discusses the civil war and its aftermath in El Salvador. Succeeding the introduction to the Salvadoran context given in this chapter, Chapter Six outlines the political and economic features of the civil war discussing such issues as the role of the United States in prolonging the conflict, and the human rights abuses perpetrated against the Salvadoran population by the military in the name of 'democratic freedom'. As the civil war ended with the signing of the peace accords in 1992, Chapter Six concludes with an examination of the state of contemporary Salvadoran society showing that although there is now 'peace' in El Salvador, the root causes of the civil war still exist to threaten this fragile stability.

While Chapter Six will have provided a general understanding of the civil war, *Chapter Seven* discusses how Salvadoran women experienced the civil war. Through an examination of the main themes revealed in my research as well as research conducted by Las Dignas and others, it shows the contradictory nature of these experiences. The disempowering experiences of the civil war are then discussed in relation to Salvadoran women's mental health. Finally, conclusions on the importance of healing these disempowering impacts are made on the basis of the changes that occurred in Salvadoran women's mental health status as a result of their participation in the war.

Having established the mental health impacts of the civil war for Salvadoran women, *Chapter Eight* proceeds to examine the work of Las Dignas in healing these impacts. It begins with an overview of the history of Las Dignas' work in gender and development and shows how this organisation came to identify the need for a programme which recognised women's gender-specific experiences of the recent civil war. The mechanisms of this programme are then outlined through author observations of two self-help groups, one operating in a rural area and one in an urban setting.

To analyse the empowerment potential of the self-help group process, *Chapter Nine* uses the theoretical model developed in Chapter Four as an analytical tool. Drawing again on author observations and the testimonials of women participants, it shows that the experience of participating in the self-help groups has been empowering for participants particularly at a personal or individual level.

Chapter Ten answers the research question set by this thesis by drawing on the main findings of my research. Having summarised these findings and having answered the research question, I will thereupon conclude this thesis by stating the application of the research to the wider field of GAD and by posing recommendations for future research both in El Salvador and in the GAD field in post-conflict environments.

This thesis should provide a significant contribution to the theory and practice of gender and development in post-conflict contexts. It is only when the gendered impacts of conflicts are understood and efforts taken to heal these impacts, that lasting peace can be a reality.

Chapter Two - Theoretical Approaches to Women and Development in the Third World

Introduction

While the aim of many research projects in the social sciences is to *extend* theoretical debate on a certain set of social relations, there will inevitably be existing theoretical frameworks to explain component parts of the phenomenon at hand. Theory has a strong relationship to development practice. Rathgeber (1990:489) has stated, for example, that 'all development programmes are situated within specific theoretical and political frameworks', and Antrobus (1991:314), that 'a lack of explicitness about [these] theoretical frameworks and paradigms has been a major contributor to a blurring of our analysis of development'. In examining the theoretical underpinnings of the work of Las Dignas in healing the wounds of war in El Salvador, it became evident that forms of development theory focusing on women could be used to assist in the understanding of this unique form of gender and development praxis. Chapter Two outlines these theoretical forms.

Beginning with a historical review of development theory in the post-World War Two period, Chapter Two will outline the ways in which feminist ideals, such as equality and inclusion, became incorporated into the realms of both development theory and practice in methods which allowed for the specific needs of women to be heard in international development forums. Moving on from this historic conjuncture, it will follow the progress of theorising on women and development from its initial basis in modernisation theory to its current emphasis on gender relations and the approaches of postmodernism and empowerment.

This chapter, through a broad review of the theoretical underpinnings embedded whether consciously or unconsciously in the work of Las Dignas's mental health programme, will help us to understand the basis of this work and also, what we can

expect it to accomplish. As theory formation is a dynamic process, this exercise may allow us to extend the theoretical debates in the field of gender and development, providing that much needed link between what actually happens at the grass-roots and what is written and theorised about in the academy. If we are to ensure that development produces 'good change' for groups of women throughout the Third World, then this process of theoretically reflecting upon praxis is essential.⁵

The 'Women's Question' enters the Development Arena⁶

Before Women in Development

Theories of development emerged in the post-World War Two era in response to the success of reconstruction programmes such as the Marshall Plan in reviving the shattered nations of war-torn Europe (Visvanathan, 1997:2). In what became known as the first development decade (1961 - 1970), modernisation theory provided the framework whereby underdevelopment in the newly independent nations of the Third World could be eradicated and 'development' realised. Western Nations committed funds through technical assistance and aid to promote economic development in the untiring belief that the benefits of this development, measured by employment, would 'trickle down' to the masses or to those most marginalised groups in the Third World (ibid).

⁵ Chambers (1995:vi) defines development simply as 'good change'.

⁶ I have used the notion of the 'women's question' as referenced by Bunch and Carillo (1990:70) and others, to elucidate the way in which women in the Third World were viewed by the development industry as early on as the 1970s. Women were not seen as agents of change, but rather, a pressing problem contributing to the much maligned state of underdevelopment in the Third World. The question of what to do with women in the Third World thus arose and the various theories and policy approaches discussed in the first section of this chapter were presented as the answer to this question.

Influenced by the work of neo-classical economists and social scientists such as Talcott Parsons, and rooted in the discourses of anti-communism, patriarchy and ethnocentrism (Escobar, 1997:89), modernisation theory held, that in order for Third World Nations to develop, they must follow the experience of the West. This meant that not only were underdeveloped nations expected to follow the Western experience of economic growth (derived from entrepreneurial ambition, investment and sustained capital accumulation), but also, that they should emulate Western values and belief systems. Modernisation theorists defined underdevelopment as a fixed state, devoid of historical and cultural significance and believed that by an evolutionary process of 'development by diffusion', Third World nations could rid themselves of the socio-economic systems that 'held them back' (such as tradition, kinship networks and fatalistic approaches to the world) from the utopia of capitalist development (Webster, 1990:99-106; Escobar, 1997:86; Todaro 1997:70).

There were, however, competing theories on the nature of underdevelopment in the Third World at this time. The paradigm of thought known as dependency theory emerged in the writing of Paul Baran (1973) and Andre Gunder Frank (1967) and held that underdevelopment, far from being an original condition, was the result of historical relationships between the First and Third Worlds. From the beginning of mercantile capitalism to imperialist expansion through colonisation and neo-colonisation, the First World had, according to Frank (1972:20), determined a process of underdevelopment in the Third World through the terms of unequal exchange. Development and underdevelopment did not, therefore, exist as separate or differentiated states, but, as Frank further stresses, they were 'the opposite faces of the same coin' (1969:9).

For Frank and other dependency theorists, the only way the Third World could break the chain of exploitation was to de-link from the capitalist world system. Here socialism became the prescription for development in the dependent periphery. With few other strings to its prescriptive bow than socialism, however, dependency theory soon fell prey to criticism. Despite striking a blow to modernisation theory from which, some

say, it never fully recovered,⁷ dependency theory's intellectual and practical contributions were shattered by the fall of socialism in Eastern Europe and by the academic criticism levelled at its major theorists by orthodox Marxists such as Warren (1980) and Laclau (1971). Apart from socialism, dependency theory had, therefore, no solutions for poverty and underdevelopment in the Third World, which, by the third development decade (1980-1990), had entered what has become known as the 'lost decade' of development.

From the mid 1980s, countries which had previously experienced improvements in development indicators such as child mortality, literacy rates and life expectancy were reversing these trends. Growth rates plummeted and gross inequity between the First and Third Worlds increased alarmingly. These factors, coupled with Third World debt, falling commodity prices and the effects of structural adjustment,⁸ produced a situation which was difficult for even Western governments and major lending organisations such as the World Bank to ignore. As one World Bank economist observed of this time:

it became increasingly clear that a large proportion of the rural population lived and would continue to live on a near subsistence level unless development

⁷ It can be argued that modernisation theory endures today in the form of neo-liberalism. With the exception of modernisation theory's sociological base, neo-liberalism shares much in common with this so-called discredited theory (Schuurman, 1993:11-12). With its emphasis on limiting the role of the state and the employment of a liberal economy employing strict monetary policy, neo-liberalism is a philosophy that is 'rooted in ... orthodox neo-classical theory - the notion that there is only one body of economic theory with universally applicable concepts' (Brohman, 1995:126). A neo-liberal remedy for underdevelopment would thus be, 'simply a matter of promoting free markets and *laissez-faire* economics within the context of permissive governments that allow the "magic of the marketplace" and the "invisible hand" of market prices to guide resource allocation and stimulate economic development' (Todaro, 1994:85-86). Both the modernisation and neo-liberal approaches employ universalistic and eurocentric theoretical constructs based on assumptions that are often unrealistic and which show total disregard for culture and the heterogeneous nature of Third World social formations (Brohman, 1995:126). Consequently, it is ironic that neo-liberalism is now received so favourably by the powerful players of world development practice (international lending institutions, governments and the international business community) considering the discrediting of its close cousin, modernisation theory, by social scientists in the 1960s and 1970s.

⁸ With the ideological shift in the global economy from Keynesian and Marxism to neo-liberalism, policy changes have occurred which enhance the role of market and reduce the role of the state (Prendergast and Stewart, 1994:xiii). Structural adjustment, defined simply as the 'increased reliance on market forces and [the] reduced role of the state in economic management' (Ghai, 1994:15), has become the hallmark of these policy changes. Featuring such tenets as deregulation, tax reform, the encouragement of foreign investment, financial liberalisation, reduced public expenditure and privatisation, structural adjustment programmes have been initiated in both developed and developing countries since the early 1980s and have often caused, it has been argued, an intensification of poverty both nationally and internationally (Ghai, 1994; Vivian, 1995; Emeagwali, 1995 and Bello, 1994).

policies and lending for development were explicitly redirected (Alder, 1977:32).

Such negative empirical observations of development showed very clearly that the time had come for a radical rethink of post-World War Two development ideas. It was this 'impasse', coupled with considerable post-modern criticism of theory formulation in the social sciences (with its focus on rooting out universalistic notions of 'progress' across gender, class and ethnic divisions), and the rebirth of the women's movement in industrialising countries, that led to an awareness of women's essential role in development processes in the Third World (Schuurman, 1993:1; Visvanathan, 1997:3; Snyder, 1995:10).⁹

Women as Economic Actors: Ester Boserup and WID

Prior to the 1970s, when Boserup (1970) released her ground-breaking study *Women's Role in Economic Development*, it was thought that men and women were affected by the development process in the same way (Momsen, 1991:3). Women were either seen as invisible, or they were treated paternalistically in what was at this time, a particularly male-centred view on modernity (Scott, 1996:25; Acosta-Belén and Bose, 1995:2). When Boserup revealed empirical evidence which suggested that many Asian, African and Latin American women were in fact marginalised by development, this essentialistic notion of gender neutrality became subject to some reformulation. Boserup argued for example, that because women's work in agricultural and household production was misrepresented or categorised as non-work by stereotypical notions of female and male gender roles, women had been denied the opportunity to participate in decision making on aspects of aid and development that directly affected their lives and the lives of their families (Mitter, 1989:1 in Boserup, 1989).

In dignifying the importance of women's work in the Third World, and, in refutation of traditional economic thought which argues that the advantages of women's employment

⁹ For a more thorough discussion of this 'impasse' in development theory, see for example, Scott, (1996) and Booth (1985).

are offset by corresponding losses of employment opportunities for male breadwinners, Boserup further stressed the need for women to be included in the development process from the onset: 'The recruitment of women to the modern sector helps to accelerate the growth of the economy beyond the rate attainable by the use of male labour alone' (1989:211). Thus, in the writing of Boserup, Tinker and Bo Bramsen (1972), Huston (1979), and later in work such as Rogers' (1980) *The Domestication of Women*, women in the Third World were given the visibility that they had been denied. The eyes of the international community finally opened to the impact of capitalist development on the position of women in the Third World (Touwen, 1996:17; see also Momsen, 1991:13).

Inspired by this new thinking in economic development and in response to lobbying by the international women's movement, the United Nations launched its decade for women (1976-85). With this decade and with the three international conferences and assemblies that anchored it, various special measures to integrate women into development processes (WID) were born (Jahan, 1995:1; Tinker, 1997:33-36; Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1991:3).

At first, these measures were primarily designed to improve the way women cared for their families (Tinker, 1997:38-39; Moghadam, 1990:39). The first group of measures, known as the *welfare approach* drew heavily on sex-role theory (Kabeer, 1994:4) and the Western welfare tradition whereby women were defined as a 'socially vulnerable group' in times of crisis. Here, Mother and Child Health Programmes (MCH) and family planning programmes were instituted to guarantee children's long-term nutritional status, and to control women's fertility. The idea that women had a role to play in development beyond their biological role was thus ignored in the welfare approach, which defined women in totality as unproductive economic actors or passive recipients of change (Moser, 1989:1807-1809; Rathgeber, 1990:492; Tinker, 1997:38; Kabeer, 1994:6).

As development thinking shifted from the belief that economic growth with its 'trickle down effect' could solve the problems of Third World poverty, to a broader focus on alleviating poverty and promoting growth with redistribution (Moser, 1989:1812), a new approach to WID, labelled the *antipoverty* approach was formulated. Here, income

generating projects provided women with the employment they needed to better meet theirs and their families' basic needs (Moser, 1989:1812; Touwen, 1996:19). However, with the multitude of constraints Third World women faced in their daily lives such as long working days, lack of control over household income, reduced access to credit and lack of mobility, these income generating projects failed to provide a way out of poverty for many women in the Third World (Lyon, 1991:185-195; Moser, 1989:1813; Sarr, 1991:293; Young, 1993:130).¹⁰ As structural adjustment programmes began to take their toll on the Third World, a new set of measures aimed at making even more use of women's triple roles of production, reproduction and community management (as defined by Moser 1989:1801) were adopted. These measures, labelled the *efficiency approach*, were based on a renewed awareness that women's participation in development is crucial to the success of adjustment programmes (Momsen, 1991:102; Touwen, 1996:19; Elson, 1991:203). Thus, if women were integrated more fully into the development process this would not only raise levels of production but also, act as a buffer to some of the adverse impacts of structural adjustment programmes on women (Townsend, 1993:173).

Yet, as the 'the largest and most dramatic use of women's energy has been to resist [integration]' (Jain, 1990:1455), critics remained unhappy with this new variation of the WID paradigm's integrative focus. Rather than exploring new ways of integrating women into the development process then, these critics called for a radical rethinking on the expediency of integration itself. As the approaches which stemmed from this conjuncture share a critique of economic development as promoted by the modernisation paradigm, they can be labelled an alternative paradigm of thought on issues concerning women and development (Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1991:3; Antrobus, 1991:314). It is to this alternative paradigm that we will now turn.

Alternative Thought on the 'Women Question' in Development

¹⁰ In recognition of the fact that it implies a 'false homogeneity' (Mohanty, 1988:77) between women in culturally and economically diverse nations, the term Third World Women is used carefully and with an acknowledgment of its inherent limitations.

The idea that women should be integrated into the development process to more fully reap its benefits, is an anathema to advocates of the alternative school. They argue that the 'problem for all but small numbers of well-off women, is not that they are an *underutilised* resource [in the development process] but that they are an *overutilised* resource' (Elson, 1991:203, my emphasis). The following statement on women's work in the Third World typifies this argument:¹¹

[women] account for over half the food produced in the developing world, and even more in Africa; they constitute one-fourth of the developing world's industrial labor force; they carry the main responsibility for child-care and household chores; they head one-fourth or more of the families in many developing nations; and they usually collect most of the household's water and fuel wood (Roy, Bomqvist and Tisdell, 1996:4-5).

The model of capitalist economic development promoted by WID advocates, it is thus argued, not only ignores or undervalues women's work inside the home (Mwau, 1991:284), but is also devoid of the kind of thorough analysis (class, ethnic, gender) that could systematically locate axes of women's subordination (Young, 1993:131). Critiquing Boserup's work, for example Benería and Sen (1997:48) stress that,

the problem for women is not only the lack of participation of women [in the modernisation process] as equal partners with men; it is a system that generates and intensifies inequalities, making use of existing gender hierarchies to place women in subordinate positions at each different level of interaction between class and gender.

¹¹ See also Waring (1988) for convincing arguments on women as an over-utilised resource in the Third World.

In its inability to question the very tenets of economic development then, the WID approach has become the reason why development has not only failed to secure the emancipation of women in the Third World, but also, why it has led to a further intensification of the feminisation of poverty (Tinker, 1990:5; Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1991:3; 1991a:159).¹² While scholars of the alternative school are in general agreement on the above premise, their ideas on the mechanisms of oppression used by capitalist development vary somewhat. These ideas, which for the sake of clarity have been divided into Rathgeber's (1990) two approaches, Women and Development (WAD) and Gender and Development (GAD), will be briefly discussed below.

From WAD to GAD

Emerging primarily in the writing of Neo-Marxist feminists, the WAD approach drew on tenets of dependency theory (in its critique of the domination of the world capitalist system through colonialism) to explain women's subordination in the Third World (Rathgeber, 1990:492). In their groundbreaking work for Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), Sen and Grown (1987) highlighted the sexual division of labour as the key to capitalism's underdevelopment of women in the Third World (Hirshman, 1995:45). With its focus on production for exchange over production for direct use, capitalism had relegated women's roles (in reproduction and consumption) to the private domain, a loci of low status, and had thus created gender hierarchies in what were previously seen as egalitarian societies (Visvanathan, 1997:21; Jaquette, 1982:273; Moghadam, 1990:17).

¹² Coined originally by Diana Pierce to describe the poverty inherent in female-headed households in the United States, the feminisation of poverty generally refers to the fact that women in both developing and developed nations not only bear a disproportionate share of poverty but also, shoulder most of the burden for coping with this poverty at a household level (Chen, 1995:23). According to Chen, (1995:27-29) factors which contribute to the feminisation of poverty include, individual skills and knowledge (women lack access to literacy, numeracy, entrepreneurial and technical skills), traditional family structures (many women have no property rights and their lifestyles are dictated by the marriage contract) and economic development policies (structural adjustment policies, for example, have undermined protective regulations on wages and have concentrated women in low paying, low security work (Elson, 1991a; Standing, 1989)).

As capitalism persisted, after independence from colonial powers, these gender hierarchies intensified and were further reproduced in the productive sector through the new international division of labour. Here, as in the agricultural sector where cash cropping had been ideologically separated from subsistence production, the exploitation of women's 'cheap' and 'docile' labour by transnational capital became the basis for continued capitalist accumulation (Acosta-Belén and Bose, 1995:15-36; Jaquette, 1982:273-274).

Hence, while its primary focus has been in outlining the marginalisation of women by capitalism, WAD advocates also acknowledge that non-elite men can share victim status within the capitalist system (Rathgeber, 1990:493). It is thus assumed that a transformation of the capitalist world system, rather than a transformation of the social relations of gender, will lead to an improvement of the position of women in the Third World (ibid: Young, 1993:12). Like Marxism itself, therefore, the WAD approach is essentially 'sex blind' (Hartmann, 1981:11).¹³ It is here where the major distinction between the WAD and the GAD approaches lies.

The point of departure of the GAD approach from the WID and WAD approaches then, is in its examination of the role of patriarchy in the underdevelopment of women in Third World societies. Indeed, the very use of the word gender instead of women, suggests an examination by gender and development advocates, of the social relationships between men and women that have maintained women's subordination, rather than one which is concerned with women as a discriminated sex *per se* (Moser, 1989:1800).¹⁴

Influenced by the work of socialist feminists (who argue that a critique of capitalism must include a critique of male domination (Jaquette, 1982:276)), the GAD approach rejects the public/private dichotomy that has been traditionally used to undervalue women's work in the home and in subsistence production, and calls for, instead, 'an approach [which] does not focus singularly on productive or reproductive aspects of women's (and men's) lives to the exclusion of the other' (Rathgeber, 1990:494). In this

¹³ In her seminal essay on the relationship between Marxism and Feminism, Hartmann (1981:3-11) describes how the 'women question' in Marxism has never been the 'feminist question', which examines the causes of male dominance over women, but rather, women's relationship to the economic system.

¹⁴ See also, Young (1997:51).

way, the GAD approach employs a holistic perspective in its analysis of the way particular aspects of society are shaped and reproduced (Young, 1993:135; Young, 1997:53).

In arguing that the production of future generations (in physical and social senses) is a social rather than an individual concern, the GAD approach is, moreover, supportive of the state in its dual role (in the developing world) as an employer of labour, and as an allocator of social capital to socially necessary ends (Young, 1997: 53; Rathgeber, 1990:494). As most women in the Third world have little existing bargaining power and are generally politically weak, however, support from the state must extend, as Young (1997:53) points out, 'beyond concerns with economic self-sufficiency to the need for political self-reliance'.

This notion of pushing the boundaries beyond women's economic needs is readily visible in both Maxine Molyneux and Caroline Moser's work on strategic and practical gender interests/needs. Molyneux, in her analysis on socialist governments' commitment to women's emancipation, first identified a theory of women's interests that would be 'applicable to the debate about women's capacity to struggle for, and benefit from social change' (1986:283). Recognising the danger in using the homogenous category of 'women's interests', Molyneux used instead the notion of gender interests, delineating these further into practical and strategic gender interests.

Practical gender interests, according to Molyneux (1986:284), 'are given inductively and arise from the concrete conditions of women's positioning by virtue of their gender within the division of labour'. Normally, they are a response derived from a perceived need identified by women within a specific setting (Moser, 1989:1803). As women are given responsibilities within the sexual division of labour for not only domestic (including child-care) and subsistence work, but also, for income generation and community management, practical gender interests may range from adequate access to potable water to appropriate housing facilities for the entire community.

Although they are located within existing axes of women's subordination, practical gender interests do not, however, challenge these axes. It is strategic gender interests which, 'are derived ... deductively ... from the analysis of women's subordination and from the formulation of an alternative, more satisfactory set of arrangements'

(Molyneux, 1986:284), that take up this challenge. These interests, which can include the alleviation of the burden of child-care and domestic labour, the adoption of adequate measures against male violence and control over women, the establishment of political equality, and the removal of institutional discrimination, all work towards the strategic objective of overcoming women's subordination in differing contexts (ibid).

Moser (1989:1802), using Molyneux's conceptualisation, argued further for the need to incorporate these forms of gender interests into development policy:

*If planning is to succeed it has to be gender aware. It has to develop the capacity to differentiate not only on the basis of **income**, now commonly accepted, but also on the basis on **gender**. This requires modifications, particularly in local-level planning, to achieve a more integrative approach which takes account of women's particular requirements* (original emphasis).

In Moser's argument, to meet this requirement, planners need to conceive of women's particular interests in terms of their planning needs or 'the means by which their concerns may be satisfied' (ibid). Thus, strategic and practical gender *interests*, become strategic and practical gender *needs*, and from this conceptualisation, strategies for gender policy and planning can be realised (ibid).

Gender and Development Practice, then, would involve the implementation of those projects which promote a change in gender relations (Rathgeber, 1990:499). Such projects would, 'question traditional views of gender roles and responsibilities and point towards a more equitable definition of the very concept of "development" and of the contributions made by women and men to the attainment of societal goals' (ibid).

While there is an assumption in Molyneux and Moser's theories of gender interests and needs, as there is in the GAD approach in general, that women themselves must be the definers and agents of change, critics of GAD point to its inherent lack of ability (and therefore, one could argue, its lack of commitment, to Third World women's definitions and strategies for change) to challenge both the goals of modernisation/Westernisation, and one of its expressions, the influence of 'colonial discourse on Third World women' (Chowdhry, 1995:35). These critics feel that a new approach, one which celebrates difference and exposes the geo-political power relations that have posited Third World

women as 'other', could provide useful contributions to both the theory and practice of Gender and Development (ibid). This approach is postmodern feminism.

Postmodern Challenges to Gender Issues in Development

Postmodernism emerged as a 'body of thought' through Jean-François Lyotard's (1984) book, *The Postmodern Condition* (Parpart and Marchand, 1995:2; Preston, 1996:275). In this book, Lyotard brought together the work of three distinct cultural trends - the philosophical attack on structuralism, the economic theories of post-industrial society, and the criticism of the functionalist austerity of modern art - to formulate a critique of modernity that overwhelmingly displayed an 'incredulity towards metanarratives' (Lyotard, 1984: xxiii-iv, in Parpart and Marchand, 1995:2). According to postmodernists, these metanarratives, or 'overarching philosophies of history' (Fraser and Nicholson, 1990:22) such as Marxism or the enlightenment story on the progress of reason and freedom, lost their credibility when, in their obsession with constructing grand explanations for social phenomena, they distanced themselves from the lived realities of differing people's lives in differing contexts:

The emerging idea about the 'makeability' of society, led ... to an increasing dialectical relation with reality. Theory and reality began to develop their own internal dynamics. As a result theory had the tendency to move faster than reality. Among social scientists the notion grew that if theory did not match reality then reality was wrong (Schuurman, 1993a:188).¹⁵

Postmodernists felt that it was no longer possible to define an essential truth about society and thus called for a search to be undertaken 'for previously silenced voices, for the specificity and power of language(s) and their relation to knowledge, context and locality' (Parpart and Marchand, 1995:2). One way in which postmodern feminists have entered the debate on modernity, therefore, has been through their exposition of the forms of colonising discourse that have defined minority women in the First World and

¹⁵ See also, Fraser and Nicholson (1990:22).

women in the Third World as an undifferentiated 'other' vis a vis the universal (white Western) woman.

For these scholars and activists, postmodernism's focus on difference has provided a space for the agency that groups of women in the Third World have both historically exercised and have been excluded from presenting. It is easy to see, then, how a totalising view of Third World women's lives, such as that which is embodied in Gender and Development's focus on patriarchy as the universal oppressor, could be held in such disdain by postmodern feminists. As Ahiwa Ong (1988:80) has suggested, 'For those feminists looking overseas, the non-feminist Other is not so much patriarchy as the non-Western woman'.

In many ways, the postmodern critique of Gender and Development follows postmodernism's general critique of feminist theory and practice. Rather than review these critiques (which will be revisited in Chapter Five), we could consider an exemplary thesis against the discourse of Gender and Development by one of postmodern feminism's leading voices:

*What is problematical about this kind of use of 'women' as a group, as a stable category of analysis, is that it assumes an ahistorical, universal unity between women based on a generalising notion of their subordination. Instead of analytically **demonstrating** the production of women as socio-economic political groups within particular local contexts, this analytical move limits the definition of the female subject to gender identity, completely bypassing social class and ethnic identities ...Because women are thus constituted as a coherent group, sexual difference becomes coterminous with female subordination and power is automatically defined in binary terms: people who have it (read: men) and people who do not (read: women) (Mohanty, 1997:83).*

Thus, while postmodernism appears to depart from GAD through its emphasis on the particular, in reality, much of what has been identified as GAD analysis *has* focused on localised gender related struggles which *do* take into account class and ethnic identities (see for example, the Routledge series of *International Studies of Women and Place*). Hence, rather than abandon a concern for gender issues in development *per se*, some scholars and practitioners in the GAD field have argued for an exploration of the positive contributions postmodern feminisms have to offer:

Postmodern feminist thinking, with its scepticism towards Western hegemony, particularly the assumption of a hierarchical North/South divide, provides new ways of thinking about women's development. It welcomes diversity, acknowledges previously subjugated voices and knowledge(s) and encourages dialogue between development practitioners and their "clients" (Parpart and Marchand, 1995:17).

The postmodern feminist focus on difference and discourse offers the possibility of understanding and transcending both Western and Third World patriarchal ideologies without abandoning the search for a more equitable world (Parpart, 1993:455).

One way in which postmodern feminisms and GAD have already engaged, it can be argued, has been in the empowerment approach. This approach, labelled also the Third World Women approach by Chowdhry (1995:36), has been derived more from grassroots development and emergent Third World feminist writing than from First World women (Moser, 1993:74; Kabeer, 1994:223; Rowlands, 1998:17; Cleves Mosse, 1993:161). It is an approach which promotes a development that is rooted in the particular experiences of women and men in the Third World (Chowdhry, 1995:36) and as such, offers a way through the quagmire of the universal versus particular debates. It does this through not only its recognition of women's varied experiences of oppression, but also, through its emphasis on the need to challenge these oppressive structures at different levels (Moser, 1993:74). As this approach is, I will later demonstrate, one of the main theoretical underpinning's of Las Dignas' work in mental health, it will now be discussed in some detail.

Empowerment and Gender Issues in Development

Sen and Grown in their work for DAWN are often attributed with launching the empowerment approach to gender issues in development. In their now famous book *Development Crises and Alternative Visions: Third World Women's Perspectives*, Sen and Grown illustrated how women have developed 'great capacities for internal resilience and resistance' against the dominant development model (1987:78). These

resistances were made possible through the empowerment of individuals and organisations, to the extent that Sen and Grown have argued, that the models for empowered individuals and organisations that they present, are the key to ‘developing the political will for the major changes needed in most societies’ (1987:89).

But what does this ‘empowerment’ that Sen and Grown refer to, really mean? Too often scholars and practitioners have employed this politically useful term without a clear definition or precise understanding of it, or of the mechanisms by which it can be achieved. A critical examination of empowerment is crucial if the empowerment approach is to ever become a mechanism for change in gender and development circles. As Rowlands stresses:

The failure to define and explore the practical details of how empowerment can be achieved considerably weakens the value of the concept as a tool for analysis or as part of a strategy for change (1997:8).

Thus, before we begin to review how the empowerment approach has been applied in Gender and Development, it is first necessary to establish an understanding of its complex component parts.

Defining Empowerment

As empowerment means different things to different people and because it has both psychological and political components (Rappaport, 1986:69), there will not be one definitive answer to the question, ‘what is empowerment’? It is possible, however, to find commonalties throughout most writing on empowerment that can act, in the absence of a clear definition, as explanatory tools. Thus, in the first instance, we can say that empowerment is rooted in the notion of power (Kabeer, 1994:224; Maguire, 1984:2; Rowlands, 1997:9-27; 1998:11-15). And while the notion of power is in itself contested, below is a useful list of ‘forms of power’, which Rowlands (1997:13) has collated from seminal writings on power in the social sciences, that could see us through this first stumbling block:

Power Over: power that is controlling and that is met by resistance, manipulation or compliance

Power To: power that is productive and which generates the possibility of new actions

Power With: a sense of being in it together, of the benefit of tackling problems as a whole rather than as individuals

Power From Within: power that comes from inside an individual. This power is found in self-respect and in acceptance of others and translates as a respect for others and an acceptance of others as equals

Adapted from Rowlands (1997:13)

In the dominant discourse of post-World War two development (modernisation, neo-liberalism), power has traditionally been conceptualised as 'power over' (Rowlands, 1997:11). Here, as expressed in, for example, the income-generating projects of the WID paradigm, access to income is said to give women greater power over decision making in the household. The problem with this approach, however, is that while women may now have greater access to income, few have been able to transform their subordinated position *within* the household. This is because a conceptualisation of power as 'power over decision making' fails to take into account the processes by which certain issues are excluded from the decision making agenda (Kabeer, 1994:225). Thus, power over, is rooted in,

...the implicitly accepted and undisputed procedures within institutions which, by demarcating decisionable from non-decisionable issues, systematically and routinely benefits certain individuals and groups at the expense of others (Kabeer, 1994:225).

The remaining forms of power listed by Rowlands, however, view power in a different light. Power to, power with and power within, imply a process whereby power is generated not at the expense of others, but rather in ways that enable individuals and groups to achieve their individual and collective goals (Rowlands, 1997:12). Such a conceptualisation of power is also consistent with some feminist views on power where

an articulation of the 'power to' and the 'power within' entails an analysis of the structural mechanisms which maintain women's subordination in varying contexts (Rowlands, 1997:14; Kabeer, 1994:229).

Using a sense of power as process (power to and power with) combined with feminist perspectives on power (power to and power from within, in reflection of the 'personal is political'). Rowlands (1997:14) sees empowerment, therefore, as, 'undoing negative social constructions so that people come to see themselves as having the capacity and the right to act and influence decisions'. Others too, see empowerment in this processional and feminist light. Moser, for instance, identifies empowerment as, 'the right to determine choices in life and to influence the direction of change, through the ability to gain control over crucial material and non-material resources' (1993:75), and Afshar, as, 'a process ... something which cannot be done to/for women, but which has to be their own' (1998:3).

In the second instance then, we can say that this *process* of empowerment, confronts varying notions of power at different levels. Rowlands (1998:22-25), through her work with a women's education programme in Honduras, differentiated three levels or 'spaces' in women's lives where power was confronted and where empowerment thus became simultaneously possible. The first space, 'personal empowerment', involved a realisation in individual women of self-esteem, dignity, self-confidence, agency and a sense of self in relation to a wider context. The second space, 'collective empowerment', was implicit in group identity, a collective sense of agency, group dignity and self organisation and management. Finally, the third space, 'empowerment in close relationships', arose from 'personal empowerment' and involved the ability of individual women to negotiate, communicate, get support, defend their rights and have a sense of dignity and self in their relationships with significant others.

Through her examination of strategies for empowerment employed by women's organisations in South Asia, Kabeer (1994:223-263) emphasised the personal nature of the empowerment process. Power she argues (1994:229), 'lies not only in men's ability to mobilise material resources from a variety of arenas ... but also in their ability to construct the "rules of the game" in ways that disguise the operations of this power'.

Thus, empowerment strategies for women must work with the 'power from within' if they are to have any impact in improving women's access to, and control of, decision making, determining agendas and resources.

It is at this personal or individual level that Stein (1997:65), in addition, has seen much of general empowerment research focusing. Reviewing Zimmerman (1990) and Zimmerman and Rappaport's (1988) work on definitions of empowerment in the USA, Stein observes that while empowerment takes place in 'multiple domains' (home, community, political realms) it is the personal psychological level that it is most often discussed in the literature concerning empowerment measures. Thus, her review of Zimmerman's (1990:173-174) delineation of individual and psychological empowerment (where individual empowerment is a personality variable and psychological empowerment contextually orientated), Wedeen and Weiss's (1993:6) list of personal level empowerment factors,¹⁶ and Kak and Narasimhan's (1992) empowerment measures,¹⁷ led Stein to formulate the following framework for viewing individual level empowerment:

¹⁶ These are grouped into: ways of feeling, ways of thinking and ways of behaving.

¹⁷ These are expressed as self-enhancement, family relations and community relations.

Table 1: Jane Stein's Framework of Individual Level Empowerment

Individual: internal/psychological	Individual: situational/social
sense of control	control over resources
competence	interpersonal, work, and organisational skills
confidence	decision making powers
coherence	self-sufficiency
self-esteem	mobility
entitlement	savvy
responsibility	increased status
participation	financial and social support
solidarity	autonomy
community	information
flexibility	income
initiative	improvements in living conditions such as child care, school attendance of children, and housing improvements
future orientation	

Adapted from Stein, (1997:66-67)

We can see that even though Stein views empowerment at an individual level, this vision is still able to extend our understanding of empowerment well beyond the personal/individual. According to Stein's formulation, individual level empowerment relates not only to a person's sense of self, but also, to the way in which a person interacts with their family and society. In fact, the majority of the development literature views empowerment in a similar vein.

Friedmann, for example, (1992:116) speaks of an 'interconnected triad' which seeks to empower women and households socially, politically and psychologically. Social power for Friedmann represents the ability of the household to access certain 'bases' of household production such as financial resources, participation in social organisations, knowledge and skills. Social empowerment, therefore, represents an increase in the

households access to these productive bases. Political power, on the other hand, is conceptualised as the ability to access the processes by which decisions which affect the household are made. Political empowerment goes beyond the ability to vote, however, and can be seen as most effective when the household is involved in collective action for change (1992:33).

Finally, Friedmann's psychological power is conceptualised as a sense of individual potency. Here, psychological empowerment is represented by self-confident behaviour and, as such, may have positive effects on the ability of the household to achieve social and political empowerment (1992:33). When this social, political, psychological triad, which is focused on the individual woman and her household, joins forces or is linked to others, the result is, according to Friedmann, 'a social network of empowering relations that, because it is mutually reinforcing, has extraordinary potential for social change' (1992:116).

In analysing the household as a central component of the empowerment process, Friedmann is quick to acknowledge, however, the 'structural inequality of gender that is rooted in household relations' (1992:107). As members of households that are headed by men and as heads of households themselves, women are generally openly discriminated against and keep in a state of subordination vis-à-vis men (Friedmann, 1992:109). Thus, for household empowerment to occur, women's claims for psychological, social and political empowerment must be addressed within the context of such intra-household inequalities.

Along with the above theorists, Young (1993:158), moreover, stresses the need to include both individual change and collective action in the parameters of empowerment planning for women. When women act together to set their own agendas and control their own lives, to help each other achieve their goals and to place pressure on society to change, development is then redirected towards the needs and visions of women. Collective empowerment, therefore, promotes individual empowerment but not in a form that enhances individual advancement (Young, 1997:372). What is crucial when we attempt to define the concept of empowerment then, is an understanding that

empowerment is not only a fluid process but also, a context specific and multileveled one.

As a multileveled and context specific process, empowerment explicitly requires the *participation* of individuals and groups. Simply being involved in economic, social and political life does not guarantee a path to empowerment, however. Empowerment requires the active participation of individuals and groups in those activities that seek to alter power relations within the household and within wider society. It is thus qualitative participation, which evokes involvement in the processes that affect people's lives, rather than quantitative participation, which measures participation principally in terms of numbers, that is to be sought in an empowerment process (Karl, 1995:1).

Interestingly, the notion of participation is so intertwined with empowerment, that they have been linked bidirectionally (Stein, 1997:63). Zimmerman and Rappaport (1988:745) in their three studies aimed at examining the relationship between psychological empowerment and participation, found, for example, that in both their samples (college students and community residents), greater participation in community organisations and activities was associated with psychological empowerment. Put simply, then, if empowerment is to take place individuals and groups must actively participate in the processes that make it happen.

While this fact may seem glaringly obvious to the reader, the reality for many groups of women in the Third World is that participation in empowering strategies may be completely untenable:

... women in many cultures are socialised in such a way as to lack any sense of having rights or needs except in relation to others; women typically want things for others - their children, their family. Powerlessness not only impedes the powerless from getting their needs placed on the agenda, it often makes articulating such demands unimaginable (Young, 1993:148).

Participation in differing empowering strategies for many women in the Third World thus requires a sense or an understanding of their subordinated position in society. A Brazilian educationalist, Paulo Freire, is often attributed with developing the first model

for achieving this understanding. Freire (1972), used literacy as a tool to enable people to reflect on their position in the world so that once they had reflected and realised their oppression, they would then be able to act. Freire called this process of reflection, conscientisation.

The Women's Empowerment Framework developed by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 1993:5) views this notion of conscientisation as the third step along a five step path to empowerment after welfare as the first step and access to resources as the second. For women to be able to take the action to eradicate gender inequalities, UNICEF stresses, 'there must be recognition that their problems stem from inherent structural and institutional discrimination' (1993:5). In addition to this recognition, however, UNICEF points out, women, 'must also recognise the role they can often play in reinforcing the system that restricts their growth'(1993:5). According to the Women's Empowerment Framework then, conscientisation is the bridge to participation from which control, the 'ultimate level of equality and empowerment' can be realised (1993:5).

In the Latin American context particularly, this conscientisation of women was often achieved through the influential role played by the Catholic church in Latin American society. In 1968, at a Latin American bishops conference in Medellin, Colombia, a branch of the Catholic church known as the Popular Church, or the Church of the Poor, had proclaimed a preferential option for the poor (Lindin, 1997:6,10).¹⁸ This 'option' known as Liberation Theology, was,

an attempt, primarily by the poor themselves, to reflect in a religious way on their experience of poverty and injustice It is thus an ideology that starts out in a particular political context and a set of social conditions - those of the Catholic faith and the poor in Latin America - and goes on to formulate a critique that challenges both society and church ... liberation theology might sound like a passive activity. It is the opposite Knowledge of God is sought through a critical reflection on praxis, the action and practice of the poor in seeking their liberation from every kind of oppression (Lindin, 1997:5).¹⁹

¹⁸ Chapter Six will examine the practice of liberation theology in more detail in relation to the Salvadoran context

¹⁹ See also, Ellacuría and Brockman (1991:19) and Evans (1992:138-140).

The praxis of liberation theology was manifest throughout Latin America in structures known as Christian Base Communities where the poor,

were encouraged with the guidance of the priest to participate in a process of awareness building aimed at putting them in control of their own lives Now, lay people, elected by their fellow parishioners, were given active roles of teachers and preachers in the church, with a dramatic and ultimately political effect which no-one could have predicted (Pearce, 1986:109).

While feminist critiques of liberation theology have pointed to the blindness of liberation theology to issues of power inherent in Latin American social structures,²⁰ the massive positive impact of liberation theology on Latin American women should not be underestimated. Reflecting on their oppression in society as part of the marginalised majority often led women to gain a sense of their own subordination *within* this majority. Moreover, this realisation, coupled with the egalitarian relations promoted by Christian Base Communities (Stephen, 1994:205), often also empowered women to take action against oppressive structures both inside and outside the home.

Gaining a sense of their subordination and taking action to eradicate it, does not, however, necessarily guarantee empowerment for women. In fact, one of the most serious problems associated with the primacy of the subjective or the individual in the empowerment approach is that the political and historical context in which people live their lives is often ignored. Thus, while a person may feel a sense of empowerment, this does not always equate with an actual increase in power (Riger, 1993:282). In an early study on the efficacy of community organisations to effect change in the United States, for example, Molotch (1973) found that while these organisations had been relatively successful at achieving local internal change, they had remained unsuccessful in their attempts to effect change at larger external levels (Riger, 1993:283).

In her critique of the ideology of empowerment, Yuval-Davis' (1994:179-197) has similar concerns with the use of the empowerment approach as a panacea for

²⁰ Some critiques have, for instance identified similarities in the way gender is ignored in liberation theology to the cult of machismo in the Church and in Latin American Society (Lindin, 1997:34).

marginalised groups. Drawing comparisons between the ideology of 'the community' and that of empowerment, Yuval-Davis contends that the idea that people will be empowered by virtue of their membership in a marginalised grouping, is a far too simplistic one:

The automatic assumption of a progressive connotation of the 'empowerment of the people', assumes a non-problematic transition from individual to collective power, as well as a pre-given non-problematic definition of the boundaries of 'the people'. Moreover, it also assumes a non-problematic, mutually exclusive boundary between the notion of power of and the notion of power over, as if it is always possible for some people to take more control over their lives without it sometimes having negative consequences on the lives of other powerless people (Yuval-Davis, 1994:181).

Yuval-Davis points, for instance, to the power differentials often found within these marginalised groupings and suggests that a view of empowerment as automatically progressive reflects an inability by those who promote empowerment policies to come to terms with the conflict inherent in the outcomes of such policies:

'White backlash' and 'working class racism' were, therefore, never taken seriously except as 'false consciousness' or a personal pathology of despair. Nor was 'infighting' and the growing clashes between 'women's' units' and 'race units', between 'Afro-Caribbeans' and 'Asians' etc. taken seriously (Yuval-Davis, 1994:182).

When one considers also the *forms* of knowledge gained through the empowerment process, further conflicts arise. Writing on the pitfalls of empowerment in the practice of participatory development, Rhanema (1992:123) suggests that the kind of power to which the powerless are generally initiated, is nothing short of 'state power'. Here, the informal networks of resistance employed for centuries by ordinary people against state power are discounted and replaced by a form of power heavily influenced by the European leftist tradition. While this form of empowerment does little to establish new forms of people power, it manages, in the words of Rhanema,

to persuade target populations that not only are economic and state authorities the real power, but that they are also within everyone's reach provided everyone is ready to participate fully in the development design (1992:123)

If this is indeed the reality of empowerment, I concur with Rowlands (1997:140) in her belief that the conflict that arises from the empowerment approach is centred around the contested nature of power itself. If power is viewed as 'power over' then the pursuit of power for women and other subordinated groups will almost necessarily generate conflict amongst those individuals, groups and institutions from whom power is being sought. When women seek to overcome their subordination this is, therefore, often interpreted as a plan to usurp the power of men:

It is easy to see why the notion of women becoming empowered is seen as inherently threatening, the assumption being that there will be some kind of reversal of relationships, and men will not only lose power but also face the possibility of having power wielded over them by women (Rowlands, 1997:11).

It is precisely because of the above types of assumptions made about the form of power sought by women that empowerment is such a complex issue. There are, moreover, 'encouraging' and 'inhibiting factors' which influence the process of empowerment and which in turn, further add to its complexity (Rowlands, 1997:111). Sharing problems, getting out of the house and making friends, for example, were the encouraging factors to the achievement of personal empowerment Rowlands (1997:113-114) found in her case study of a health promoters' training programme, while domestic violence, lack of control of income within the family and the presence of *machismo* were the inhibiting factors to this process.²¹

²¹ Throughout Latin America, *machismo* represents an oppressive form of sexism derived from Spanish colonial ideas and the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. *Machismo* exaggerates the differences between men and women according to their so-called natural roles (men are aggressive, fearless, authoritarian, promiscuous, while women, in contrast are devoted to the family and home, passive, submissive and quiet) and determines what is fitting behaviour for each gender. *Machismo* asserts the superiority of men over women and is at influence in the work place, in the home, in the church and in the laws of the state. Although *machismo* cuts across class lines in Latin America, upper and middle-class women are more able to escape some of its inequitable impacts by delegating the responsibility of housework and child-care to their working class domestic servants, for instance (Fisher, 1993:3-7; Green, 1997:165-166).

Although the actions taken by women to empower themselves can result in emancipatory changes to their life circumstances, they can also result in conflict which could have the effect of placing them once again in a subordinate position within the family and within wider society. The inhibiting factors of an empowerment process can thus result in disempowerment for individual women. The next section which focuses on the notion of disempowerment, will highlight this and other points related to the complex nature of empowerment.

Disempowerment

The concepts of empowerment and disempowerment encapsulate, according to Reid and Finchilescu, 'the many facets of power relations, the dynamics of which vary from context to context' (1995:399). Disempowerment can be seen to be, therefore, what empowerment is not. If empowerment in a particular context denotes a sense of self-worth, then disempowerment would denote a lack of self-worth. If empowerment means the ability to control resources in the household, then disempowerment would signify a lack of control of these resources.

Disempowerment, like empowerment then, can also be experienced at different levels. Psychologically, disempowerment may be expressed as low self esteem. Socially, it may take the form of a lack of power of decision making in the household and politically, it may be expressed through a general lack of control over the machinations of the state. This means, therefore, that disempowerment does not only have the potential to alienate individuals from formulating their own 'social reality', but also, from the possibility of collective action as disempowered individuals, 'lack the sense of being causal agents' (Zimmerman, 1990a, in Reid and Finchilescu, 1995:399).

In their study on the effects of media violence against women on women college students, for example, Reid and Finchilescu conceptualised subjective feelings of disempowerment as feelings of powerlessness, fear of intimidation and vulnerability. While it is obvious from their conceptualisation that disempowerment has a strong

psychological and interpersonal component, Reid and Finchilescu were, nonetheless, quick to point out that disempowerment is also rooted in the social and the political:

It is a concept that is most applicable to marginalized social groups that have become stigmatized and disadvantaged through their powerlessness, and its reversal necessitates the changing of the traditional power balances at the levels of interpersonal, community and social relations (Reid and Finchilescu, 1995:399).

Writing on the exclusionary (political and economic) impact of global capitalism on the world's poor, Friedmann views disempowerment in a similar vein. For him, the process whereby power has been accumulated by the 'state' and the 'corporate economy' at the expense of the 'political community' and 'civil society' domains of social practice, is best understood as a process of systematic disempowerment (1992:29-30). Here, at its most extreme, disempowerment takes the form of military dictatorships which effectively shut down the political community and civil society domains through cooptation, intimidation and fear (Friedmann, 1992:30-31).

Disempowerment is also maintained in this process of exclusion by poverty. The system of power relations from which capitalism is sustained acts to disempower the poor by making them superfluous to this system. Through such actions as not providing full employment in the formal sector, and fostering a pattern of land ownership which reduces large numbers of the poor to a state of landlessness, capitalist production acts to keep the poor, poor and restricts any of their claims to social power to the level of day to day survival (Friedmann, 1992:70).

For women, the disempowerment that stems from this poverty is compounded by a system of gender relations which seeks to maintain their subordinated status vis-à-vis men. Here disempowered or subjugated women, as Hall (1992:116) calls them, are unable to live or even imagine a life which is not controlled by men. The values of disempowered women are those which are defined for them by men and the behaviours of disempowered women are those which flow from these male-defined values. Disempowered women find it difficult to determine their own life choices because these choices are 'essentially predetermined' by men and by a system of patriarchy through

which male power and privilege is maintained (Hall, 1992:116). The following poem on the life of women in rural areas of the Soloman Islands, highlights the impotence disempowered women feel about taking control of their own destinies:

*I am women
born in the village
destined to spend my life
in a never-ending vicious circle
gardening, child-bearing, housekeeping
seen and not heard
(excerpt of poem by Jully Sipolo, 1986)*

To reverse the state of disempowerment that women and other marginalised groups occupy, Hall, and the other authors referenced above, stress the need for a process of empowerment. Does this mean that once power has been redistributed in the various ways and at the various levels discussed in the previous section that disempowerment will no longer exist? Because empowerment for women in particular demands the ‘the radical alteration of the processes and structures which reproduce women’s subordinate position as a gender’ (Young, 1997:372), I think not. If we see disempowerment as the absence or lack of various forms of power, then efforts to alter power relations can result in forms of sanctioning by those who have power. These forms of sanctioning which are aimed at halting the process of empowerment by taking power away from those seeking it, can be seen as the disempowering effects of efforts to empower.

When we talk of disempowerment and empowerment as enshrining the many facets of power relations that exist between individuals and groups in a given context, it is best then, not to imagine a form of linear progression between the two. As empowerment can result in disempowerment and vice versa, a more helpful view of power relations would see the interconnectedness of these two concepts in a world where actions to promote empowerment do not exist in a vacuum.

This does not mean, however, that the potential to experience disempowerment in an empowerment process should lead us to abandon empowerment altogether as an approach to social change. Indeed, as we shall see in the following chapter, it is

precisely this disempowerment that has generated the actions and movements that have improved the lives of so many women throughout Latin America.

Empowerment then, is an approach to gender and development that is enabling women to struggle for context specific forms of power at different levels and in ways that are culturally appropriate. Empowerment *is* currently being used in gender and development practice and as such it *is* contributing to the realisation of more equitable gender relations. Despite its problems and despite its potentially disempowering effects, therefore, empowerment must be pursued if there is to be any hope of living in a world where women will no longer be almost universally subordinated.

Summary

Theory formulation in the field of development has been a complex and dynamic process. From the exclusionary and 'top down' paradigms of modernisation and dependency, to the grassroots approach of empowerment, development theory has been engaged, since the late 1940s, in finding ways to eradicate underdevelopment in the Third World. It has only been since the early 1970s, however, that development theory has turned its attention to the position of women.

Chapter Two has charted the process by which development theory has viewed the 'women's question'. It has explored the contribution of various theoretical traditions to the advancement of theories and strategies for achieving women's development and has concluded that the empowerment approach holds the best known strategies for improving women's lives in the Third World. But what are these empowerment strategies and how do they work? While this chapter has discussed and defined the *concept* of empowerment, we are reminded of an earlier statement by Rowlands (1997:8), that a failure to explore the actual practice of empowerment weakens its use as a tool for social change.

Hence, having gained a better understanding of empowerment in this chapter, let us now explore the practical details of achieving empowerment in the following chapter. Given

that our previous discussion has highlighted both the contextual nature of empowerment and the importance of women's participation in collective bodies, this exploration can be accomplished through a discussion on women's organisations in Latin America as well as an examination of the theoretical traditions that underpin both their activities and impacts.

Chapter Three - Women Organising for Change in Latin America: Empowerment/Disempowerment in Practice

Introduction

From the early 1960s, women throughout the Latin American region have been participating in social movements for change. Formed as a direct response to the rise of dictatorships and the concomitant closing of channels of popular participation (Jelin, 1990a:2), these movements are the mechanisms through which women in Latin America have experienced and still are experiencing, empowerment. Examining empowerment in the Latin American context will give us a more thorough basis for understanding of the work of *Las Dignas* in chapters to come, because despite the diversity of the Latin American region, 'the political, social and economic particularities of Latin America (the experience of conquest, the role of the Catholic Church, the Hispanic legal and political system) provide continuities across countries' (Westwood and Radcliffe, 1993:22). As a feminist committed to revealing the diversity of women's struggles, however, every care will be taken in Chapter Three to acknowledge the specific contexts from which women's empowerment has arisen.

Keeping in mind the diversity of women's experiences, Chapter Three will discuss the ways in which participation in women's organisations has empowered and disempowered women in Latin America. Beginning with an outline of New Social Movements (NSMs) theory it will show how the political and economic conditions of post-World War Two hegemonic forces in Latin America opened spaces for women to organise, and, because these same forces viewed women as apolitical actors, inadvertently thrust women to the forefront of the opposition movement. Moving from this broad discussion on social movements, Chapter Three will then outline the various forms women's organising has taken in Latin America, from mother's movements focusing on human rights, to feminist movements articulating such demands as an end to women's subordination.

In recognition that such actions to promote social change have placed women in conflict with the power brokers of Latin American society, Chapter Three will then turn to examine the disempowering effects of organising for change in Latin America. Reviewing various literature on the impact of conflict on women, it will show how women's efforts to empower have often not only failed to sustain revolutionary change, but also, have rendered women particular vulnerable to the perpetration of gender-related violence. These consequences of empowerment have had the effect of disempowering many women and as such, must be considered in any evaluation of the effectiveness of women's empowerment in Latin America.

Women's Organisations and New Social Movement Discourse

Discussion on women's organisations in Latin America can be placed in the context of their roles as NSMs for change. The intellectual space in which the study of NSMs locates itself, has seen a 'new way of relating what is political and what is social, the public world and private life, in which daily social practices are linked and interact directly with the political institutional' (Jelin, 1990a:3). This in turn, has generated a search for meaning and understanding of these collective acts and practices, which are 'expressions' of the discord that has arisen from new hegemonic formations in the post-World War Two period (Mouffe, 1984).

Researchers in search of this meaning have drawn distinctions between 'old' movements, such as the workers' movement, and NSMs (see for example, Scott, 1990:15). As a consequence, many researchers have insisted that these movements are novel in their cause, location and operation.²² Whereas old popular movements arose in response to industrialisation (Scott, 1990:15), NSMs, it is argued, are a direct response to, 'the increasing complexity of Latin American societies' (Calderon, Piscitelli and Reyna, 1992: 24). Such factors as militarisation and authoritarianism, the growing control of global economic forces by major lending institutions, the debt crisis of the 1980s with its associated impoverishment of marginalised groups and others, and increased urbanisation, have led to a crisis of the state whereby the demands of actors can no longer be accommodated within its prevailing institutions. As Calderon *et al.*, (1992: 25) explain, this crisis of the state provides the context for theorising the novelty of NSMs: '[NSMs] are new in essence because the tension has finally crystallized. The state's response to the social demand for integration was exclusion. Is this not a form of modernity?'

Slater, (1985:80) and Cardoso, (1979:33-37) identify characteristic features inherent in these contemporary Latin American states which have been and still are the focus of protest and mobilisation by NSMs. First, there has been a tendency towards bureaucratic-authoritarianism in Latin America at a time when simultaneous and generalised modernisation should have, according to modernisation theory, witnessed a process of democratisation throughout the region. Without lapsing into the vast literature on the definitions and explanations for such regimes, we can generalise by saying that this tendency towards bureaucratic-authoritarianism has typically been characterised by the rule of armed forces as an institutional organisation (rather than as a

²² Fuentes and Frank (1989:179-181) dispute the newness of NSMs and insist to the contrary, that most movements bearing the NSMs label are without doubt new forms of old age movements against oppression. Citing examples including the Spartacist slave revolts in Rome, peasant movements in 16th century Germany and women's movements of the 12th century from which the genocide of women labelled 'witches' arose, Fuentes and Frank argue that it is only in the ecological/green movement and the peace movement that any sense of originality can be found. Indeed for these authors, the common claims of difference between NSMs and the workers' movements of the industrial capitalist age also have very little legitimacy. Working class and union movements, Fuentes and Frank (1989:180) point out, can also be seen as NSMs when industrial development such as that which is currently occurring in the East and South produces, 'analogous conditions and grievances'. Therefore, 'These working class social movements mistakenly termed "classical", must be regarded as both recent and temporary, not to mention that they have always been local or regional and at best national (state) orientated movements'.

tool to maintain the power of a dictator) and the imposition of ideological and organisational instruments that are statist and hierarchical (rather than broadly nationalistic and party oriented), and which aspire to apathise (rather than mobilise) the masses. Thus, bureaucratic-authoritarianism in Latin America represents:

systems that are 'excluding' and emphatically non-democratic. Central actors in the dominant coalition include high-level technocrats - military and civilian, with and outside the state - working in close association with foreign capital. This new elite eliminates electoral competition and severely controls the political participation of the popular sector (Collier, 1979:24).

Second, Latin American states have been unwilling to deliver services of mass consumption such as potable water, electricity and health care facilities. When the military states of the 1960s (which had favoured various forms of state-led development and had therefore provided forms of welfare provision) were replaced in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, first by further military states and then by so-called democratic states (from the late 1980s) favouring New Right or neo-liberal economic policies, the provision of such services was reduced in an ideological drive to roll back the state and allow the private sphere more influence in the economy (Waylen, 1996:104-105; Schuurman, 1993a:192).

Finally, Latin American states have suffered a generalised eroding of their legitimacy. The doctrine of national security embraced by Latin American states in the 1970s and early 1980s, saw that any forms of opposition to the state were violently repressed.²³ The political repression employed by Latin American states was aimed at eliminating opposition to the regime by destroying both the political will of individuals and the personal ties to family and friends that characterised them as a people (Salimovich, Lira and Weinstein, 1992:74). In response to this doctrine and to these forms of state repression, social actors have increasingly viewed the political sphere with scepticism. Even in the late 1990s, therefore, at a time when almost all Latin American states have made the transition to some form of democracy, the ability of the political sphere to be a

²³ The doctrine of national security, according to Fisher, (1993:10), assigns to the armed forces and their allies, 'the role of safeguarding internal security and waging war against subversive elements within their borders'. These elements include any ideas, parties or organisations which are seen to threaten the status quo on political, economic and cultural levels (Stephen, 1995:810).

representative domain remains highly contested. So-called democratic states such as Mexico and Brazil continue to be identified with human rights abuses and the inability to overcome negative economic growth and massive foreign debt. Furthermore, the antipopulist austerity programmes imposed by the IMF and the World Bank, have ensured that these states remain illegitimate in the eyes of many Latin American people (Chinchilla, 1992:38; Schuurman, 1993a:192).

NSMs are new then, because they are a direct result of, or a resistance to, new forms of subordination ('bureaucratisation', 'commodification of social life' and 'cultural massification') which have defined the post-World War Two hegemonic project and which can be clearly seen in the above characteristics of Latin American states (Slater, 1985:3). Hence, while NSMs can be seen as struggles over modernity and the material conditions of society, they are also about struggles over meaning or identity, 'against a backdrop of normalizing projects of global order and power'(Slater, 1997:259).²⁴

In fact, NSMs, according to Melucci (1980:218), mobilise in 'defence of identity' and produce "'new social spaces'" where new novel lifestyles and social identities can be experienced and defined'(Johnston, Laraña and Gusfield, 1994:11).²⁵ Thus, Scott describes NSMs as,

collective actor[s] constituted by individuals who understand themselves to have common interests and for at least some significant part of their social existence, a common identity (1990:6).

These new social spaces where identity is sought, represent for NSMs theorists, 'new ways of doing politics' (Jelin, 1990:3; Slater, 1997:259) and as such, constitute a further aspect to NSMs' originality. Whereas old social movements sought to mobilise the political sphere in their attempts to seize power over the apparatus of the state, NSMs

²⁴ See also, Escobar (1992:69), Johnston, Laraña and Gusfield (1994:10) and Melucci (1994:110).

²⁵ Resource Mobilisation theorists, however, challenge the notion that NSMs are a result of such challenges to group identities. In opposition to the thesis that collective action results from perceived conditions of deprivation, these theorists believe that it is instead, dependent on the resources available and the opportunities presented for collective action (Tilly, 1978 in Canel, 1992:24; Mueller, 1994:254). Where the identity and resource mobilisation approaches to the analysis of NSMs converge, however, is in their rejection of Marxism's reductive analysis of social movements which views collective action in terms of economics and class (Canel, 1992:23).

are characterised by an increasing politicisation of social life (Laclau, 1985:30; Slater, 1997:263). As NSMs are concerned with the 'personal and intimate aspects of human life' (Johnston, Laraña and Gusfield, 1994:8) they are located in civil society where change is brought about through 'the transformation of values, personal identities and symbols' (Scott, 1990:18), rather than through traditional extra-parliamentary politics (Melucci, 1994:103). According to Laclau (1985:32), this redefinition of discursive spaces provides a useful theoretical key with which an understanding of NSMs can be unlocked:

their central characteristic is ... that an ensemble of subject positions (at the level of the place of residence, institutional apparatuses, various forms of cultural, racial and sexual subordination) have become points of conflict and political mobilisation.

The final aspect to NSMs' originality which can also be seen to support their ideological project (that of a radically unrestricted and indeterminate view of society (Laclau, 1985:39)), lies in their ability to maintain highly fluid and democratic organisational structures. While Scott (1990:30,35) is quick to acknowledge that the very heterogeneity of NSMs renders the use of organisational form as a distinguishing criteria highly problematic, he nevertheless summarises the main characteristics of NSMs' organisational forms as follows:

- They are generally grass-roots based or consist of small groups;
- They generally organise around specific, usually local issues;
- Their mobilisation is cyclical, characterised by periods of high activity and periods of inactivity (where in the later case, the movement is sometimes temporarily or permanently disbanded);
- The organisations constructed to bridge these periods of high and low activity tend to be characterised by fluid hierarchies and loose systems of authority;
- Their membership is characterised by fluctuating numbers and change.

In sum then, when we speak of the NSMs phenomenon, what we are referring to, at least in the case of Latin America, is the novel forms of resistance employed by a variety of social actors to counteract the very policies and actions of Latin American states that

have marginalised these actors (economically, socially and culturally), or rendered their identities invisible. Thus, the NSMs phenomenon in Latin America is the embodiment of Foucault's (1980) postmodern notion of the existence of resistance wherever and however, power is exercised (Hartsock, 1990:168).²⁶

For women in Latin America, this resistance has paradoxically been made possible by the attempts of authoritarian states to define what is legitimate political action (Jelin, 1990:204). As state terrorism and militarisation colonised both the political and the private worlds (creating increasingly intolerable conditions in the latter (Arizpe, 1990:xviii)), the loci of resistance was forced to shift away from its institutional base (in trade unions, in the workplace and in political parties) to the community or civil society which was directly impacted upon by this invasion and where women had traditionally found it easier to participate (Waylen, 1996:108; Fisher, 1993:11). Thus,

Ironically, military authoritarian rule, which intentionally depoliticized men and restricted the rights of 'citizens' had the unintentional consequence of mobilising marginal and normally apolitical women (Jaquette, 1989a:5).

The construction of women by the militaries' patriarchal project as apolitical social actors (a construction that reinforced the historical silencing of Latin American women's agency), also inadvertently opened spaces for women to mobilise (Jaquette, 1989a:5; Alvarez, 1989:26; Safa, 1995:232). As women were seen as unthreatening, their actions, as opposed to those of men, were at least initially, given something of a wide berth (Waylen, 1996:108; Fisher, 1993:109):

The ingrained belief that women are indifferent to politics may have led the military rulers of Brazil to believe that anything women do is intrinsically 'apolitical'. Thus, even though women began to organise campaigns against

²⁶ In her essay on the utility of postmodern thinking to feminism, Hartsock (1990: 157-175) criticises Foucault's formulation on the basis of its inherent limiting quality. For Hartsock, Foucault's thesis on resistance in the face of power is simply that, a thesis on resistance. Foucault offers no way forward for marginalised groups to create a more just society. In fact as Hartsock (1990:170) stresses, 'Foucault suggests that if our resistance succeeded, we would simply be changing one discursive identity for another and in the process create new oppressions'. My view on the resistance employed by NSMs in Latin America, is then a non-Foucaultian view of resistance. From what I have observed and read of NSMs in Latin America, resistance is regarded by many social actors as a way forward from oppression and thus implies a sense of transformation rather than the above 'vicious circle' of oppression that Foucault alludes to.

the rising cost of living or human rights in Brazil, the military seems to have allowed women's organisations greater political leeway than was granted to the militant Left, student and labour organizations, which were seen as more threatening to 'national security' (Alvarez, 1989:25).

Thus, it has been as actors with the opportunity to politicise social spaces and as individuals struggling for recognition and identity as citizens, that Latin American women have been 'propelled to the forefront of the opposition' (Alvarez, 1989:26; Fisher, 1993:2). Hence, women's organisations in both the context and frameworks of their resistances have been viewed as NSMs in Latin American societies (Pitanguy, 1995:174). Their mobilisations, in response to the authoritarian state and the global economic crisis, and in defence of the everyday life world or social organisation in which they occupy, form the essence of the NSMs' project for revolutionary change. For,

[if] governments' kidnap and kill their sons and daughters, women... [will] ... demand a public forum to denounce the situation and cry out for a end to such abuse. If the market causes the level of their husbands' income to plummet, obliging ... [them] ... to seek employment and to carry out additional work in the home to stave off hardship, while still being expected to fulfil their valued role as mothers, then women will demand better social services, better urban infrastructure, better wages and more child-care facilities. If their husbands - peasants or miners - find themselves imprisoned both literally and metaphorically by repressive structures, then women will demand the right to speak out on their behalf (Arzipe, 1990:xvii).

As NSMs are guided by the need for a multiplicity of approaches to struggle, however, their cartographies will be necessarily varied. The following five sections define and examine the varied ways in which women have organised for change in Latin America.²⁷

²⁷ While for the sake of clarity I have divided women's organisations in Latin America into the forms of mother's movements, indigenous peasant movements, feminist movements and revolutionary movements, the reality is that each of these forms generate their own internal contradictions and multiple spaces. They do not represent fixed homogenous categories of activism, but rather, their boundaries are fluid and dynamic.

Forms of Women's Organisations in Latin America

Defining Women's Organisations

Analysis of women's organisations in Latin America, or attempts to define the types of consciousness that exist among the members of these organisations, are often constructed in terms of the public/private divide and in relation to the binaries, practical/strategic and feminine/feminist (Schirmer, 1993:60; Marchand, 1995:61; Stephens, 1995:807). In patriarchal societies the private and the public are seen to be diametrically opposed. Thus, for a woman to participate in the public sphere, she must necessarily, according to this view, neglect her roles in the private sphere as housekeeper and mother (Jelin, 1990a:7). Similarly, as we saw in Chapter Two, it is argued that for women to overcome their subordination, they must mobilise in response to their practical and strategic gender interests. As mobilisation in response to practical gender interests will not in itself lead to emancipation, however, it becomes necessary to go beyond practical gender interests to attend to strategic interests if emancipation is to be sought (see for example, Molyneux, 1986:284-285).

The feminine/feminist binary, it has been further argued, mirrors that of the practical/strategic (Marchand, 1995:61). Whereas feminine interests are seen as those which are drawn from daily living concerns such as access to potable water, feminist interests are seen as those which are drawn from issues and concerns specific to the female condition such as reproductive rights (see for example, Alvarez, 1989:25). Thus, women's organisations which mobilise in response to the former are constructed as feminine movements, while those which mobilise in response to the latter are considered feminist.

In the context of women's organisations in Latin America, these dichotomous constructions become extremely problematic. The reality of women's mobilisations in Latin America, as with NSMs in general, is that the location of their activity is not

restricted to a distinct sphere or site. Rather, women engage in power struggles in a 'multiplicity of sites' from the domestic world of the household to the streets (Westwood and Radcliffe, 1993:20; Vargas, 1992:199). Imposing such dichotomies, or as it has been suggested, such linear views of progress, onto the varied sites from which women mobilise thus not only implies,

a hierarchical relationship between the practical [private/female] and the strategic [public/feminist] such that women, in order to progress must move from one to the other ...

but it also,

does not take into account the understanding from feminisms that the 'personal is political'. On the contrary it tends to maintain the distinction between public and private, and between the personal and the political, the deconstruction of which has always been so central to feminist politics (Westwood and Radcliffe, 1993:20).

Many women's mobilisations in Latin America, are, as we shall see, the very embodiment of the above feminist maxim. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the activities of mother's movements throughout the region.

Mother's Movements: Working Class Urban and Human Rights Movements

Mothers movements mobilise women on the basis of their class and of their reproductive roles as wives, mothers and consumers. Responding to both military authoritarian rule and the current economic crisis which have placed increased burdens on women's triple roles of production, reproduction and community management (Moser, 1993a:188-193; Safa, 1995:229), mother's movements have proliferated in the decades following the 1960s, bypassing recognised channels for collective action to place their demands directly at the state (Safa, 1995:233). This has been done through self-help initiatives of both a mutualistic (involving the provision of services to resolve local community problems on a short-term basis) and cooperative (involving the sale of goods and commodities) nature (Corcoran-Nantes, 1993:150). In addition, activities to oppose and reveal the human rights abuses of authoritarian states (such as those of the *Madres of the Plaza de Mayo* in Argentina, the COMADRES of El Salvador and the

National Coordinator of Widows of Guatemala (CONAVIGUA)), have also mobilised women to defend the private sphere against increasing state and market intervention (Corcoran-Nantes, 1993:150; Britto da Motta and Moreira de Carvalho, 1993:81; Hensman, 1996:65; Waylen, 1996:109; Jelin, 1990:187; Chinchilla, 1992:41).

This mobilisation has been made possible in a sense, because mother's movements have challenged the state in ways that are not overtly threatening to themselves, their families, or to the authorities that they are confronting.²⁸ The following quote from Caldeira (1984, cited in Britto da Motta and Moreira de Carvalho, 1993:81) on a women's health movement in Sao Paulo illustrates this point:

Women from the Jardim das Camelias did not see the slightest problem in demanding child-care and health centres, nor in going to the meetings ... since they interpreted all of this as 'working for the welfare of my children'. Thus it was as responsible mothers that they were able to take over the mayor's office, in the same manner that the fact of being conscious mothers allows them to leave home more easily to 'face the outside world' to work.

Crucial also to the ability of mother's movements to organise (especially in the 1970s and early 1980s) was the central role of the Catholic Church in Latin American women's lives. Working for the church as delegates of the word (in Christian Base Communities allied to the popular church) or as members of church mother's groups (largely allied to the conservative wing of the Catholic Church), provided women with a way to participate in life outside of the home (Machado, 1993:103; Safa, 1995:231). It was through this involvement that women often developed political consciousness and leadership skills (Stephen, 1994: 204; Vargas, 1995:82). Rather than question the traditional gender roles assigned to them by the Catholic Church, however, mother's movements concerned with human rights in particular, evoked very powerfully the Catholic symbols of the suffering mother and her sacrifice, in their protests against the state (Safa, 1995:231; Westwood and Radcliffe, 1993:18).

²⁸ Many women involved in mother's movements, although initially excluded from detention by the military, were, after a period of time, detained and tortured along with various other oppositional groups. As Stephens (1995:812) highlights in the case of El Salvador: 'After women established the street as their territory through participation in marches, sit-ins, hunger strikes and public meetings, the members of El Salvador's security forces began to view all women in public places with suspicion and treated them accordingly'.

While at first glance, it may seem as though the activities of mother's movements have reinforced Latin American women's traditional roles and have therefore, prevented them from empowering themselves, the activities of mother's movements can influence the transformation of gender roles or empower women in at least five important ways. Firstly, by using symbols of motherhood and family to demand human rights, mother's movements challenge the traditional roles ascribed to mother's as apolitical and passive actors (Jelin, 1990:205; Westwood and Radcliffe, 1993:18). In addition, mother's movements present the authoritarian state with the following dilemma: how to uphold its moral legitimacy based on the, 'defence of the Christian values of family and motherhood in the face of a godless communist threat from the Left' (Fisher, 1993:109), when the public challenge to its legitimacy comes from these very values themselves (Schirmer, 1987:37).²⁹

Secondly, the process of coming together to discuss issues and to organise campaigns can in itself be an empowering experience for women. Mother's groups provide women with a space to meet, self-esteem, a place to make friends and in some cases an excuse to leave the home when domestic duties become intolerably tedious and isolating:

Some women find it 'empty' just to take care of children and wash and iron - it's plain emptiness. Thus, they feel they need to get out of that routine. They have no other place to go, and they want to grow. At least they can find friends here (CEAS, 1978, cited in Britto da Motta and Moreira de Carvalho, 1993: 81).

I loved going to the meetings. It became the high point of my week, because it was a chance to get together with other women and talk about the problems we had in common - like how to keep our children fed and our husbands sober Now when he came home drunk I'd put up a stink. I was more independent too, since I had my own group of friends. And my work at the [mother's] club made me feel important; it made me feel like I had something to contribute to the community (Alvarado, 1987:11-12)

²⁹ Schirmer (1987:37) argues that in addition to these challenges, mother's movements, through staging their demonstrations with candles, flowers and photos of their relatives, are also challenging the cult of death with a celebration of life. By provoking the state in these ways, mother's movements are aiding in the demystification of its methods of repression and control.

It is not always easy for working-class women to meet in such a collective fashion. Hostile husbands and other family members along with women's own insecurities often prevent participation in mother's groups.³⁰ The action of coming together as a community of women to share problems and ideas is, therefore, immensely empowering for some women especially given the obstacles they have had to overcome in order to participate:

My husband doesn't like me to participate. Ah, but even if there's a fuss, I go Women must do something they like ... You make friends in the local groups, you make contacts and it opens women up, little by little things become clearer; let's see if we can overcome this fear we have of our husbands (Women's group participant in Sao Paulo, cited in Caldeira, 1990:65).

Thirdly, in collectivising demands originating from their traditional roles, mother's movements politicise these demands (Safa, 1995:233; Acosta-Belén and Bose, 1995:28). This can lead to a greater understanding of both class and gender subordination (Fisher, 1993:2). Therefore,

poor women, though seemingly organising around their families' needs, are also negotiating and sometimes challenging power relations in their daily lives and thus are chipping away at hegemonic discourses about gender, development and politics and developing critical perspective's on the world in which they live (Escobar and Alvarez, 1992: 320).

Fourthly, by mobilising and confronting the state on issues of violence, (seen in the campaigns of the COMADRES of El Salvador and the CONAVIGUA widows of Guatemala to discover the truth about their loved ones who had 'disappeared'), many mother's movements concerned with human rights have come to see that questioning the violence of the military authoritarian state requires an analysis of political violence that links state violence (disappearance and torture) to personal violence against women (rape and battering) (Schirmer, 1993: 31; Stephen, 1995: 814). The public awareness of

³⁰ See for instance Domitila Barrios de Chungara's account of the problems women of the housewives committee of Siglo XX faced with many men when they began to organise. The following quote is one such example of these problems: 'The men weren't used to hearing a woman speak on the same platform as them. So they shouted: "Go back home! Back to the kitchen! Back to the washing! Back to your housework!" And they jeered and booed them' (1978:74).

violence against women detainees and alleged subversives also made discussion on violence against women in the home and in the street more acceptable (Jaquette, 1989a:5).

Finally, mother's movements can be seen to push the boundaries of gender identity simply by locating women and their activities in non-traditional sites (Westwood and Radcliffe, 1993:22). As women in Latin America are expected to inhabit the private sphere, the very presence of their bodies staging demonstrations or marching with pickets in sites from which they have been traditionally excluded, is an intensely political act (ibid.: Waylen, 1996:17). Thus, we see that the actions of mother's movements are not just about the defence of the private sphere, but also, very importantly, about demanding citizenship or inclusion in society (Safa, 1995: 227; Corcoran-Nantes, 1993:138).

Not all women's movements in Latin America mobilise in the above form. In addition to mother's movements that mobilise around issues of gender and class in urban areas, we also find movements which mobilise around issues of ethnicity and class in the rural domain.

Indigenous Women's Organisations/Peasant Movements³¹

The lives of the vast array of indigenous peoples of the Latin America region, as well as those of the peoples who were enslaved and transported to it, have, from the time of conquest early in the 16th century, been characterised by a process of 'Otherisation' (Westwood and Radcliffe, 1993:6). Spanish and Portuguese imperialistic discourse, muffling the contestations between ethnic and religious groups in the 'old world', established a form of European identity or racism, which when applied to the aforementioned peoples of the Latin American region, had a

³¹ While not all 'peasant people' or rural working class people are of indigenous descent in Latin America, in the literature on women's organisations the activities of indigenous women in rural areas are most often referred to in terms of their roles as peasants (*campesinas*).

profound impact on the shaping of cultural development and gendered identities (ibid.).

In the discourse of European racism, indigenous and black women were either made invisible through the ideology of 'racial democracy' (representing the process of whitening by miscegenation) or constructed in pejorative terms as 'Indios' to denote backwardness and marginalisation from society (ibid.:6-8). Hence, as Wade (1986:16, in Westwood and Radcliffe, 1993:6-7) notes in the case of Colombia:

The emergence of a large mixed intermediate group ... has established the myth of a Latin American 'racial democracy' based on the predominance of the mestizo and the mulatto and in which racial marks are no barriers to marriage and social mobility. It is important to recognise, however, that the mechanisms of racial and social vertical mobility that exist in Latin American societies draw their dynamic from an attempt to escape blackness that has been and continues to be negatively evaluated, and thus to whiten oneself and eventually the population as a whole.

Thus, when we speak of the oppression of Latin American women, we must pay heed to Westwood and Radcliffe's (1993:6) insight that, 'Gender is lived through racisms and social construction of "race" in Latin America'. What may represent an opening for some women therefore, may be a source of marginalisation for others. Consequently when Benton (1993:234-235) writes of the gains of the feminist movement in Bolivia in the last decade (in gaining access to contraception and educational opportunities for middle-class women) she is quick to point out the huge cultural gap which exists between these women and Quechuan and Aymaran women whose 'only alternative to a life of constant struggle in the countryside has been domestic service in the city, with its concomitant economic and sexual exploitation' (ibid.).

As rural-urban migrants, moreover, Quechuan and Aymaran women face further problems related directly to the social construction of their 'race' in Bolivian society:

We peasant women [Quechuan and Aymaran], we are discriminated against from the moment we leave home when we go to the city or set foot in the

village. They call us Indians, peasants, filth and all that. These are the problems we have to face (Margarita Laime in Benton, 1993: 234).

The resistances employed by indigenous/peasant women can thus be seen as resistances against this very process of Otherisation. In the post-World War Two decades this has signified resistance against the spread of capitalist economic development which, through its exploitation of resources, land and labour, and through its attempts at global domination through warfare (played out in the Cold-War counter-revolutionary civil wars of Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador), has further alienated indigenous/peasant peoples from their lands and cultures (Comacho, 1993).³² Resistance has been necessary then, to not only dismantle the racist ideologies which have rendered indigenous/peasant peoples historically invisible, but also, quite simply, for survival.³³

Through peasant unions or through their own autonomous unions and organisations, indigenous/peasant women have contributed greatly to this struggle. In Guatemala for example, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Rigoberta Menchu worked through the CUC (the Peasant Unity Committee) to ensure that the plight of her people was made visible. Menchu fought not only for her people's right to participate in a just society (politically, socially and economically), but also, for cultural autonomy:

This is my cause. As I've already said, it wasn't born out of something good, it was born out of wretchedness and bitterness. It has been radicalized by poverty in which my people live. It has been radicalized by the malnutrition which I, as an Indian, have seen and experienced. And by the exploitation and discrimination which I've felt in the flesh. And by the oppression which

³² The struggles of the Mayan Indians of Guatemala against exploitation of their labour and further alienation of their lands in the 30 years proceeding the sacking of the democratically elected Arbenz government, for instance, were labelled as communist insurgency and dealt with by violent repression by US funded military units (Lutz and Lovell, 1993:228). Similarly, many groups of indigenous peoples living in strategic areas were used by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and by other state counterinsurgency units as fighters and informants against popular revolutionary uprisings. Such was the case of the Mosquito Indians of Nicaragua, whose historic struggles for autonomy from the Nicaraguan state were exploited by US backed contra rebels and turned into a campaign of armed opposition to the Sandinista revolution of the late 1970s and early 1980s (MacDonald, 1984:42-49).

³³ Many examples can be given of indigenous peoples who, through such strategies of genocide, assimilation and acculturation, no longer exist on this earth. Out of all of the indigenous people of the Caribbean region, for instance, only a few enclaves have survived to the 20th century. Genocide of the indigenous people of that region has been almost total (Barreiro, 1993:233).

prevents us performing our ceremonies, and shows no respect for our way of life, the way we are (Menchu, 1984:246-24).

In Honduras also, Elvia Alvarado's work with various *campesino* (peasant) groups ensured that the rights of peasant people were represented:

We're fighting so that we too, can share our nation's wealth. We're fighting so that, we, too can live well. We all want to have good houses - with cement floors instead of dirt, with running water to take a shower and clean water to drink. We all want electricity so we don't have to ruin our eyes with those gas lights we use. We all want real bathrooms, with toilets that flush and sinks that have running water. Of course we want these things. Aren't we human beings? Don't we have the same rights that rich people do?(1987:26).

At the same time as struggling for their livelihoods and in a related way, their cultural autonomy, indigenous/peasant women have fought for their gender specific concerns to be recognised. When agrarian reform measures failed to recognise their essential participation in agricultural production and when male members of their communities silenced their demands by claiming the public political voice of authority (Radcliffe, 1993:199; see also, León, 1990:135-150), an awareness of the machismo that permeates their communities simultaneously grew amongst indigenous/peasant women:

Campesino men have to be more responsible with their women. They have to have only one woman. Because they have a hard enough time supporting one family, let alone two. Campesinos who drink have to stop drinking. And campesinos who fight with their wives have to stop fighting. Our struggle has to begin in our own homes (Alvarado, 1987:56).

What type of liberation do we want? ... [the] ... type which consists of women being respected as human beings who can solve problems and participate in everything ... a liberation that means our opinion is respected at home and outside the home (Barrios de Chungara, 1983:42).

Nevertheless, for indigenous/peasant women as well as urban working-class women, the struggle for empowerment has not been so much about feminism (emancipation for women) as it has been about class (improved living conditions) and ethnicity (recognition of cultural difference/rights). In fact for many women involved in these movements, their views on feminism, mirroring those of the Latin American Left in the

mid 1970s (Sternbach, Chuchryk and Alvarez, 1992: 394),³⁴ have been of an unrepresentative doctrine employed by middle-class women to make sense of the world that only middle-class women represent:

We've tried to work with middle-class feminists but they talk about a different world from ours. For example, they did a workshop where they told us we've got to value ourselves, stop serving the biggest steak to the men. Of course poor women like us aren't very familiar with steaks ...

[speaking on women's centres run by feminists] ... It's another world, all carpeted, with pictures on the wall, everything brand new. We felt uncomfortable. The only time we'd been in houses like that was as domestic servants (Participant of a Chilean working-class women's organisation, cited in Fisher, 1993:187).

It isn't like the feminists say ... Women have to be prepared to, and know how to, understand their husbands, have patience In the cities, men and women separate, women paint their nails, their lips, go for tea. I don't agree; I'd rather be poorly paid. I'm shocked by the feminists and I tell them so (Campesina interviewee, in Radcliffe, 1993:213-214)

Yet as Vargas (1992:195-214) has pointed out, the form of feminism the above testimonials allude to has undergone immense changes in the last decades in its attempts to root out what one of Chile's leading feminists has labelled the 'seal of the absolute' (Kirkwood, 1986:213-214, in Vargas, 1992:195), or the kind of feminism which anchors itself on women's experiences as a subordinate gender exclusively. Can we then speak of a distinct *feminist* movement as a further expression of Latin American feminism? This next section examines these and other concerns which have been played out in what has essentially been the 'middle-class feminist side' of the women's movement in Latin America.

³⁴ The generally held view of feminism by the Latin American Left will be discussed in the following section on the 'feminist stream'.

The Feminist Stream

In her analysis of the women's movement in Latin America, Vargas (1992:195-214) has identified the 'feminist stream' as an integral part of this multifaceted social movement for change. While feminist ideals such as equality and the right to citizenship in all its forms obviously underpin much of the activity of women's organisations throughout the Latin American region, as we have seen in earlier sections, it can be argued that it is in the 'feminist stream' of mobilisation that feminism in Latin America has more *specifically* come of age.

The origins of this feminist stream in Latin America can be linked to a period of modernisation in the 1960s that saw increased educational and workplace opportunities for middle and upper-class women across the region (Vargas, 1995: 78, citing Peru: Westwood and Radcliffe, 1993:6, citing Brazil). These increased opportunities coupled with the prevailing ideologies of the modernist project (socialism, populism and liberalism), led the aforementioned groups of women, charged with their experiences of participation mainly in political parties of the 'New Left' (in the 1970s), to demand universal equality and citizenship in their various nation states (Vargas, 1992:199-200).

Paradoxically, the involvement of feminists in left-wing political parties was instrumental in constraining feminism into a form considered to be appropriate to the vanguard at that time:

The legacy of the Left weighed heavily on Latin American feminism during the early years of the movement, an inheritance that led early feminists to privilege class over gender struggle, and, in the Marxist tradition, to focus on women's work and on women's integration or incorporation into the public world of politics and production (Sternbach et al., 1992:401)

Consideration of gender-related concerns, was for the Left, a domain of the misguided petite bourgeoisie, who, as tools of Yankee imperialism, had adopted a new fashion that bore no relation to the lives of the majority of women throughout the region (ibid:394). This view was further reinforced by the Catholic Church,

whose doctrines placed women not only in the position of self-sacrificing, self-abnegating virtuous mothers, but also, of upholders of family and public morality (Chinchilla, 1992:40). Feminism, the church argued, only served to point women 'in the direction of materialism, individualism, and egotism and, thus, was inherently opposed to church doctrine' (ibid.).

During their work with women of the 'rear-guard' or with women of the popular classes, however, many feminists began to realise that those ostensibly feminist concerns (such as sexuality and abortion) which had been held in such disdain by the Catholic Church and the Left, were, in truth, of concern to these women as well. In fact, many working-class and black women reclaimed the label feminist in a form of protest at the way leftist males had defined issues of importance in their lives. Thus, instead of being opiates to distract the masses from their historical role in class struggle, feminist issues were, rather, issues of crucial importance to the survival of working-class women (Sternbach *et al.*, 1992:404).

Alongside these discoveries, feminists throughout Latin America in the 1970s were also beginning to challenge the inherently undemocratic nature of the political Left. The fact that these parties tended to homogenise opinions, were hierarchical and basically uninterested in political feminist demands, led some feminists to abandon political parties and concentrate on forming their own autonomous organisations (ibid.). With this action, the feminist stream was born (Jaquette, 1989a:5). As Vargas (1995:84) explains, this realisation did not come easily, it was born from brutal experience and self critique:

The first demonstration we organised demanding women's rights to decide on their own reproduction, and opening the controversy on abortion, got a tremendously hostile reaction from men, and also from many women inside and outside the political parties. From being perceived as competent intelligent women who had been supporting the general struggle, we were now seen as hysterical middle-class women, trying to divide the people's unity under the influence of Western feminism. It was [only] through reflection and self-critique that we began to criticize traditional political action.

With some feminists now acting independently of political parties, new debates began in the movement on the question of 'double militancy', the upholding feminist and partisan political goals (Safa, 1995:237). At the first Latin American and Caribbean feminist *encuentro* or meeting, held in Colombia in July 1981, these debates, alongside what was seen as the 'wide and generous recognition of sisterhood' (Vargas, 1992:203), emerged strongly. Confrontations on the question of double militancy were circumscribed by the need for feminists to mark their space and to protect the movement from elements which may hinder or manipulate its development (ibid.:204). Autonomy was seen as so vital at this early stage of the movement that it came to be perceived not so much as a goal of the movement but, 'as an end in itself' (Vargas, 1992:204).

Throughout its ensuing development in the 1980s and 1990s, the feminist stream was confronted by further challenges and debates. During the various *encuentros* which proceeded Bogota (held approximately every two years), confrontations ranging from lesbian challenges to the homophobic nature of the feminist movement, to challenges of working class rural and urban women on the prohibitive cost of attending the *encuentros*, to challenges from indigenous and black women on the racism inherent in the Latin American feminist movement, forced the feminist stream to become more pluralistic in both the way it formulated its concepts of subordination, and in the way it perceived feminist political action (Sternbach *et al.*, 1992:410-432). While many tensions still remain, particularly among those of the feminist stream who decry the need to incorporate the views and demands of the vast number of women's movements who they believe to be not truly feminist, it cannot be denied that Latin American feminism in the 1990s is, as Sternbach *et al.* (1992:432), conclude,

a politically and socially heterogenous movement composed of women who identify with feminism but who retain an unwavering commitment to socioeconomic justice and popular empowerment. In a supposedly "postfeminist" era, Latin American feminism is clearly a powerful, vibrant, energetic, creative, and exuberant political force ...

Before we can make any concluding remarks on the impact of this creative and exuberant political force in empowering women across the Latin American region, it is necessary to examine one final framework of organising that has formed an essential part of women's struggles for change particularly in the Central American region: the participation of women in armed movements for national liberation.

Revolutionary women³⁵

Simultaneously as mother's movements were demanding answers to the disappearance of their sons and daughters and working-class rural and urban women were organising collective strategies for survival, women in Nicaragua, Guatemala, Mexico and El Salvador were fighting for shared issues of social justice in guerrilla movements for national liberation. Defying such dichotomous and gendered representations of warfare as home-front/battle front, defended/defenders, weakness/strength, passivity/activity, and staying/departing (Lake and Damousi, 1995:5), which have constructed women as the 'collective other to the male warrior' (Elshtain, 1987:3-4), women in the aforementioned countries have participated in prolonged people's wars against military and elitist states which had oppressed the majority of their populations for centuries.

While analyses of women's participation in revolutionary struggles from the independence period to the mid 20th century (in Colombia, Cuba, Uruguay and Bolivia), have pointed to the essentially middle-class, educated nature of women revolutionaries (see for example, Jaquette, 1973:344; Labao, 1993:471), analyses of women's participation in prolonged people's wars in the late 20th century, have in contrast, confirmed the active participation of women across class and ethnic lines (Chinchilla, 1982). This may be because of the fact that to be successful, a prolonged people's war must organise the participation of all mass sectors. Or, as it has also been suggested, the influence of feminist issues on movement ideology as well as socioeconomic conditions related to family survival, may have also been a contributing factor to this seeming mass mobilisation of women (ibid.).

In the case of the Nicaraguan revolution, for example, women's practical gender interests were targeted in the form of welfare programmes (Molyneux, 1986:285). There is no doubt, however, that the establishment of women's mass organisations to support revolutionary transformation was instrumental in soliciting women's participation in not only Nicaragua but also, in El Salvador. With the wide goal of liberating women from capitalist patriarchal exploitation, the Association of Nicaraguan Women Confronting the Nation's Problems (AMPRONAC) and the Association of Salvadoran Women (AMES) worked to ensure that both women's practical and strategic gender interests were advanced by their partner movements (Thompson, 1986; Randall, 1981). Programmes enacted by these broad based movements included, 1) literacy campaigns; 2) campaigns to increase women's political representation; 3) campaigns to incorporate women into the realm of social production; 4) provision of extensive child-care facilities; and, 5) organisation of various rural and urban women's committees to lobby for basic services such as water and electricity (ibid.). Thus, while these organisations were committed to socialist transformations of their various states, they recognised the need to target women's specific needs and specific conditions within that struggle.

The Central American and Zapatista revolutions of the late twentieth century may also have attracted women into their ranks because of the opportunities they presented to women to take up leadership positions (Lobao, 1993:472). In opposition to earlier guerrilla revolutions where women were often viewed solely as support crews to cook 'a seasoned meal which tastes like something' and to perform domestic tasks for male combatants (Guevara, 1969), women in these revolutions were often accorded egalitarian status within the revolutionary movement (see for example, Chinchilla, 1990:371-397). In the Zapatista movement for example, the 'women's revolutionary law' guarantees women today both the right to participate in the struggle and the right to hold leadership positions in the military command (Katzenberger, 1995:109-110; Castillo, 1995:24-25). Women's participation in the Sandinista revolution in the 1980s

³⁵ The role of women in the Salvadoran Revolution will be discussed in detail in Chapter Seven.

in Nicaragua was similarly egalitarian. As Dora Maria, a former Commander in the FSLN states:

Women participated in our Revolution, not in the kitchens but as combatants. In the political leadership. This gives us a very different experience. Of course they played other roles during the war and acquired tremendous moral authority, so that any man - even in intimate relationships had to respect them (cited in Randall, 1981:56).

The 'other roles' that Dora Maria alludes to in the above testimony are the various positions other than combatant positions, that women occupy in times of open-armed conflict. These roles, which ranged in the Central American and Zapatista revolutions from radio operators, to cooks, to nurses, to mechanics and urban organisers, were essential to the survival of these revolutions and often also represented a challenge to women's traditional gender roles in these countries.

At first glance then, we can see that the mass participation of women in struggles for national liberation in the countries discussed above did in fact push the boundaries of gender identity which had constructed these women as passive, peace-seeking, and physically weak vis-à-vis their strong, warring and active male counterparts. To say that these challenges to gender identities resulted in the empowerment of these women, however, is slightly more problematic. The next part to this chapter examines the long-term impact of participation in such revolutions and in the forms of NSMs discussed previously. Particular reference is made to the empowerment/disempowerment that these mobilisations for change have caused.

Women's Mobilisation's for Change in Latin America as Empowerment/Disempowerment?

As we saw in Chapter Two, women's empowerment represents a process which results in a fundamental transformation of the social relations of gender which have subordinated women on individual, familial and societal bases. Implied in this process therefore, is the notion that empowerment will be sustainable, or, put

another way, that the resulting gender transformations that stem from an empowerment process will be long-lasting rather than short term (see for example, Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1991a:162). To examine this phenomenon in relation to the Latin American context, we begin firstly by examining the long-term consequences of the empowerment experienced by women who participated in struggles for national liberation in Central America (excluding El Salvador, which will be studied in depth in Chapter Seven) and secondly, by analysing the outcomes of women's participation in other social movements for change.

Can Women's Empowerment Outlive Revolution/Democracy?

Common in the general literature discussing aspects of women's roles in conflict, is the notion that emancipatory change does not necessarily continue for women in post-conflict environments (Byrne, 1996:35; Lycklama à Nijeholt, 1991a:152; Peterson and Runyan, 1993:131). Hence, for those groups of women who mobilised for the war-effort either as combatants or as supporters of the struggle, a return to peace often represented a return to the private sphere and the invisibility or disempowerment that this sphere represented.

So all-pervading is the need to reconstruct traditional gender roles in post-conflict contexts, that even for those women who participated in national liberation struggles in Latin America where explicit egalitarian agendas were promoted and often set down in law (see for example, Chinchilla, 1995:243), empowerment has been less than a sustainable process. As Myrna Cunningham, for example, notes in the case of Nicaragua:

A serious problem occurs as a result of repatriation. Men are leaving their weapons behind ... and coming back home. This is good and shows that women's efforts for peace really work; but the men want to become the leaders and the decision makers, to take back their jobs, displacing the women who remained holding the community together for years (cited in Piza Lopez, 1991: 55).

One feature of the apparent inability of women's empowerment to continue after the revolution has been the incapacity of these socialist states to fully transform inequitable gender relations in the areas of production and reproduction (see for example, Charles, 1993:129-134, on Cuba and Nicaragua; Collinson, 1990, on Nicaragua). Some feminists stress that these consequences can be linked to a socialist approach to revolution which links, according to Molyneux,³⁶

gender oppression to class oppression and [which] believes women's emancipation can be achieved only with the creation of a new socialist society and with the further development of the productive capacity of the economy (1986:289).

Women's emancipation is viewed therefore, not as a goal in itself, but only 'insofar as it contributes to the realisation of those goals' (ibid.:295). In fact, due to the almost mercenary nature of the socialist commitment to emancipation, the supposed liberatory value of women's participation during struggles for national liberation has also been disputed. In this vein, Chinchilla has the following to say on women's participation in the Nicaraguan revolution:

The war meant that many women faced greater demands on their time and more contradictions in their lives than ever before. Whether or not they had formal jobs or sources of income, women continued to carry out their traditional responsibilities for the daily reproduction of families; now, however, their job was made more difficult by frozen wages, inflation, black-market speculation, shortages, the continuing scarcity of child-care and maternity care, and the persistence of machismo (1995:255).

If we apply the same conception of empowerment as a sustainable process on the many forms of women's NSMs in Latin America, similar issues arise. Whether the participation of women in such social movements for change is in itself a guaranteed path to sustained empowerment, is difficult to know. Certainly, as we have seen in our previous discussion, the participation of indigenous/peasant, urban working class and feminist women in the varied activities which have characterised women's NSMs in Latin America, has had an enormous impact on the oppressive gender relations which shape the majority of Latin American women's lives. Despite this great progress,

³⁶ See also, Hartmann (1981:30-33),

women still remain subordinated in Latin America, and patriarchy continues to be a dominant ideology.

These difficulties in sustaining the empowerment process relate in some ways to the organisational structure of NSMs themselves and to the changing nature of the Latin American state in the late 1980s and 1990s. Whereas in the 1970s and up until the mid 1980s, women mobilised throughout the region against the abuses of military authoritarian states, the 1990s, with its return to institutionalised politics, has seen both the demobilisation of many women's social movements (which have organised mainly around practical gender interests) and the marginalisation of those women who chose to re-enter political parties structures (Waylen, 1996:130).

While quick to point out the difficulties in generalising women's political activity in so-called democratised Latin America, Waylen (1996:130-131), citing Barrig's (1992) and Bouvard's (1994) work on popular women's organisations and human rights groups in Peru, Chile and Argentina, has explained some of the difficulties for the women's movement in the period she calls the 'return to competitive electoral politics'. For the sake of clarity these difficulties are grouped into Figure 2 which has been adapted from Waylen's discussion:

Figure 2: The Women's Movement During the Return to Competitive Electoral Politics (Peruvian, Chilean and Argentinian Examples).

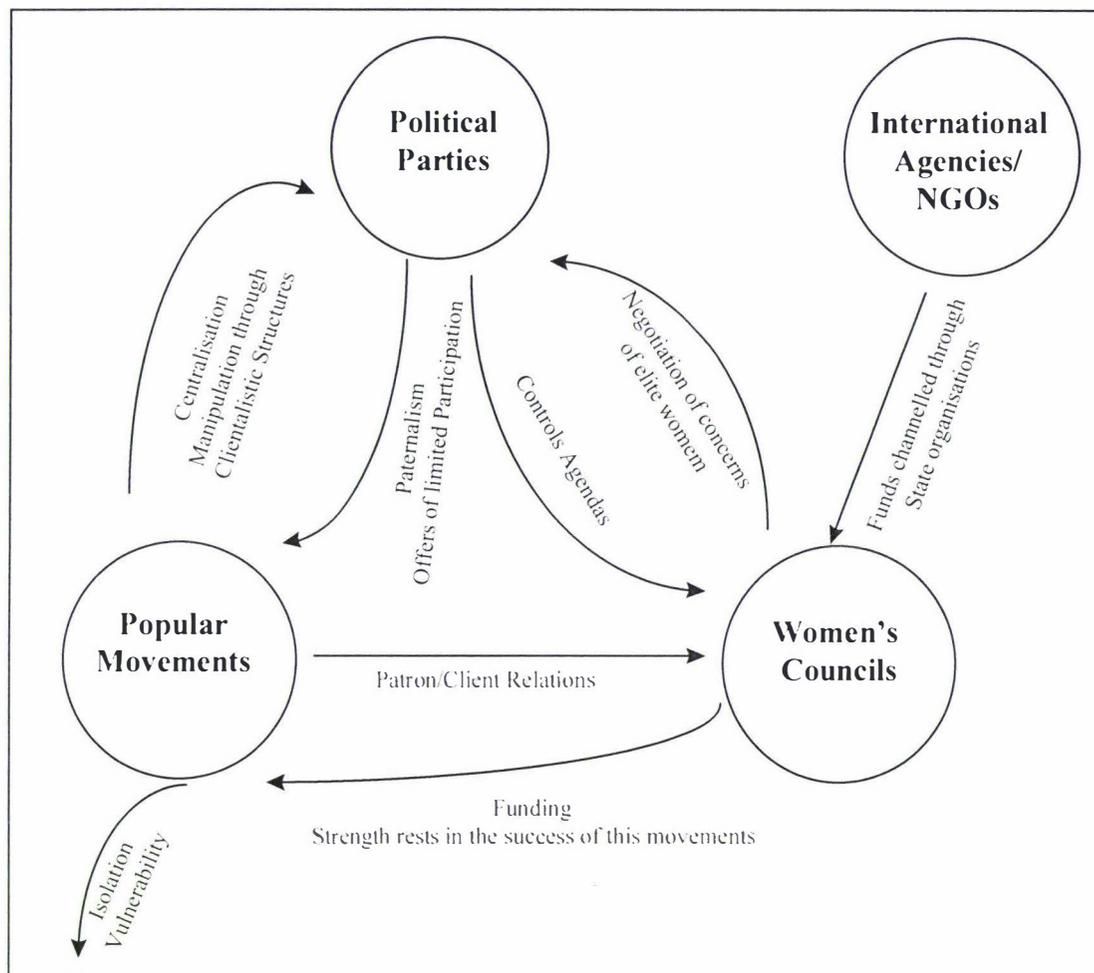


Figure based on Waylen's discussion (1996:130-131).

The arrows in Figure 2 represent the relationships between the key players (represented by circles) associated with women's organisations in the democratic phase of Latin American states. Beginning with popular movements, for example, we can see that the relationships between political parties and the women's councils that are tied to them, can often result in patron/client relationships or dependence through factors such as manipulation and the need for funding. As international development agencies (governmental and non-governmental) are increasingly channelling their funds through women's councils, popular movements are required to engage in relationships with these councils on terms that are often not of their own making. For political parties and

their women's councils, on the other hand, their relationships with popular movements are at best desirable (in the case of women's councils which depend on the strength of the popular movement to justify their presence) and at worst limited and paternalistic.

Women's councils, nonetheless, are also dependent on their associated parties to negotiate the needs of those mainly elite women with whom they identify. In response to this dependence, political parties are able to control the agendas of women's councils and ensure that women's political demands (those that challenge patriarchal structures) are kept at the margins of political discourse. Hence, at a time when Latin American women are freer than ever to organise themselves around issues of importance to their daily lives, problems of sectarianism and exclusion remain. Democracy, as Jaquette, points out, has not proved to be the kind of social change many women's organisations were struggling for:

Feminists have had to confront the unpleasant fact that democracy does not mean a change in the way a society does its political business. Hierarchical patterns re-emerge, including personalism and "patron/client" ties between the powerful and the weak; the state reasserts its corporatist role, assigning legitimacy and access to certain groups and excluding others; and politicians resume their efforts to reward themselves and their followers in the historical pattern of patronage that holds the system together in the absence of social consensus (1989:197).

For many women, then, the main issue that underpins the success or failure of their movements is that of autonomy. And while there is a general agreement that engagement with conventional politics must be carried out on the basis of autonomous movements, the wheres and wherefores of this engagement are clearly complex and contradictory (Waylen, 1996:133-134). When Vargas and another leading feminist in Peru decided to run for election 'autonomously' but under the umbrella of a coalition of leftist parties, for example, they suffered a painful political defeat. Similar results occurred in Argentina and Brazil, and in Uruguay, not one single woman was elected to the Uruguayan parliament (Jaquette, 1989:191).

Thus, we can see how difficult it is to come to any decisive conclusion on the empowerment potential of women's participation in organisations for social change in

the post-World War Two period in Latin America. The idea that democracy, or a successful revolution would see an end to women's subordination, has not been substantiated in many Latin American states. In fact, in the context of state sponsored terrorism such as that which has taken place in Latin America in the last three decades, the conflict engendered by such participation has on many occasions led to the disempowerment of women. By disrupting the dominant culture's constructions of femininity through the forms of mobilisation discussed in the previous section, Latin American women, as Hollander argues, 'become specific targets of military and paramilitary repression' (1996:46). Here, the potential for women to overcome their subordination is not only subverted by gender-specific forms of repression perpetrated against women by the terrorist state, but also, by the concomitant impact caused by a widening of misogynistic attitudes towards women:

Where women are disappeared, tortured, and assassinated in ways that are gender specific, these acts generally legitimate violence against women and in doing so strip away the paternalistic facade from male-dominant culture. The terrorist state [therefore] widens the already existing gap in the psychosocial experiences of women and men (Hollander, 1996:46).

Thus far we have discussed one form of disempowerment engendered through women's efforts to promote social change in Latin America, namely, the inability of empowerment to sustain change after revolutionary struggles, and, in the case of other forms of women's mobilisations, when democracy was re-established. Continuing with this theme of disempowerment, we will now turn to the further ways in which state sponsored repression has subverted the process of women's empowerment in Latin America.

Gender-related Violence as Disempowerment

As a broad concept, gender-related violence signifies the forms of violence that are enacted against women because they are women (Richters, 1994:1). While this broad conceptualisation includes violence against women in the home, community and the state, it is gender-related violence in the context of the state which will form the main basis of our discussion in the following sections.

There is no doubt that women experience violence during times of radical social change in ways that reflect situated cultural constructions of the female sex. Gender-related violence can be thus seen as 'violence which embodies the power imbalances inherent in patriarchal society' and which reflects 'culturally-defined notions of masculinity and femininity which serve to reinforce women's subordinate position' (El-Bushra and Piza Lopez, 1993:1-2, see also Bunster-Burotto, 1994:156). Although such violence is not always necessarily perpetrated by men against women, overwhelmingly, this is the form that it takes (ibid.).

As gender-related violence in political conflict (in the case of Latin America) is most often of a sexual nature, it is consciously designed to violate a woman's 'sense of self [and] her female human dignity' (Bunster-Burotto, 1994:158). Gender-related violence in Latin America, is, therefore, 'diffused female sexual enslavement through the patriarchal state ... crystallized and physically implemented'(ibid:156). It is designed to disempower women by not only terrorising them into submission but also, by instilling in them a sense of the impossibility of change. One of the most common forms of gender-related violence is rape.

Rape in Latin America

As in hundreds of other conflicts throughout the world, rape has been used in Latin America as a weapon of terror, to destabilise society and to break its resistance (ibid.). In Guatemala and El Salvador for example, the rape of women whether it be at the hands of the police, civilian patrols (in the case of Guatemala) or the armed forces, became a deliberate counterinsurgency tactic - a normative act of social control (Richters, 1994:50). Thus, the invasions of women's bodies through rape are 'construed to be military operations aimed at weakening, incapacitating, and finally destroying the enemy's power to resist' (ibid.).

Rape often also forms part of an overall strategy of torture which, as with rape itself, has the aim of eradicating the disease of subversion. This next section will examine torture's gendered discourses in the Latin American context.

Torture in Latin America

Bunster-Burotto has written that although punitive sexual enslavement of female political prisoners was widespread throughout Latin America, an understanding of such torture must be contextualised in the 'political, economic and social forces present in a given historical-national situation' (1994:156). Hence we see through Bunster-Burotto's work a differing picture of torture emerging in the countries of the Southern Cone (Argentina, Bolivia, Uruguay, Chile and Paraguay) than that of the countries of Central America (Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador). In the former group of countries where military dictatorships were entrenched for decades, torture against women, Bunster-Burotto argues, was of a systematic nature. Women were identified and incarcerated by the military and there were specific institutions designed for this task. In the latter group of countries, however, Bunster-Burotto stresses that violence against women took place within the context of generalised violence. Thus, political torture reached the women of Central America as daily terror. Violence was inflicted against women in this group of countries during massacres, during attacks on churches, and during attacks on villages (ibid:156-157).³⁷

Notwithstanding the need to view torture against women in Latin America in terms of national-historical contexts, there does appear to be a pattern to the *types* of torture that has been inflicted on women throughout Latin America in the last three decades of conflict. As stressed above in the general discussion on gender-related violence, this torture consisted across the board, of violent sexual attacks on female bodies and thus can be seen to relate specifically to cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity in Latin American society.

³⁷ Notwithstanding the fact that women experienced torture in Central America as daily terror, many women in Central America were also singled out for special treatment by the military. The detention and torture of many women involved in social movements throughout Central America, is one case in point.

Hollander (1996:53) has suggested that one important reason for male violence against women relates to men's need to combat feelings, experienced since early infancy, of engulfment by the omnipotent mother. As a solution to this women are constructed through cultural myths and rituals in terms of polar opposites. The glorification of women on the one hand and the debasement of women on the other, thus enables men to neutralise women's power by placing her 'either above or below male fear' (ibid.). From time to time however, men must reassure themselves of their domination by violently abusing that which is potentially powerful (ibid.). In the case of Latin America this abuse centred around women's culturally defined oppositional roles of Madonna and whore (Taylor, 1993:37).

Torture was used by the military to crystallise these two positions held by Latin American women. Gang rape, body slashing (especially of nipples and breasts), various forms of beating, rape by trained dogs, the penetration and decimation of women's genitalia by electric rods and the introduction of live rodents, were some of the physical methods whereby the prisoner underwent 'a rapid metamorphosis from Madonna - respectable women and/or mother - to whore' (Bunster-Burotto, 1994:158).

The torture inflicted on men, although comparatively less severe in sexual terms, followed similar lines. As the military state enforced an ideology of adoration of the dominant and aggressive male sex (Hollander, 1996:67), it became necessary for men who opposed the state to be transformed into something other than this adulated sex. To feminise subversiveness then, men's bodies were also transformed into penetrable bodies. Jokes were made about the size of their penises, they were taunted about their manhood and their genitalia and other orifices became the subject of prodding and poking by various torturous devices (Franco, 1992:107). Thus,

Sexual torture for men emphasiz[ed] an attack on their masculine role: they [were] debased as human beings and as men by being forced to witness the rape and torture of female prisoners - a compañera, a wife, a daughter, a mother - and suffer precisely because of their inability to protect them (Hollander, 1996:60).

Suffering this form of torture forced male prisoners, as Franco (1992:109) notes, 'to live like women'. It was here, for often the first time, that men became aware of what it meant to be objectified, to be battered and ridiculed and to be constantly aware of their bodies. And it was also here, for often the first time, that men learned the comfort found in everyday activities and the strength gained from talking to friends (ibid.).

Along with these physical forms of sexual torture, the Latin American military also used psychological torture in their assaults on the female psyche. Psychological torture, designed to exploit 'the female psychological connection with others' (Hollander, 1996:69), took many painful forms of which the following are but a few examples: the threat of and the actual torture of a woman's children in front of her; the rape of heavily pregnant women in front of other women; having to endure the screams and cries of other women being tortured and raped a few feet away; and the delivery of false news concerning the death or torture of a loved one (Bunster-Burotto, 1994:170-171). If the woman is active politically her torturers would, in addition, force her to make the decision whether to betray her political allies or her family. The knowledge that this act could lead to the brutalisation of those she loves is said to be even more traumatic for a woman than being tortured herself (Hollander, 1996:69).

The psychological torture reserved for pregnant women, was similarly dehumanising. Having been prevented from protecting the baby growing inside them from the effects of torture, pregnant women were then forced to give birth surrounded by their cursing and taunting torturers (Hollander, 1996:69). If they were able to survive this horrific process, once they had given birth, these women were transferred (a euphemism for mass-scale assassination in Argentina) in their hundreds, their babies adopted by military couples or sent to clandestine orphanages (Bunster-Burotto, 1994:170-171).

Thus, we can see how the torture inflicted upon women held in detention in Latin America was designed to subvert women from the processes through which they were attempting to seek power. Building on this notion of gender-related violence as a mechanism of disempowerment used by the authoritarian state, let us now turn to examine the strategy of disappearance as further tool through which women's disempowerment was constructed.

Los Desaparecidos/ The Disappeared

During the conflicts against authoritarian rule in the Southern Cone and in the struggles for national liberation in Central America, disappearance, defined as, 'the kidnapping, illegal detention, torture and execution of real or imagined opponents of military rule' (Fisher, 1993:104), was central to the military state's campaigns of terror.³⁸ Friends, relatives, and loved ones of opposition leaders and of those who expressed dissent to the ideology of military rule would 'disappear', often in the middle of the night. Many of the disappeared were killed, while others were detained and suffered the torture reserved for other political prisoners (Desjarlais, Eisenberg, Good and Kleinman *et al.*, 1995:122).

Since the first documentation of disappearance in Guatemala in the 1960s, there have been 30,000 cases of disappearance documented in South America alone (*ibid.*). In the more urbanised countries of Argentina and Chile, Schirmer (1987:34) argues, the main targets for the strategy were from the urban working and middle classes while in the more agrarian societies of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, peasants and slum dwellers were the primary targets.

If the strategy of disappearance was used to establish a climate of terror in the population at large, how can it then be presented as gender-related violence? To answer this question we must remember the all-pervasiveness of the ideologies of *machismo* and *marianismo* in the construction of gender-roles in Latin American societies.³⁹

³⁸ These campaigns of terror inflicted by authoritarian regimes are often referred to in the literature as 'cultures of fear' (Desjarlais, Eisenberg, Good and Kleinman *et al.*, 1995:122; Corradi *et al.*, 1992). Here the aim of the regime is to create a culture of fear amongst the civilian population by a process of intensive repression. Fear is used as a social control mechanism to induce a sense of helplessness in the general population. For individuals this fear is used to effect a 'personal dismantling' (Desjarlais, Eisenberg, Good and Kleinman *et al.*, 1995: 119).

³⁹ *Marianismo* is the female equivalent of *machismo*. Named after the Virgin Mary, *marianismo* exalts the submissive, self-sacrificing mother as the ideal women in Latin American society. Many famous Latin American women have fulfilled this purpose. Eva Perón, for example, described herself as the 'shadow' to her husband's figure, and Violetta Chamorro, ex-President of Nicaragua, portrayed herself as a 'healing mother' to her divided children (Green, 1997:166; Fisher, 1993:3).

By ensuring that loved ones disappeared from their lives, the military state denigrated women's roles as wives and mothers (ibid.). The military had invaded the very private sphere that women had occupied and nurtured for centuries and women were powerless to prevent it. Moreover, by pursuing a form of 'censorship of memory' (ibid.) through the tactic of disappearance, the military also prevented the mourning that is necessary to remember and to valorise the actions of the disappeared.

A paradox thus emerges in this uncertainty of knowing whether relatives are alive or dead. Many relatives who are 'left behind', 'translate the vague limbo of the unknown and the uncertain into a positive force of protest' (Schirmer, 1987:35). We saw earlier in this chapter how mother's movements throughout Latin America have been at the forefront of this force of protest. The strength of the relationship between mother and child overcame the threat of death for these women (Franco, 1992:112). The initial leeway granted to mother's movements because of their unthreatening natures and their mobilisations in defence of the family unit, was soon reversed, however, when the military began to view the presence of all women protesting in public places as subversive. For the COMADRES of El Salvador, for example, this perception resulted in the detention, rape and torture of the majority of their active members (Stephen, 1995:814).

While the above forms of gender-related violence that took place during the period of military authoritarian rule in the Southern Cone and during the various national liberation struggles in Central America were most often inflicted against those women who allegedly threatened the national security of the state, as we alluded to in the introduction to this section on gender-related violence, women who were bystanders or civilians during this time were also subject to gender-related violence.

Violence against Women Refugees/Civilians

As civilians and refugees, women are particularly vulnerable to gender-related violence (Turshen, 1998:27-30; Vickers, 1993:23-30). The fact that they are left behind 'undefended' along with the fact that they are forced to flee away from the cultures and

resources that have sustained their communities, make them easy targets in the eyes of those they are running from, as well as those at whose mercy they depend (El-Bushra and Piza Lopez, 1993:7). Thus, as social control deteriorates, rape and sexual harassment become common-place amongst women civilian and refugee populations (ibid.; Heise, 1993:178). In her analysis on the impact of gender-related violence on women's reproductive health, for example, Cox (1994:133) notes that her interviews with US health professionals working with Central American refugees were revealing in the *consistency* of their claims on the high rates of sexual assault amongst these women. In fact, as Cox (ibid.) further notes, her interviewees indicated that rape was an almost universal experience for Central American refugee women over the age of twelve.

This gender-related violence experienced by women civilians and refugees, is not solely perpetrated by the military. As the actions of the military state reinforces the relationship between *machismo* and violence, men are more apt to transfer the anger they feel against the state on to safer and more socially acceptable institutions. Hence wife bashing and rape become the arena where this anger and aggression is expressed (Hollander, 1996:64).

Latin American exile psychologists, Corral and Paez stress, furthermore, that many relationships between men and women in *exile* are also characterised by sado-masochism:

The marginalized and wounded man needs to be seen: in order for her to notice my presence, I make her suffer. But if he lets me suffer, I in return have reason to counterattack (1980 cited in Agger, 1994:104, original emphasis).

The long-term psychological effects of the types of gender-related violence that have been outlined in the above sections, should not be underestimated. As El-Bushra and Piza Lopez stress (1993:1) 'violence effects women ... in terms of their mental health, by sapping their self-esteem and self-confidence, limiting their capacity to solve their own problems, as well as their capacity to develop relationships with others'. Thus, as we can clearly see, gender related violence against women involved in political conflicts throughout Latin America, has resulted in some level of disempowerment for many.

Summary

Chapter Three, through its discussion on women's participation in social movements, has attempted to chart the ways in which women experience empowerment in Latin America. It has shown how the authoritarian state, by forcing the loci of resistance away from its traditional base in political parties and trade unions to civil society, has inadvertently mobilised women to fight the repressive policies and actions that the state has instituted. By joining together with other women to fight such oppression, many women in Latin America have subsequently transformed their traditional gender roles as apolitical passive actors. This is particularly clear in the case of mother's movements who subvert the traditional symbolism of women as self-sacrificing mothers, into a tool of political protest.

Collectivising their demands in the ways described in this chapter has not always led, however, to empowering outcomes for women. As the authoritarian state punishes those who make a stand against its ideologies, many women who participated in social movements have been the victims of gender-related violence. This violence, which reflects culturally defined notions of masculinity and femininity in Latin American society, has attempted to reinforce women's subordinated status and has thus caused the disempowerment of many.

As a result of this process, many women have suffered and still are suffering from trauma. This trauma is also in itself disempowering. It is disempowering not only because some of its manifestations (such as terror, hopelessness, anxiety, self-blame, lack of confidence at the psychological level) may prevent women from being able to participate in empowering initiatives but also, because it reinforces the traditional powerlessness of women in Latin America. The following chapter which focuses on the psychological impacts of gender-related violence will highlight these and other important points related to trauma and healing in post-conflict Latin America.

Chapter Four - Psychological Impacts of Gender Related Violence: Trauma, and Gender-Specific Approaches to Healing in Post-Conflict Latin America

Introduction

As was confirmed in the previous chapter, the physical and psychological forms of gender-related violence employed by the authoritarian state have disempowered many Latin American women. From feeling as though they had the power to transform the economic, social and political systems that had disempowered them as women and as members of the poor majority, many Latin American women now feel overwhelmed with feelings of fear, hopelessness and loss.

Chapter Four, through its discussion on the psychological effects of gender-related violence will examine these dynamics of trauma in Latin America. Beginning with an outline of the effects of this form of violence on individual women, it will show how the trauma of gender-related violence extends beyond the individual impacting, as Herman notes, 'on the systems of attachment and meaning that link individual and community' (1997:51). Thus, the healing of trauma is essential if women are to feel as though they have a chance in helping themselves, their families and societies to become the kind of people and places where such trauma will never exist again.

Having established that addressing trauma should be a priority for Gender and Development practice in contemporary Latin America, Chapter Four then moves to review the gender and development literature concerned with mental health care for women in post-conflict environments. This literature will attest to the problematic nature of viewing mental health needs in Western terms and the need for culturally appropriate methods for approaching mental health care in such environments.

In view of the apparent gap in this literature on gender-specific approaches to healing, however, an approach to healing the trauma of gender-related violence will be mooted. This approach to healing, which takes the form of a theoretical model constructed from ideas drawn from the fieldwork context and from the theory presented in this chapter and the previous two, will then be used in Chapter Nine when the empowerment potential of Las Dignas' work in mental health is analysed.

Psychological effects of Gender-Related Violence

Generalising Psychological Effects

In a volume dedicated to the prevention of, and appropriate responses to, sexual violence in the context of women refugees of warfare, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) had the following to say on the psychological effects of gender-related violence:

all victims experience psychological trauma. They may feel paralysed by terror, experience physical and emotional pain, intense self-disgust, powerlessness, worthlessness, apathy, denial and an inability to function in their daily lives. In the worst cases they may experience deep depression leading to chronic mental disorders, suicide, illegal termination of pregnancy, endangering their lives or abandonment of their babies. Cases of infanticide of children born as a result of rape have also been reported (1995:6).

The UNHCR (1995:6) goes on to list further psychological reactions to gender-related violence experienced by women victims of conflict. The following are a few examples: (a) loss of trust and a sense of loss of safety and security; (b) guilt and shame related to the discourse of 'classic rape syndrome' (that is, that the victim is in some way responsible for what has happened to her); (c) aggressiveness, anger, hatred or revenge which result from directing psychological trauma outwards as opposed to inwards; (d) a feeling of being unclean and unworthy (especially in women who come from cultures where virginity, modesty and female chastity defines a girl's or woman's value); (e)

psychic numbing (a defensive reaction to mute emotion characterised by slow speech, blunted emotions and a calm demeanour), and; (f) retraumatisation (described as the psychological equivalent of tearing off a scab which occurs when an event triggers the victim to remember the previous trauma).

Trauma may also be expressed through psychosomation, or, put another way, it can be played out in the constant physical ailments such as headaches, sore backs and gastrointestinal disturbances that often plague victims of gender-related violence. Allodi and Stiansny's (1990:144-148) study of 28 tortured women from Central and South America, for example, revealed that these women were suffering from physical symptoms such as insomnia, headaches, body pains, stomach discomfort and lack of appetite, in addition to their affective symptoms of depression, fear, feelings of hopelessness, loss of self-esteem, crying and irritability and sexual anxiety/avoidance.

Other studies on the psychological effects of gender-related violence in Latin America have noted similar effects. In describing the mental health of an Argentinean woman detainee who gave birth while tied to a bed by her hands and feet (her baby was subsequently made to sleep on the floor of her cell), Bunster-Burotto states that in the aftermath of such trauma, the mother suffered from 'impaired memory, headaches, inability to concentrate, nervousness and dizziness' (1994:172).

In attempting to understand the dynamics of trauma following torture in Chile, Agger and Jenson, (1996) identified the psychological dynamics of dissociation and victimisation as concepts useful in not only understanding the experience of torture, but also, a person's subsequent reactions to it. Dissociation, or 'turning yourself off' during the torture process is a common psychological survival mechanism necessary to avoid an 'overwhelming anxiety which would lead to total disintegration' (Weinstein and Lira, 1987:49 in Agger and Jenson, 1996:92). The mechanism and the consequences of this dissociation can be clearly seen in the following testimony by a woman psychiatrist who experienced torture in Chile:

Rape is not a difficult problem - at least for me. I place sexual violation on the same level as physical and psychological aggression - that is, as one more

technique. We were all considered objects, and the persons who did one thing or another to us were also on the same level. Of course, there have been some cases of frigidity - with women comrades when they met their men afterwards, or others who did not want to establish an emotional relationship because of the sexuality that they imagined would follow (cited in Agger and Jenson, 1996:92)

Victimisation, as conceived by Agger and Jenson (1996:93-101), refers to the consequences of the power relationship established between the torturer and the tortured in which the tortured person is placed in an inferior position. In the very political form of torture which took place throughout Latin America, this power relationship was used to turn the tortured into collaborators with the military. Through physical and psychological methods such as those outlined in the previous chapter, the tortured were made to betray their families and friends, thus transforming themselves into the position of the torturer, by delivering their families and friends into the hands of certain torture and perhaps even death. Having made this choice of physical over psychological survival, the tortured then suffered a kind of moral death resulting from the privileging of themselves or their families over the strength of their political beliefs. Hence, victimisation is 'a moral trauma because it changes a person's feelings of dignity and moral integrity' (ibid.:94).

Thus, the trauma resulting from gender-related violence does not only effect the individual (Herman, 1997:51). As Martín-Baró stresses, the nature of repression that took place in the political conflicts of Latin America (silencing of opposition, rape, torture, disappearance, massacres, displacement, isolation, economic pauperisation) was also responsible for the traumatising of families and of society in general. It is then a 'psychosocial' trauma, or, the, 'traumatic crystallisation in persons and groups of inhuman social relations' (Martín-Baró, 1988:138):⁴⁰

Because the conflict ... [had] ... elements of dehumanisation ... [and was] ... tied up with the socio-economic crisis ... you cannot deny that there will be a collective deterioration of social relations ... [which] ... needs to be looked at from a psychological perspective (Martín-Baró, 1990:23).⁴¹

⁴⁰ See also Salimovich, Lira and Weinstein, (1992:72-89)

⁴¹ All references from Martín-Baró (1990), have been translated by author.

Judith Zur (1993:27-30) in her study of the psychosocial effects of 'La Violencia' (a period of government sponsored terrorism (1980-1983) directed against the civilian population during the 30 year civil war) on widows of El Quiché, Guatemala, attests further to the wider implications of gender-related violence for society:

What the violence and loss meant for widows was a virtual reformulation of family life. This took place at various levels, from the roles taken up by women and children to replace those of missing male kin, to attitudinal changes regarding the security that one could expect from the family. The threat to the family meant that members had to disperse spatially in order to survive ... as a result of witnessing relatives being massacred, and being unable to respond, women's images of themselves as mothers and wives and of carers and complementary partners, respectively, were destroyed (ibid:29).⁴²

With the loss of their male kin, these widows are also particularly vulnerable to other forms of psychological trauma engendered by conflict such as isolation and economic pauperisation. Thousands of women have become the sole providers in their families, and, in rural areas, have been forced to rely on the goodwill of male relatives to help them work the land. For many rural women however, the loss of male kin has meant that they have had to abandon their land and move into the cities to join the ranks of the 'superexploited' as domestic workers for the wealthy (Hollander, 1996:65).

As a woman in Latin America usually derives her identity from 'her position in the family and especially from her sacred mothering role where she is ... absolutely devoted to her children, and willing to sacrifice her own desires to please her family' (Bunster-Burotto, 1986:304), the inability to provide adequately for her family can lead widows and other women who have been abandoned by their husbands and partners to experience feelings of anxiety and powerlessness. Given the ideological campaign of appropriate motherhood waged throughout Latin America by the military state, these feelings are further compounded by the guilt women are made to feel for transgressing societies role of a good mother, that is, one who is able to protect her loved ones from death and disappearance (Hollander, 1996:67-68).

⁴² See also Green (1995:73-75), for a related account of the disintegration of family life for Mayan widows.

The physical consequences of gender-related violence, in addition, impact on women's psychological states. Through rape and other forms of gender-related violence women are exposed to HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. They are also, quite obviously, exposed to unwanted and often highly traumatic pregnancies (given the damage to their reproductive tract because of gender-related violence) and as a result may attempt dangerous abortions (Byrne, 1996:37). It is hard to imagine that such consequences of gender-related violence could escape the psychological traumatisation of women. Even for those women who are able to cope with rape and torture, the cultural constructions of women in many societies result in them being held responsible for such gender-related violence and thus ostracised from society (Byrne, 1996:37; El-Bushra and Piza Lopez, 1994:21).

From the early 1980s, with the publication of the American Psychiatric Association's third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders (DSM-III) (MacDonald, 1996:41), psychiatrists have often identified the types of psychological effects of gender-related violence discussed above, as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

PTSD is not a recent phenomenon. Descriptions of traumatised soldiers in the post First and Second World War periods for example, were reported under various names including, shell shock, gross stress reaction, combat exhaustion or stress, battle fatigue and disorderly actions of the heat and combat (Allodi, 1990:248; Ursano, Fullerton and McCaughey, 1994:7). PTSD is also not the only kind of psychiatric condition resulting from exposure to a traumatic event. Depression, generalised anxiety disorder, and substance abuse have been well documented as reactions to traumatic events (Ursano, Fullerton and McCaughey, 1994:8). Nonetheless, PTSD is generally described as,

a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have been

begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event (Caruth, 1995:4).

Some form of a stress reaction is normal for individuals who have experienced a disastrous or traumatic event where they have been placed in situations that are unusual, frightening or unexpected. Where this acute stress reaction develops into a chronic condition leaving the individual vulnerable to a whole range of physical and psychological disorders, however, the difference between the normal psychological and physiological components of an acute reaction to trauma and the chronic nature of PTSD is differentiated (MacDonald, 1996:40). In fact, according to new DSM-IV guidelines, an acute response to trauma which occurs during or immediately after the event and which is resolved within 4 weeks can now be diagnosed as an Acute Stress Disorder. PTSD is hence diagnosed when characteristic symptoms occur for longer than one month (ibid.:44).

Diagnostic criteria are listed in the DSM-IV under the following sections: (a) the stressor (describing the nature of the traumatic stressor); (b) re-experiencing the trauma (lists five ways in which the traumatic event will be re-experienced); (c) avoidance of behaviour and numbing of responsiveness (lists seven symptoms of avoidance or numbing); (d) increased arousal (lists five types of symptoms of increased arousal); (e) duration of the disorders (persistence of the symptoms outlined in sections b, c, and d for more than one month after the traumatic event has occurred - if symptoms are experienced at least six months after the trauma, a diagnosis of delayed-onset PTSD may be given); (f) functional impairment (impairment of occupational, social or other important areas of functioning (a new category introduced with DSM-IV) (American Psychiatric Association, 1994 cited in MacDonald, 1996:45-50).

Diagnosis of PTSD is made if an individual is shown to experience a certain number of symptoms per section. In the case of section (b) for example, an individual must experience the traumatic event in at least one of the following ways: recurrent and intrusive distressing recollections, recurrent distressing dreams, dissociate reactions (hallucinations, flashbacks), exposure to internal or external cues that symbolise or resemble an aspect of the trauma (anniversaries of the event) and physiological

reactivity to thoughts and events that relate to the trauma (high blood pressure, high temperature) (American Psychiatric Association, 1994 cited in *ibid.*:46-47).

Despite PTSD's usage as a primary diagnostic category for victims of trauma (*ibid.*:41; Shalev, 1994:202), and despite the adaptations and revisions of the criteria listed above to reflect current trends in trauma research, the primacy of PTSD in the context of trauma, remains highly contentious. One of the most common criticisms given by feminist therapists of PTSD, as we shall see below, is that its rigid classificatory nature is essentially androcentric and reflects dominant heteropatriarchal discourses in Western societies.

Prior to the publication of DSM-IV by the American Psychiatric Association in 1994, for example, the defining characteristic of trauma in relation to the traumatic stressor (Criterion A) was that this stressor had to be 'an event outside the range of human experience' (see for example, American Psychiatric Association, 1987). Brown (1995:101; see also Herman, 1997: 33), argues, however, that many events which cause psychic pain in women are not in fact outside the range of human experience for those women. In discussing the 'ordinariness' of 'secret trauma', that is trauma which occurs in private, behind closed doors, or in the dead of the night, Brown states that in the case of rape (by friends or lovers or relatives), incest, battery and sexual harassment,

They are the experiences that could happen in the life of any girl or women ... today. They are experiences to which women accommodate; potentials for which women make room in their lives and their psyches. They are private events, sometimes known only to victim and perpetrator (1995:101).

By failing to recognise the traumatic nature of such stressors, Brown concludes that therapists, both men and women, are themselves perpetrators of a heteropatriarchal discourse. This discourse renders the very real threat and presence of trauma which occurs in the lives of subordinated groups (girls and women of all colours, working-class people, gay men and women, people with disabilities, and men of colour in the US) as, 'a continuing background noise rather than an unusual event' (1995:102-103).

This lack of recognition of the traumatic nature of many types of violence inflicted on women and other marginalised groups in Western societies is, furthermore, complicit of heteropatriarchal power relations between men and women in society, maintained, amongst other methods, by the myth of the 'willing victim of interpersonal violence'. A victim of a natural disaster for example, is more likely to be treated by mental health professionals like 'an innocent victim of a random event'. The woman victim of interpersonal violence, on the contrary, is often assumed to have played a part or contributed to her problem (Brown, 1995:102,105).⁴³

The most recent volume of the DSM, (DSM-IV), has modified the nature of a trauma or stressor to denote an 'event or events that involve actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of oneself or others' and has thus adapted itself to deal with some of the concerns raised by feminist therapists. It still fails, however, according to some critics, because of its limited nature. How can one diagnosis, Brown questions, adequately describe, 'all the interpersonal and interpsychic effects of trauma?' (1995:111). Brown also feels that the DSM-IV revision has fallen short of finding a diagnosis which would describe the effects on an individual of repetitive exposure to victimisation and interpersonal violence, the experience of many women victims of psychic trauma.

Cultural criticisms of PTSD, particularly in the case of trauma arising from political violence, follow similar trajectories. Arthur Kleinman (1995), an anthropologist who has written extensively on cultural approaches to mental health, has summarised the problems of applying an essentially Western classification of trauma (PTSD) onto those individuals suffering from the experience of political violence, as follows. Firstly, in defining a traumatic event as something which is 'outside the range of human experience'. Kleinman draws our attention to the ethnocentrism inherent in the classification of traumatic events in the official text (here Kleinman is referring to DSM-III-R):

⁴³ In a recent court case in Italy for example, a man was found not guilty on the charge of raping a young woman in his taxi. The judge ruled that as the woman was wearing jeans she could not be treated as a rape victim given the assistance she would have had to provide to remove her jeans.

given the downright common, even routine experience of political violence in many parts of the world, the idea of what is usual sounds suspiciously ethnocentric, even provincially middle class and middle Western. Indeed, the text itself says that 'stress ...would be markedly distressing to almost anyone'. But what is a common stressor under conditions that obtain in Bosnia, Haiti, Colombia, or even South Central Los Angeles may seem remarkably uncommon in Cambridge or the upper eastside of Manhattan (1995:179).

Secondly, and very much related to the above ethnocentrism, Kleinman takes cause with the strong emphasis placed on the individual sufferer of PTSD at the expense of the social consequences of collective violence. As the experience of political trauma is clearly an interpersonal event involving the breaking of familial and personal bonds, lost relationships, collective fear and the assault on respect and loyalty amongst friends and family, it is basically erroneous to focus on the emotional responses of the individual when 'the physiology of trauma is as much a result of social trauma as it is an entity unto itself' (1995:180).

Thirdly, Kleinman finds the emphasis on the *persistence* of traumatic symptoms in PTSD's diagnostic criteria equally troubling. The notion that the continuation of traumatic symptoms denotes a pathological rather than a normal response to suffering relies too heavily on what can be seen as a pivotal American ideology: that suffering cannot be endured and must be brought to an end. In reality, however, suffering is endured by not only the millions of poor people worldwide who seem to live through the unendurable, but also, by the middle-classes whose privileged status cannot prevent them from experiencing some forms of suffering. Instead of erasing the memories of trauma then, Kleinman suggests that these memories need to be 'worked with' and even 'commemorated' as the 'commemoration of collective trauma is one of the means by which societies remember' (1995:180).

Finally, and by way of conclusion, Kleinman (1995:182) argues that the medicalisation of political trauma through the diagnostic category of PTSD, 'violates the experience of that trauma'. By turning those individuals who have experienced political trauma into patients who are suffering a disease, we, albeit unintentionally, 'remove the human context of trauma as the chief focus for understanding violence' (ibid.). People who experience political violence are often the victims of a political project which

intentionally aims to harm the population. Thus, while these individuals do suffer traumatic symptoms as a result of this systematic harming, can we really say that they are suffering a disease?

Constructing such trauma in the terms of a disease model, also disallows for the varied responses to political violence that occur throughout the world. The victims of political violence are often highly active in resisting such violence, or in other cases, the dynamics of their local worlds result in victims contributing to their own problems. Whatever the case may be, it is essential that political trauma be seen as an experience that is.

more than and different from a disease condition even though it has physiological effects ... the political process is central to the appropriation of the images of suffering as it is to the experience of suffering. The experience itself is characteristically cultural, elaborated in ways that differ from its development in other societies (Kleinman, 1995:185).

Thus, while there are obvious limitations with using the criteria of PTSD to describe the impact of gender-related violence on women, families, and on society in general, this should not detract from the fact that the trauma of gender-related violence in Latin America is a massive health concern. Given this fact, the healing of such trauma must be a priority for Gender and Development practice in those countries in Latin America which have experienced political conflict of the kind described in this chapter.

The next section examines the priorities of Gender and Development practice in the healing of trauma in post-conflict environments and presents a model of healing that aims to empower women to reconstruct their experiences of trauma and to change their lives at personal, familial, community and societal levels.

Gender and Development in Post-Conflict Environments

While there is very little literature in the Gender and Development field which deals specifically with the healing of trauma in post-conflict environments, there is, nevertheless, implicit acknowledgment in this small body of literature, of the need to address the impact of trauma resulting from gender-related violence in political conflict. This impact is seen as a mental health matter, particularly concerning women refugees and more recently, children (El-Bushra and Piza Lopez, 1993:8; El-Bushra and Piza Lopez, 1994; McLachan, 1993:14; Wallace, 1993:22; Sancho-Liao, 1993:36; Richters, 1994:61; Buwalda, 1996: 61-68; Shackman and Reynolds, 1996: 69-77; Summerfield, 1996:88; El-Bushra and Mukarubuga, 1995:22).

These concerns, be they the many physical and psychological symptoms mentioned above, or situated cultural constructions of changes in mental health status,⁴⁴ are seen as being stumbling blocks to women's participation in post-conflict development reconstruction in the same way that violence against women in general, impedes development (El-Bushra and Piza Lopez, 1993:4-5; El-Bushra and Mukarubuga, 1995:17; Carrillo, 1991; Richters, 1994:150-151). Often, the issue of mental health is referenced in relation to practical strategies for dealing with victims of gender-related violence in conflict (El-Bushra and Piza Lopez, 1994; Shackman and Reynolds, 1996:69-77; Summerfield, 1996:85-89), or, as has also been the case, the healing of trauma is seen as a human rights issue (Richters, 1994:143).

Thus, mental health, or the healing of trauma in post-conflict environments does not need to be viewed as an issue of concern only to those in the mental health profession.

⁴⁴ For Afghan women, this has meant not going out to social occasions or not enjoying these occasions (McLachan, 1993:14).

As the above brief review of the development literature clearly shows, mental health is a development issue. Given this fact, questions immediately arise as to the kinds of strategies that could be used to aid societies in healing the wounds created by conflict.

While it is both inappropriate (due to the essentialism of such a undertaking) and beyond the scope of this thesis to present an all encompassing strategy to deal with the myriad effects of gender-related violence across cultures and nations, the following section nonetheless, reviews some additional development literature on strategies for healing and, in light of the gap in such literature on gender-focused strategies, presents a framework for approaching healing which could form a part of gender and development practice in the post-conflict environments of Latin America.

Healing the Wounds of Gender-Related Violence

The development literature gives us some pointers on how to heal the wounds of gender-related violence. Summerfield (1996:87) states, for example, that it is crucial at the onset for development workers to reflect on their own assumptions about the personal impact of conflict. Western notions of the universality of trauma and the need for psychological treatment of this trauma, may not be appropriate in developing country settings, as, 'every culture has its own constructions of traumatic events and recipes for recovery' (ibid: see also Sugar, Kleinman and Heggerbougen, 1994:72; Kleinman, 1995:173-189). Conflict obviously causes suffering and distress, but only small minorities of victims of conflict develop 'mental illness' and require psychological treatment. Thus, as Summerfield (ibid.) and Richters (1994:158) respectively conclude:⁴⁵

Interventions should not use a (mental) aid-and-relief model, addressing 'psychology', but a social development model, addressing 'suffering'.

[Notwithstanding the fact that] ... women's suffering due to gender violence is finally receiving the attention from health workers which was lacking in the past, the placing of this suffering within the realms of psychology should not be pushed too far.

⁴⁵ See also Ball (1991:266) and Paltiel (1993:211).

That is not to say, however, that the myth that women's mental health is a luxury concern, or, is an issue for wealthy countries, should be equally embraced (Paltiel, 1993:197). While a global review of women and mental health has concluded that women are excellent copers despite their subordination, economic deprivation and lack of control over their life circumstances, the needs of women who are suffering the impacts of gender-related violence still must be addressed (Paltiel, 1987). In fact, as Paltiel (1993:197) further observes, the United Nations Conference on Women held in Nairobi (1985) was instrumental in revealing the importance of well-being for women through its exposition of the range of initiatives women had instituted for themselves in this area.

Nonetheless, as conflict results in the shattering of the social fabric of society, interventions which attempt to reconstitute a sense of community, rather than the treatment of a 'mentally ill' individual, would be more helpful in this regard (Summerfield, 1996:87; Desjarlais, Eisenberg, Good and Kleinman *et al.*, 1995:131). Socially based interventions also acknowledge the ethos of fear and violence that persists in post-conflict societies and this acknowledgment ensures that the social harm of political conflict, 'from the demoralisation of society to the dislocation of entire communities', is not delegitimised or neglected (Desjarlais, Eisenberg, Good and Kleinman *et al.*, 1995:134).

Here, therefore, the formation of social movements becomes a way of both reconstructing the militarised authoritarian state into an institution that is responsive to the needs of civil society and collectivising the shared experiences of women to gain the identity needed to initiate social change actions. Hence participation in social movements, even though it has the potential to be further responsible for the trauma experienced by women, can also act to heal these wounds.

Being part of a social movement, in addition, enables women to more readily elaborate on their traumatic experiences as it is through participation that they gain a sense of the importance of links beyond the family (Hollander, 1996:74). A woman may experience healing through participation in social movements then, because,

her loss is no longer individualised, detached from its historical context and from the collective process but is now part of the political struggle which produced it and can now potentiate its reparation It is this transcendence of isolation and this commitment to act as historical agents that many Argentine mental health professionals believe is essential to the resolution of the pathological effects of state-induced trauma (Hollander, 1996:74).

In Mexico, for example, the coming together of Guatemalan refugee women searching for ways of coping with the problems they face as refugees, has led to a political understanding of their 'brokenheartedness' (a word they use to describe the most tangible and most persistent characteristic of their refugee experiences) and an awareness of how they might contribute to social change in Guatemala (Ball, 1991:263-267). Similarly in Chile, the formation of survivors groups has enabled families to de-privatise their suffering. In such groups violated families find not only the opportunity to form new family and social networks, but also, a platform for political commitment and work (Agger and Jenson, 1996:146).

A related way of approaching healing, particularly in the Latin American context, has been in *testimonio*, or, in the giving of testimony (Agger, 1994:115). As Agger (*ibid*) stresses:⁴⁶

To transform the feeling of being guilty and impure, to 'make the ugly beautiful', is one of the most important themes for victims of violence, whether it is the silent violence in the family, incest, rape or organized political violence.

Richters, (1994:68) furthermore, describes the importance of this approach to healing for women. Through the process of giving testimony, women have the opportunity to challenge entrenched power structures and to rebuild the moral and social order for themselves and for their communities:

By testifying, they assert the dignity and the innocence of the entire victimised community. Insisting that their personal histories can only be understood in the context of massive social destruction, women from beleaguered groups who speak out manage to recover pieces of their personal and social identity which

⁴⁶ See also Laub (1995:70) and Aron (1992).

have been whittled away by persistent repression Testimonio's subjective account of what has occurred contributes significantly to sustaining the community's 'truth' of what has happened as opposed to the official 'truth'. And the act of testifying is highly salutary for people's mental health, a form of sociotherapy, healing wounds of social trauma inflicted by the terrorist state (Richters, 1994:68).

The creation of a safe space is crucial for the giving of testimony, especially for women, who, as victims of gender-related violence, may feel responsible for the violence inflicted upon them, or, may be constrained by the sexual taboo inherent in Latin American societies. A conspiracy of silence may also occur where women feel so disempowered that they view their experiences as unworthy of public hearing. Whatever the case, what emerges clearly from the development literature, is the need to approach healing in post-conflict environments in culturally sensitive ways, and in ways which build on communities' own capacities (Richters, 1994:67; Summerfield, 1996; Paltiel, 1993:210).

Recently, the need to include psychosocial aspects of health in Primary Health Care programmes has also been referenced in the development literature (Paltiel, 1993:211). As the World Health Organisation's (WHO) definition of health assigns mental well-being as one of the central elements of health, the prevention of mental illness and the promotion of mental well-being become important elements in the quest for 'health for all' (Costa e Silva, 1998:8). The former Secretary General of the United Nations, Mr Boutros Boutros-Ghali, has stated for example, that,

It is time for mental health problems to be seen by the international community as what they are: a threat to individual well-being and a threat to peace and development worldwide The challenge is to combine concern for mental health issues and humanitarian assistance and protection efforts. Development policies must incorporate a concern for the protection and promotion of mental health (cited in Costa e Silva, 1998:8).

In the context of primary health care programmes, that is health care programmes designed to promote 'essential health care that is accessible, practical, scientifically sound and socially acceptable' (WHO, cited in Costa e Silva, 1998:9), mental health is beginning to be seen as an integral part to the promotion of health care. In the

developing world, the incorporation of mental health into existing primary health care programmes can act both as a way of providing an identifiable level of basic mental health care to targeted population groups and as a primary method of delivering mental health care free from the problems associated with institutional and professional delivery systems often found in the developed world (Murthy, 1998:127).

Despite these and other insights discussed above, it seems, however, to be generally accepted that there is a dearth of information on, not only the impact of conflict on women, but also, on gender-sensitive approaches to healing this impact (El-Bushra and Mukarubuga, 1995:20; Richters, 1994:158; Turshen, 1998:18; Wallace, 1993:22; Kirkwood, 1994:90; Byrne, 1996:38). In view of this, the following approach to healing is presented, and could act as a conceptual tool or theoretical framework for gender and development practice in the post-conflict environments of Latin America.

An Approach to Healing

Given the disempowerment that has resulted from the trauma of gender related violence in Latin America, an approach to healing such trauma must centre on the notion of empowerment. While this may seem an obvious corollary to our discussion thus far, with the exception of Jane Stein's (1997) comprehensive study of empowerment and women's health in international development (defined in a holistic sense to include physical, psychological, socioeconomic and cultural factors), very few commentators in the field of health and development seem to have made this linkage.

Stein's work has shown us that there is an obvious linkage between strategies which support an empowerment approach to underdevelopment in the Third World and an improvement in women's health. Such a linkage, Stein (1997:244-256) concludes, is based on the following key points:

- Structural adjustment policies and economic development have impacted negatively on women's situations and this has in turn impacted negatively on their health and well-being. Simultaneously this poor health has made their lives even more difficult.

- Empowerment as a strategy, is designed to redistribute power and reduce inequity. Women in particular are using this strategy to improve their situations.
- Reducing inequity and increasing women's power and status, may mitigate the negative impact of development on women.
- Women's health is a phenomenon that is poorly understood and has only recently received attention in the developing world.
- Health is a complicated interdependent web of factors, none of which can be viewed in isolation.
- Inequity is integrally related to health because of its relation to other factors, especially those which are related to societal organisation and psychosocial factors.
- Empowerment can improve women's health by improving women's situations, by reducing inequity, and by interacting positively with other factors that affect health.
- A framework for reformulating our view of health from pathogenic (origins of disease) to salutogenic (origins of health), would link together development and women's situation, and empowerment and health. This must be done in a way that includes historical, political, economic, cultural, social and local circumstances, and in a way that adopts a non-linear, non-reductionist, dialectical approach to understanding complex issues.

In the field of psychology, feminist therapists and others have long recognised the need for empowerment in their dealings with the survivors of traumatic experiences. In her comprehensive analysis on the aftermath of violence (from domestic abuse to political terror), for example, Judith Herman (1997:133) has stated that as 'the core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others Recovery is based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of a new

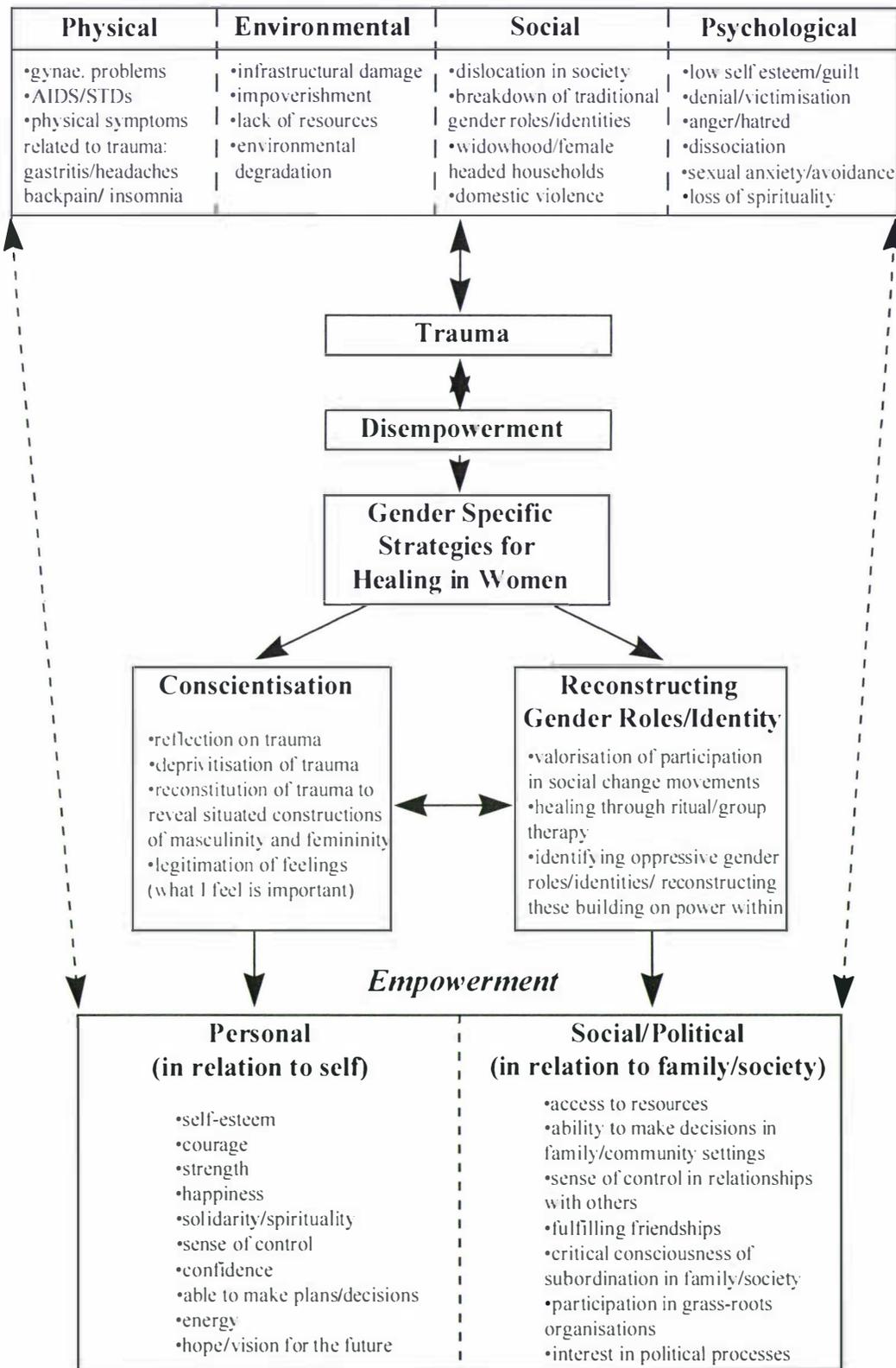
connections'. Herman's stages of recovery - a healing relationship, safety, remembrance and mourning, reconnection, and commonality - all integrate empowerment principles to accomplish the complete recovery of the survivor (Herman, 1997).

With the advent of the women's movement in North America, feminists began to use the therapeutic process specifically to empower women, particularly those who were survivors of sexual assault. Here, feminist understandings of sexual assault empowered women to break the silence of sexual violence against women and to take collective action (Herman, 1997:29). Empowerment in the therapeutic process is thus achieved through the formation of more egalitarian relations between patients and therapists: the recognition of self-esteem, expression, and cultural and socioeconomic aspects of feelings; and, the support of aspirations and healthy social relationships in the lives of patients (Paltiel, 1993:211).⁴⁷

With the above linkages between empowerment health and development in mind, we could argue that an empowerment approach to healing the trauma of gender-related violence would not only benefit those who are participating in such a process, but also, because of the further linkages between empowerment and societal factors, contribute to the well-being of society. In view of this argument, an approach to healing for women in post-conflict Latin America is presented in the following model (Figure 3).

⁴⁷ While I acknowledge that there is a considerable literature base in psychology which discusses this issue, a detour into such a substantial theoretical paradigm would distract from the focus of this chapter, that is, the examination of empowerment as it has been conceptualised in the development literature. The reader is thus directed to Brown, (1986:13-26) for a specific example of a feminist empowerment approach to the healing of the trauma experienced by a ex-Vietnam nurse, and McLeod (1994) and Worell and Remer (1992) for a more general insight into the practical and theoretical implications of the empowerment approach in therapy and counselling.

Impacts of Gender-Related Violence for Women in Latin America



Source: Adapted from Rowlands (1997), Friedmann (1992), Stein (1997), and Fieldwork interviews/ observations

Beginning at the top of Figure 3, we can see how gender-related violence against women in Latin America has physical, environmental, social and psychological impacts. To emphasise that these impacts are interrelated, however, dashed lines have been used to divide them. These impacts, while contributing to trauma and thus disempowerment, can also lead to empowerment at individual, social and political levels. This is the case because such violence, by invading the private sphere, leads to a breakdown in traditional gender roles, motivating women to mobilise in defence of the space of which they have traditionally been held responsible.

To represent this relationship, a dashed line is drawn with arrows leading directly from the impact box to the empowerment box at the bottom of the model and vice versa. This highlights the fact that empowerment cannot be seen as an evolutionary process and that it too is responsible for the perpetuation of gender-related violence against women because of the conflict engendered by those empowered women who challenge the status-quo. A dashed line has been chosen, nonetheless, to emphasise that while these relationships do exist, there are many occasions when they do not.

As with the impacts of gender-related violence, moreover, the levels of empowerment shown in the model are also interrelated. While for the sake of clarity, empowerment has been delineated into personal and social/political levels, the reality for many women in Latin America is that changes relating to the self such as strength and a sense of control, are simultaneously social and political. Here again we are reminded of the feminist maxim, 'the personal is political'.

When we are confronted with the disempowerment of women resulting from gender-related violence, strategies for healing such suffering are called for. Due to the experiences of gender-related violence for women in Latin America a strategy for healing needs to assist women to draw on 'power from within', 'power with' and 'power to' so that they are able to heal themselves and consequently their societies in ways which will contribute to the breaking down of the very same patriarchal structures (militarisation, authoritarianism, *machismo*) from which their disempowerment has arisen. Before this can be done, however, Latin American women need to be aware of the nature of their disempowerment.

Conscientisation, or reflection on their trauma may contribute to this awareness. If trauma is reconstituted as a political rather than a personal experience, and if this reconstitution simultaneously reveals the gendered nature of the political violence suffered by Latin American women, an understanding of disempowerment as well as the potential for healing the pain of such trauma must be more likely. It is important also to acknowledge during this processes of conscientisation, the importance or legitimacy of the emotions women are feeling.

Thus, with an increased awareness of the gendered and political nature of their disempowerment, Latin American women can begin to heal their trauma. Through various rituals and therapeutic tools, they can build on the aforementioned three forms of power to reconstruct the oppressive gendered roles/identities that have subordinated them for centuries, into ones that can lead to positive and sustained development for themselves and their societies.

Summary

Chapter Four, through its discussion on trauma and healing of the psychological effects of gender-related violence, has established the importance of mental health programmes for women in post-conflict Latin America. Rather than placing this trauma and its subsequent strategies for healing in the context of Western disease models, however, Chapter Four has shown that the trauma of gender-related violence in Latin America is primarily psychosocial in character. Given this effect, an approach to healing for women should be rooted in the notion of empowerment, enabling Latin American women to pursue individual and collective strategies for social change in ways that are appropriate to the political and cultural nature of their trauma.

Thus far, this thesis has focused on the theoretical underpinnings of the work of Las Dignas in gender and development practice. The next chapter, which reviews the methodological approach employed in my research with Las Dignas, represents the

beginning of the second part of this thesis, that is, a presentation of the findings of my own research and the subsequent answering of my research question

Chapter Five - Method in the Madness

Introduction

In July 1997, I crossed the border into El Salvador to begin my fieldwork. After talking about 'doing research' in El Salvador for over two years, I was finally there. Intense nervousness and fear surged through me as I looked out my bus window in an attempt to assimilate aspects of this new environment I would call home for the next seven months. I looked at the rural houses with their red tiled roofs and adobe walls, the political graffiti that coloured every street corner, the half starved dogs and the people who walked nonchalantly along the Pan-American highway as our bus sped by. Despite what I believed to be my 'extensive' experience with travelling in the developing world, nothing could have really prepared me for the shock wrought by attempting to undertake research with a poor knowledge of the vernacular in a country still reeling from 12 years of civil war. At times, therefore, my research felt like a kind of madness.

As one of the few New Zealanders to have conducted research in El Salvador, I discovered that being from a country with seemingly no geo-political ties to El Salvador did not preclude me from experiencing the warmth and friendship of the Salvadoran people. By the same token, my 'positionality' as a white western feminist researcher seemed to matter little to the women who in their kindness and generosity, offered me a unique opportunity to learn about their lives. Thus, insofar as my research experience was a kind of madness, it was a madness that enriched and enabled me. In terms of my own ability as a researcher, I found the experience very empowering. From what was expressed to me during the course of my fieldwork, I believe many of my research participants also felt some sense of empowerment as a result of the research process.

Chapter Five, through its discussion of methodology, will chart the process of my research. Beginning with a critical review of feminist research epistemologies, it will identify aspects of feminist research which I chose to draw upon prior to entering the

field. Following through with the notion of process, Chapter Five will then examine how these methods were simultaneously used and adapted once I entered the field, and the dilemmas and debates which arose from this. A discussion on the empowering potential of the research process will form the last section. Chapter Five will thus show that a form of method was employed in the sometimes mad world in which I conducted my feminist research.

Feminist Research

What is Feminist Research?

To state that feminist research is research 'about women', is to tell a half truth. Certainly in the early days of my research process, I believed that this was so. After spending almost a year reading the considerable literature on feminist research, however, it became more and more difficult to retain such a simplistic view. While feminist research is, in part, research 'about women' or about women's experiences, its primary focus has been in charting these experiences in the context of political struggles (Harding, 1987:8). What is at issue in feminist research is, therefore, an understanding of gender as crucial in constructing social relations in any given society. Women's experiences are not isolated and cannot be researched in a vacuum. They are instead, 'located ... in society and history ... [and] ... embedded within a set of social relations which produce both the possibilities and the limitations of that experience' (Acker, Barry and Esseveld, 1991:135).

Liberation, then, emerges as an essential element of feminist research. Research is feminist precisely because it works to 'end the social and economic conditions that oppress women and the achievement of a free society' (Acker, Barry and Esseveld, 1991:134). Theory and method are reconstructed in feminist research in ways which aim to transform gendered power relations (Staeheli and Lawson, 1995: 333). Hence, feminist research is action orientated or in the much quoted words of Dorothy Smith (1979), it is research *for* women because the researcher is actively involved in the fight

against patriarchy (Allen and Baber, 1992:2). In this vein, feminist research cannot be separated from the goals and activities of the women's movement. In fact, as Mies (1991:61) has stated, feminist research was made possible because of this social movement.

To this principle of action orientation, Fonow and Cook (1991:2-12) have added three other themes or goals common in feminist research processes.⁴⁸ Firstly, feminist scholarship has emphasised reflexivity (England, 1994:81). In order for research to be a process rather than a fixed event, researchers have been called on to critically examine, reflect and explore analytically every aspect of their 'temporally, intellectually, politically and emotionally grounded understandings of research' (Stanley and Wise, 1990:23). Reflexivity, that 'self-critical sympathetic introspection and ... self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as researcher' (England, 1994:82), thus allows for both the research question and the methods used to be constantly re-evaluated and transformed.

Secondly, feminist scholarship has stressed the need to give attention to the emotional components of research, an aspect particularly pertinent to my own research project (Powell, 1996:1). In a radical break from the objectivity of positivism, feminist research uses the emotions generated in the field to inform the reflective process (Fonow and Cook, 1991: 10-11). Feminist research denies positivism's objective/subjective dichotomy and 'locates the researcher on the same critical plane as the experiencing, researching, theorising people she [sic] deals with.' (Stanley, 1991:205).⁴⁹ Rather than rendering feminist research less valid than traditional social inquiry then, it can be argued that attention to the subjective in the research process actually increases its validity:⁵⁰

⁴⁸ See also Mies (1983:117-139) and Allen and Baber (1992:2), for brief descriptions on the uniqueness of feminist research.

⁴⁹ There is some debate in the literature on the paucity of men conducting feminist research (see for example, Reinharz, 1992:14-17; Scheyvens and Leslie, 1999, forthcoming). While I feel this is an important area of discussion, it is not directly related to my research project and thus will not be discussed in this thesis. Hence the use of the conciliatory binary she/he when referring to the feminist researcher. It should be acknowledged, however, that both men and women can be participants in a feminist research project (Reinharz, 1992:142).

⁵⁰ See also Roberts (1981:16), The Personal Narratives Group (1989a:201) and Powell (1996:1).

the beliefs and behaviours of the researcher are part of the empirical evidence for (or against) the claims advanced in the results of research. This evidence too must be open to critical scrutiny no less than what is traditionally defined as relevant research. Introducing this "subjective" element into the analysis in fact increases the objectivity of research and decreases the "objectivism" which hides this kind of evidence from the public (Harding, 1987:9)

To deny the existence of emotion in the multitude of relationships formed during the research process is also, I believe, to commit an injustice to one's self and one's research participants. The expression of emotion in, for instance, an interview situation, allows for that much needed reciprocity that is another cornerstone of feminist inquiry (England, 1994:82). For research participants agonising over the disclosure of some kind of traumatic event, the sight of a researcher's stony face must be a reflection on the researcher's commitment (or lack of) to making these experiences visible. Personal involvement is not therefore, a dangerous bias, but one of the mechanisms by which people get to know each other and allow each other to enter the private worlds that constitute their lives (Oakley, 1981: 58).

Personal involvement, and the emotions it triggers, is also a way of protecting participants from harm in the research process. Feeling guilty, embarrassed, or even shameful is a positive thing in that it ensures that we as researchers do not go too far and place participants in a situation which could be potentially disastrous (Josselson, 1996:70). In the final analysis, emotion is not only crucial to the 'success' of research projects then, but also, to the action-orientation of feminist research itself:

Time spent in analysing emotions and uncovering their sources should be viewed, therefore, as neither irrelevant to theoretical investigation nor even as a pre-requisite for it; it is not a kind of clearing of the emotional decks ... it is necessary to our theoretical investigation. Critical reflection on emotion is not a self-indulgent substitute for political analysis and political action. It is, itself, a kind of political theory and political practice, indispensable for an adequate social theory and social transformation (Jagger, 1992:136).

Finally, feminist research makes use of the situation at hand. Feminist researchers use the 'taken for granted' or the mundane aspects of everyday life as study topics because it is precisely these routine aspects that act to sustain gender inequalities (Fonow and Cook, 1991:11). Feminist researchers are also adept at recognising the research

potential of 'unforeseen settings to study otherwise-hidden processes' (ibid:12). This innovatory strategy is particularly useful when researching in settings where there may be limited access to records, people and activities. Thus, making use of the situation at hand may be nothing short of a survival mechanism for feminist researchers (ibid:13)

To understand why feminist research has emphasised the above commonalities, however, it is necessary to be cognisant with the historical roots of feminist research and in particular, the epistemological challenge by feminism to the very nature of social scientific inquiry. Below we take up this task.

Historical Roots of Feminist Research and Ways of Knowing

Feminist epistemological positions, or theories of knowledge, stem from fundamental critiques of the positivist way knowledge has been traditionally produced in social scientific disciplines (Bernard, 1973).⁵¹ While feminist critiques of research practices have roots that extend back into the 19th century (Reinharz, 1992:12), over the past two decades feminists have been especially active in advancing a multitude of evidence on the masculine bias present in traditional epistemologies (McDowell, 1992:409; Bordo, 1992:143; Klein, 1996:51). Not only have women's voices been absent from traditional scientific inquiry it is argued, but women's activities and interests have also been excluded as 'legitimate' areas of inquiry (Oakley, 1974:1-28; Harding, 1987:3; Westkott, 1990:59-60; Mies, 1991:60). Women have been silenced as agents of knowledge by men whose power and authority in the world of knowing has been preordained since the birth of modern science in the 16th century (Riger, 1992:730). From that time on science has sought to contain nature whose irrational or feminine side had the potential to annihilate all that was rational and objective (read 'good') in the world (Harding, 1986:125). For Francis Bacon for example, nature was a bride who not

⁵¹ While feminist critiques of traditional research follow general critiques of positivism such as those raised by phenomenological approaches, feminist critique is unique in the way it 'addresses political and ethical considerations head on, as all research is located within an ideological and structural context' (Powell, 1996:4; see also Mattingly and Falconer-Al-Hindi, 1995: 428). Nonetheless, feminist epistemologies can be seen to have followed the critical tradition in the way they have rejected the possibility of 'objective knowledge' (Nielson, 1990:9).

only needed to be 'tamed', 'shaped' and 'subdued' by the scientific mind, but even more radically, 'enslaved' for the service of truth (Fox Keller, 1985:36),

Where traditional social scientific inquiry has focused on women it has been in ways that have emphasised the biological determinism of female behaviour and personality in relation to that of men (Stanley, 1984:194). As a consequence of this focus, Stanley further stresses, 'women's lives and experiences are often treated as less than fully human because ... [they are] ... different from the assumed norm of male experience' (ibid.). Early studies on women in psychology, for instance, ignored the socio-cultural context in which behaviour is constructed in favour of an experimental approach. With social and historical factors conveniently bypassed, psychological research has therefore been well placed to attribute causes to biological factors inside the subject (Riger, 1992:731). These biological factors are then constructed as 'natural', relegated to the social relations of reproduction or the 'private sphere' and never spoken of again (Hartsock, 1983:231-251; Nicholson, 1984:221-230; Harding, 1986:86).

Feminism's greatest challenge to traditional social scientific epistemologies has thus been in its deconstruction of biological determinism in research about women, and in its redefinition of the 'personal as the political' (Nicholson, 1984:225; McDowell, 1992:409). Feminist scholarship has responded to traditional social scientific epistemologies, however in a multitude of ways. Harding (1986:24-29) has labelled some of these ways of knowing as feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint science and feminist postmodernism. Feminist empiricism, the first approach mooted in this trilogy of feminist thought, maintains that sexism and androcentrism in social scientific inquiry are the bias of individual knowers. To eliminate this bias, a stricter application of already existing methods is thus recommended (Hawkesworth, 1989:535; Moss, 1995:443). Hence, feminist empiricism does not reject experimentation or other positivist scientific methods *per se*, but rather, the erroneous way in which these methods have traditionally been applied in research with women (Riger, 1992:732; Mattingly and Falconer-Al-Hindi, 1995:429).

Feminist standpoint science, however, denies that there could ever be an unmediated truth about the world as knowledge is always mediated by a host of factors relating to a

person's historical and socio-political standing (Hawkesworth, 1989:536). Standpoint epistemology, exemplified in the work of Nancy Hartsock (1983, 1987) and Dorothy Smith (1979, 1981), goes on to argue, nonetheless, that knowledge based on a person's *feminist* standpoint is more complete, and in fact scientifically preferable, precisely because it is less distorted (Stanley and Wise, 1990:27). As all knowledge is situated, women, because of their historically oppressed position in the world, are therefore more suitably placed than men to reveal aspects of gender bias and disadvantage (Mattingly and Falconer-Al-Hindi, 1995:431; Harding, 1986:25; Jagger, 1992:133; Hartsock, 1983: 231-251).

It is precisely this claim to a feminist 'standpoint', however, that has so incensed proponents of the third approach in Harding's trilogy of feminist thought, feminist postmodernism. By essentialising claims to knowledge or universalising white Western women as 'women', feminist postmodernists argue that feminist scholarship in general has become part of the problem rather than the solution (Reinharz, 1992: 12; Bell Hooks, 1981:121-122; Staeheli and Lawson, 1995:327). Denying women of colour agency, it is argued, is an overtly political act which serves, through its use of dichotomous oppositional constructs, to reinforce mechanisms of power and domination (Collins, 1986: 20-21; Kobayashi, 1994:77; Lorde, 1992:47-54; Marchard, 1995:58). Feminism's over-simplistic and ethnocentric focus has not only, therefore, made problematic the use of gender as an analytical category, but also, homogenised diversity and obscured particularity (Bordo, 1990:149-153 & 1992:143; Di Stefano, 1990:75; Lawson, 1995:453).

The more universal and essential feminist knowledge claims have been, it is further argued, the more likely they are to be false (Speldman, 1990:9). How is it possible, for example, to suggest that 'women have been treated *like* slaves' when some women *were* or still *are* slaves (ibid.)? Similarly, Gilkes (1986:57, cited in Reinharz, 1992:12) has pointed to the way in which white feminist scholarship has excluded research agendas of interest and importance to women of colour. 'Why is it', she states, 'that feminist scholarship has ignored the Church, the most important social setting that black people control?'. Thus, feminist postmodernism stresses a crucial need to come to terms with difference in all its multifaceted components (ethnicity, age, sexual preference and class

in the first instance)⁵² and, in the words of Hawkesworth (1989:536), ‘to use the situatedness of each finite observer in a particular socio-political, historical context to challenge the plausibility of claims that *any* perspective on the world could escape partiality’ (my emphasis).

The focus of much of feminist postmodern research thus has been in deconstruction. Ideas or social justices, the structures on which they are based and the language by which they are expressed, all become subject to criticism in the feminist postmodern project (Tong, 1989:219). Here text is the preferred ‘field’ of research, a safe site where some of the more problematic issues of face to face research can be avoided (Wolf, 1996:8).

I concur with many of the above tenets of postmodern feminism and agree that scholars such as Bell Hooks and Lorde have revolutionised feminist scholarship by not only their critiques of universal and oppressive feminist discourses but also, by their calls for a recognition of the multiplicity of feminist epistemologies (Wolf, 1996:6). Despite this, I share Hawkesworth’s (1989:557) concerns about the potential damage that such a focus on the particular and such a retreat to intertextuality has had, and continues to have, on concrete feminist issues and goals:⁵³

Postmodernism’s retreat to the text has a political dimension not altogether consonant with its self-proclaimed radicalism The abandonment of reason(s) is accompanied by a profound sense of resignation, a nihilist recognition that there is nothing to do because nothing can be done. At a moment when the preponderance of rational and moral argument sustains prescriptions for women’s equality, it is a bit too cruel a conclusion and too reactionary a political agenda to accept that reason is impotent, that equality is impossible. Should postmodernism’s seductive text gain ascendancy, it will not be an accident that power remains in the hands of the white males who currently possess it ... relativist resignation reinforces the status quo.

⁵² According to Harvey, (1996:342) even these categories can be problematic or viewed with suspicion by some postmodern scholars.

⁵³ See also Sayer and Storper (1997:5) and Moss (1995:445).

In addition, as I was set to spend the good part of a year engaged in fieldwork in El Salvador with women of not only a different colour and class, but also, of a different ethnicity to myself, I found the challenges by feminist postmodern epistemology particularly difficult to digest. Patai (1991:137) has suggested that the risk of exploitative and unethical research is multiplied when researching down, that is among groups that are less powerful than ourselves. As a white western middle class researcher, was it inappropriate, then, for me to conduct research in El Salvador altogether? This dilemma and many others consumed me as I prepared for my fieldwork. At times I felt it would be best to simply abandon my research project before my fieldwork had even begun. Were it not for the support from Las Dignas in El Salvador and the work of those feminist scholars who advocated what I see as 'middle-ground(s)' to some of the feminist epistemologies mentioned above, I believe this may have been the case. Below the work of these scholars, along with the dilemmas and debates inherent in the practice of cross-cultural feminist research, will be discussed.

Feminist Cross Cultural Research

While feminist scholars such as Hartsock (1987) imply that my standpoint as a woman oppressed by a patriarchal society, and the institutions that serve it, would posit me as an 'insider' when researching the lives of women in differing contexts to myself, since the early 1980s in those disciplines which have traditionally undertaken social research in the Third World, this claim to universal sisterhood has come increasingly under attack (Powell, 1996:7; Lorde, 1992:48; Chow, 1996:xx). Scholars in the fields of anthropology, sociology and geography, to name a few, have questioned the way in which cross-cultural research has not only failed to benefit Third World women, but has also, through its creation of neo-colonial discourses, essentialised and distorted their lives (Parpart and Marchand, 1995:7-8). Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991:53-54), one of the leading voices in this thematic, has argued, for example, that,

the assumptions of privilege and ethnocentric universality, on the one hand, and inadequate self-consciousness about the effect of Western scholarship on the "third world" in the context of a world system dominated by the West, on the other, characterise a sizeable extent of Western feminist work on women in the

third world ... [This leads] ... to a construction of a reductive and homogenous notion of what I call the "third world difference"- that stable ahistorical something that apparently oppresses most if not all the women in these countries. And it is in the production of this "third world difference" that Western feminisms appropriate and "colonize" the constitutive complexities which characterise the lives of women in these countries. It is in this process of discursive homogenization and systematization of the oppression of women in the third world that power is exercised in much of recent feminist discourse.

In a similar vein, England (1994:81; see also, Patai, 1991:137-153), has questioned whether it is possible to, 'incorporate the voices of "others" without colonizing them in a manner that reinforces patterns of domination'. Western feminist writers it is argued, have traditionally represented Third World women as objects, hapless victims of a particular socio-economic context which they are both unable (read politically immature) and uninterested (read bound to tradition) in changing (Mohanty, 1991:57; Ong, 1988:80-82). Such erroneous representations not only deny Third World women agency, but also, because this type of research may go on to inform policy, have the potential to further marginalise certain groups.⁵⁴ Finally, research with oppressed or marginalised women has the possibility of being exploitative, because, as Patai (1991:137) states, 'the utilization of others for one's own purposes ... is built into almost all research projects with living human beings'.

There are no easy answers to the issues posited by England. Mohanty and Patai. Abandoning the research endeavour altogether, as Staeheli and Lawson (1994:74) claim can happen with feminist researchers who question their relationships with places, people and contexts they study, is not, however, a particularly suitable course of action. Scholars such as Mohanty have raised these challenges not as a way of 'scaring off' western feminists from conducting research with Third World women (as this could paradoxically lead to a legitimisation of western feminists' ethnocentrism (Reinharz, 1992:121)), but rather, as Mohanty (1991:39) further explains, 'as an attempt to "pivot" the centre of feminist analysis, to suggest new beginnings and middles, and to argue for more finely honed historical and context-specific feminist methods'.

⁵⁴ The way in which development policy further marginalises women in poor groups in Third World nations was discussed in Chapter Two.

Researching women's lives in the Third World is, moreover, seen as a *necessary* political endeavour for some Western feminists. These feminists, and I include myself here, believe that such research, through its elucidation of disadvantage, can act to challenge the status quo by unsettling the power brokers within a given society as well as those others who may benefit from women's marginalised status (Scheyvens and Leslie, 1999: forthcoming). The 'power' western feminists hold in the research process, in terms of our ability to control the research agenda, define intervention and leave the research environment (Staeheli and Lawson, 1995:332; Wolf, 1996:1-55), can therefore be used to empower, rather than oppress, groups of women in the Third World. Is it not a good idea that 'we western feminists' who have access to funding, educational institutions and other resources, use these in a manner which enables groups of Third World women, who may not have this same access to resources, to engage in political acts aimed at improving their own lives? In this sense, I concur with Radcliffe (1994:28) and Patai, (1991:150) who respectively note that,

disclaiming the right to speak about/with Third World women acts ... to justify an abdication of responsibility with regard to global relations of privilege and authority which are granted whether we like it or not, to First World women (and men).

The world will not get better because we have sensitively apologized for our privilege; nor if, from the comfortable heights of the academy, we advertise our identification with the oppressed or compete for distinction as members of this or that oppressed group The fact that doing research across race, class, and culture is a messy business is no reason to contemplate only our difficulties and ourselves struggling with them.

Thus, it is possible to find middle ground(s) in the practice of feminist cross-cultural research that recognise the power relations inherent in our 'situatedness' without denying the research exercise itself. In their analyses on this theme, Katz, Kobayashi, England and Nast (1994), have reconciled some of the dilemmas of cross-cultural research in the notion of 'betweenness'. This 'betweenness', a space that is 'neither inside nor outside' (Mascia Lees *et al.*, 1989:33 in Katz, 1994:72) acknowledges the 'fact that we [as feminist researchers] can never *not* work with "others" who are separate and different from ourselves' (Nast, 1994:57). What we must do, therefore, in the words of Moss (1995:446), is to,

sort through our positionings and those of "others" in order to be able to build narratives inclusive of "others" while maintaining a commitment to root out false beliefs, wilful distortions, and untenable assumptions.

Similarly, Allen and Baber (1992:13) have suggested that it is possible, within the postmodern feminist project, to form alliances based on affinity rather than identity. Here, it would be appropriate for women of colour and white/Anglo women to work together on feminist projects if there is a common affinity, just as it would be appropriate for each group to work separately. Thus, emphasis should be on fluid associations that would allow us to work together to achieve a radical new understanding of gender, class and race relations.

Donna Haraway's (1991:191-192) 'politics and epistemology of location' also reiterates this need for fluidity in the research process. Progressing from feminist standpoint theory, Haraway states that if partiality rather than universality forms the basis for knowledge claims, then the possibility of 'sustained, rational [and] objective inquiry would exist'. Partial, locatable and critical knowledge sustains 'webs of connection' and it is these webs which provide the hope for the 'transformation of systems of knowledge and ways of seeing'.

In sum then, if we are to conduct feminist research in cross-cultural settings it is simply not good enough to rely on what Powell (1996:7) has labelled the 'cosy epistemologically essentialist and politically liberal standpoint' of the universal sisterhood. Rather, what we must do is to critically and self-consciously examine our positionality, not only in our face to face dealings with participants in the field, but also, in every step of the research process from pre-fieldwork arrangements to issues of authorship and representation of the thesis itself. What the challenges to feminist cross cultural research have achieved, therefore, is the production of feminist researchers, who according to Wolf (1996:6), can,

enter the field with their eyes open so that they can confront these contradictions and challenges without naiveté, and so that they can move on to the many compelling questions that still beg for research.

How we actually do this, that is, how we find this 'betweenness' or confront the contradictions and challenges of our research, however, will obviously depend on the kind of research techniques we choose to employ throughout the research process. After all, as Hodge (1995:426) has noted, '*how* we see determines *what* we see' (original emphasis). Below a discussion on the efficacy and the ethical nature of research techniques often used in feminist research will be given.

Research Techniques: 'Tools of the Trade'

If we hold with the principles of feminist research that call for a breaking down of the power relations inherent in the research endeavour, then the question we should first ask is, are there particular research techniques that beg use for these purposes?. While some feminist scholars such as Harding (1987:2, see also, Jayaratne and Stewart, 1991:101), have questioned the scholarly exercise of delineating a distinct 'feminist method', (it is argued for example that this process tends to detract from the real issue of discovering feminist methodologies and epistemologies), others have devoted considerable energy to discussions on research techniques that complement feminist ways of knowing in the social sciences. This discussion has not, however, produced a compendium of unique feminist research techniques. Rather, it has given us an opportunity to see the *ways* in which feminists use what Harding (ibid.) has called the 'three methods of social inquiry' (listening to participants, observing behaviour and examining historical records) to support the transformatory agenda of feminist research. As Reinharz, (1992:243) has observed: 'Feminism supplies the perspective and the disciplines supply the method'.

In this sense, feminist researchers have preferred qualitative techniques (Wolf: 1996:26; Jayaratne and Stewart, 1991:89). These techniques which can range from participant observation to participatory action research, are seen as more appropriate because they enable us 'substantively, ... [to] ... document the social power relations affecting gender and sexuality, and epistemologically, ... [to] ... open up the gendered construction of knowledge' (Lawson, 1995:450). Techniques that allow us to form relationships with participants make it more difficult for us to deny the emotional components of research,

and also give our participants the opportunity to be actively involved in the construction of research about their lives (ibid.). As we have seen in our earlier discussion, all these factors are crucial to the principles of feminist research.

This is not to say, however, that *only* qualitative techniques are appropriate for feminist research. Although feminist researchers have traditionally steered clear of quantitative techniques, charging them as masculine and therefore most suited to the production of positivist or androcentric knowledge (Mattingly and Falconer-Al-Hindi, 1995:427; Jayaratne and Stewart, 1991:85), in recent discussions, the efficacy of quantitative techniques for the achievement of feminist goals has gained momentum.

In a recent edition of the *Professional Geographer* (1995), for instance, Mattingly and Falconer-Al Hindi, McLafferty, Moss, Lawson and Rocheleau, have all argued for the appropriateness and indeed the *need* for combining quantitative and qualitative techniques in feminist research. Quantitative techniques, they argue, are useful for describing the 'extent of difference' between women and men and between groups of women themselves. They are also useful for those feminist projects that require authority (Mattingly and Falconer-Al-Hindi (1995:433) and can provide a 'sense of space' for qualitative techniques (McLafferty, 1995:439). Thus, quantitative techniques can identify aspects of people and place suitable for further in-depth qualitative study as well as (through their ability to summarise information across large areas and populations) elucidate where qualitative study 'fits' in social, economic and political terms (ibid; Moss, 1995:447). Finally, a combination of both traditions can act to break down the historical qualitative/quantitative dualism that has worked to obscure the commonalities inherent in the 'actual operations' of each set of techniques and to reify dichotomies that have proven inadequate (Lawson, 1995:451).

Rather than choosing techniques on the basis of their 'feminist nature' then, what we must do is to select techniques in relation to the research questions asked (Mattingly and Falconer-Al-Hindi, 1995:433), and importantly, I feel, in line with the ability of the researcher her/himself. As my research project was seeking to reveal the *specific* gender-related experiences of the recent civil war for *individual* Salvadoran women, and to illustrate the specific methods used by Las Dignas to assist these same women in the

reconstruction of their identities that had been altered or 'broken' from their traumatic experiences, I did not feel quantitative techniques would be appropriate for my research. Moreover, as someone who had spent a decade working as a nurse in a variety of settings, my experience in using qualitative techniques such as interviewing and observation, far outweighed my adequacy in using certain quantitative techniques such as statistical analysis. Thus, in this pre-fieldwork stage of my research process, I sought to examine qualitative techniques which would give me the tools to conduct feminist research in a cross-cultural setting.

One of the first techniques I examined was interviewing. This technique which has been utilised in social research for centuries has been adapted by feminist researchers in ways that reinforce the centrality of the subjective in the research process. Writing in 1981 for example, Anne Oakely challenged the traditional 'maculinist' criteria for interviewing (that views the interview as a one-way process where only the interviewer elicits and receives information) by stressing the need to invest the researchers' 'own personal identity in the relationship' (1981:40). Through an interactive process whereby the interviewer discloses information about herself/himself or responds to the requests of participants for information/assistance, hierarchical barriers between the researcher and his/her participants are broken down and a 'transition to friendship' becomes possible (ibid:30-58).

This is even more the case, it is argued, in multiple interview situations (ibid:42; Cotterill, 1992:596; Reinharz, 1992:36). Interviews which are repeated over a period of time with the same research participants, not only have the potential for developing a great deal of trust in the research relationship, but also, allow participants some control over the choice and analysis of information gathered (Reinharz, 1992:36). If we consider the challenge of feminist research to confront issues of power *throughout* the research process, then this latter aspect of the multiple interview process which deals explicitly with the issue of authorship, would indeed be extremely useful.

While there are many types of interviews that can be employed for the above purposes, Reinharz (1992:18) points out that open-ended interviews, or semi-structured interviews, are most often used by feminist researchers. This form of interview

technique seeks to maximise the power of research participants as the participants themselves have a strong influence over which information is to be included or excluded in the interview. In this sense, open-ended interviews marry well with what Glaser and Strauss (1967) have termed 'grounded theory', as data is revealed through the interactive interview process, rather than tested against it. (Reinharz, 1992:18; West, 1995:747) as is the case with deductive research.

Interviewing in a way that promotes the principles of feminist research is not, however, without its problems. The idea that a researcher can develop a non-hierarchical non-exploitative relationship through researcher disclosure or reciprocity, has been rigorously challenged. Cotterill (1992:598), for example, has argued that 'friends' are easier to manipulate than 'strangers', and Stacey, (1991:114) that 'the greater the apparent mutuality of the researcher/researched relationship - the greater the danger'. Patai also has been critical of the interactive interview process as a space for equalising power relations particularly in the case of cross-cultural research. Feminist interview practice, she states, is,

merely creating a bracketed moment, a moment taken out of the broader context of unequal relations in which our research is typically done By abstracting the interview from the larger social context of the real world, we are in effect returning to the discarded research models that situate our research practices outside of reality. But now we have, for a short time, transported our narrators with us (1991:144-145).

The power relations inherent in these dilemmas are not, however, always given in favour of the researcher (see for example, Günseli Berik's experience of researching women carpet weavers in rural Turkey (1996: 56-71)). While it cannot be denied that in the majority of cases feminist researchers tend to be embedded in privileged classes and ethnicities, it still remains possible for participants to usurp power in the research process through other means. A participant, can, for instance, withhold information, or in some cases, refuse to be interviewed in the first place (Cotterill, 1992:599). Feminist style interviewing can also place considerable strain on the researcher, especially when the study involves traumatised women or men. Feminism's commitment to empathy and the importance of recounting stories means that a researcher may find her/himself in an interview situation that is potentially damaging psychologically to her/his wellbeing

(Reinharz, 1992:34-35). In the final analysis then, there are, as Cotterill (1992:602) states, 'varying degrees of vulnerability', and at times the researcher may be as vulnerable if not more vulnerable as the women and men she/he studies.

Participant observation, is a further research technique often used by feminist researchers because of its arguably collaborative and non-exploitative nature (McDowell, 1992:406). Defined loosely as a technique 'in which the outside investigator is known to be an outside investigator by those being studied' (Abercrombie, Hill and Turner, 1994:306)', participant observation entails the observation of a social collectivity. As a research technique, participant observation is particularly consistent with feminist research goals because of the way it is frequently used to, 1) document women's lives and activities; 2) learn about women's experiences from their own perspectives, and: 3) understand the behaviour of women in a particular social context (Reinharz, 1992:49).

Despite these advantages, however, participant observation has been criticised for exploiting research participants in other ways. As it has traditionally been used, for example, in the field of anthropology, participant observation has tended to be applied in ways that place the observer in an aloof or objective position. Feminist researchers have criticised this tendency of participant observation and have instead, called for a way of observing that is open to the interests of research participants. In this way, researchers should take sides and should be empathetic to those they are working with (see for example, Davis Caulfield, 1979).

Just because participant observation and interview techniques have the potential to either exploit participants or psychologically damage the researcher her/himself, does not mean that we should abandon our pursuit of non-hierarchical and non-exploitative research methods. In fact, many feminist researchers have argued that if we are truly committed to research projects *for* women, then we must move beyond what Patai (1991:149) has called 'the fragility of easy assumptions of sisterhood and reciprocity', and opt for techniques that complement feminist research's action-orientation agenda. Participatory techniques, which have the stated aim of consciousness-raising or empowerment, have been put forward for this purpose (Wolf, 1996:26).

Empowering Research Methods

Infused with the intellectual and practical origins of the women's movement and educational theorists such as Paulo Friere (1972), feminist participatory techniques demand the empowerment of, or, the 'fundamental structural transformation and improvement of' (Hall, 1981:7), the lives of those in the research community. This process is achieved through the community's active participation in all stages of the research process. Thus, not only are the members of the community involved with the physical side of research, for example, in the gathering of information, but also, with the conceptualisation and production of the research project itself (Wolf, 1996:26). In reality however, the level of interaction between the researcher and the community may vary considerably. Participatory Action Research (PAR) is one method of which the participatory component is based on 'engaging in a joint activity that has a social, economic, or political goal ... [such as] ... literacy or stopping domestic abuse' (ibid.), rather than being based on, for example, joint participation in the production of research findings.

Described as an approach which combines the traditionally isolated practices of action, education and research (Maguire, 1996:31), PAR has its origins in a wide variety of disciplinary streams and practices including applied anthropology, field research on farming systems, rapid rural appraisal, action research and participatory research (Chambers, 1994:954; Stein, 1997:233; see also, Tandon, 1996:20-23). While it is not in itself a feminist research technique, feminists nonetheless have used PAR in ways which have not only unsettled and challenged the patriarchal power brokers in a given society but also, relationships between societies and their peoples. Thus, a more feminist PAR would push us,

relentlessly, to examine then increase congruency between our personal politics and public practices, research and otherwise ... [it would push us] ... to examine our own institutions, organizations and agencies, and our practices and relationships within them. Transformation is not only for 'out there' (Maguire, 1996:35).⁵⁵

Some feminist researchers claim considerable success in their use of PAR where the outcome of the research process has seen empowered women take control over the processes of oppression that impact on their everyday lives. In her research on women in a Nepali community, for example, Elizabeth Enslin found that the women gained confidence from the literacy classes she had encouraged them to attend. As a result of this confidence the village women were able to confront domestic abuse by using tactics such as sitting outside the home of a woman who had been abused so as to embarrass the husband (cited in Wolf, 1996:30).

Other researchers have found, however, that constraints such as funding, limited time and the need to fulfill at least some of the requirements of the academy in relation to the production of research findings, have decreased the potentially empowering impact of feminist PAR. Writing on their MA research in cross-cultural settings, Heather Farrow (1995:75-81) and Barbara Shaw (1995:91-99) for example, both experienced difficulties in using the participatory approaches they had planned. Issues such as their identities as white North American researchers, limited time and experience in cross-cultural settings, and responsibilities to their funding providers and to the academy, precluded them from gaining access to marginalised groups of women who would have benefited from an emancipatory research agenda. For both these writers, the experience of undertaking participatory research raised ethical and political concerns which were only partly defused by a reciprocal and reflexive style in the research process.

Barbara Shaw, in particular, found that her research with a small environmental action group in Goa, India, heightened the expectations of the two villages where the organisation had held its environmental education programme. As funding was limited,

⁵⁵ While I acknowledge there are some historical differences between participatory research and action research, I nonetheless share Stein's (1997:233) view that the two are often combined when referred to in the literature. Hence, consonant with Stein, I use PAR where others have used participatory research, such as in this quote by Maguire.

Shaw was forced to leave India after the evaluation of the programme. She had intended that the evaluation would lead onto other activities in the villages, but as the organisation was small and involved in other struggles, their activities in the villages ceased when Shaw left. Shaw felt that her research which she had intended to be action-research, was essentially nothing more than 'studying' a village and taking the information away.

This is perhaps one of the difficult ethical dilemmas of PAR in a cross-cultural setting, that the researcher has the power to leave the research environment and to go home, regardless of the outcome of the research process. In this vein Wolf (1996:36) has put forward the following challenge: 'consciousness-raising that is instigated exogenously by a well meaning outsider who suddenly appears and later disappears is no longer politically tenable'. Participatory techniques which attempt to confront issues of power imbalances especially in the post-fieldwork arena, may then be more appropriate in terms of their constancy with feminist research principles, than the above forms of action-orientated research.

The taking of testimonials is particularly suited to confronting issues of power imbalances (Benmayor, 1991:159-174). Described as 'an authentic narrative told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation (war, oppression, revolution etc)' (Yúdice, 1991:17), testimonials first emerged in Central America in the 1970s when the *Casa de las Americas* cultural center in Cuba awarded a literary prize for work conducted in this genre. Since that time, testimonials have been popular with persons involved in national liberation struggles and with those whose stories challenge the dominant ideologies of states (Stephens, 1994:223). Although they appear similar to oral histories, testimonials, according to Stephens (1994:231), 'are consumed by people who want a version of history legitimized by a Latin American', whereas oral histories are 'generally consumed by those who share a cultural and historical background with the teller'.

Testimonials also differ from autobiographies in that their main purpose is the portrayal of collective truths or identities rather than individualities (Varner Gunn, 1992:164; Stephens, 1994:227; Yúdice, 1991:17). Hence feminist researchers have found

testimonials to be particularly useful in both exposing constructions of 'otherness', because they emphasise agency (ibid:167; Stephens, 1994:226), and in the way they actively confront issues of authorship and representation in the post-fieldwork process (Marchand, 1995:67). Because the testimonial endeavour normally involves 'collaborative dialogues between activists engaged in a struggle and committed or empathetic transcribers/editors' (Yúdice, 1991:17), the potential for either authorship usurpation (on the part of the researcher) or misrepresentation (of the testimonial teller) to occur is thus generally lessened.

Feminist researchers have used testimonials to elucidate particularly, how the personal integrates with the political in the lives of women from various Central American states (Stephens, 1994:225; Marchand, 1995:70). In Guatemala, Rigoberta Menchu's testimonial *I Rigoberta Menchu an Indian Women in Guatemala* highlighted the Guatemalan state's oppressive structures that had divided and pacified her people (1984:169), and in Honduras, Elvia Alvarado's testimonial *Don't be Afraid Gringo: A Honduran Women Speaks From the Heart* spoke of, amongst other subjects, the need for Honduran men to fight against *machismo*.

Testimonial literature in El Salvador has followed similar revolutionary trajectories. Testimonials related to Salvadoran women's participation in the recent civil war and in social movements, such as, *I was never alone*, by Nidia Diaz (1992), *No me agarran viva la mujer Savadoreña en la lucha*, (*They won't take me alive: Salvadoran Women in the Struggle*) edited by Claribel Alegría and D.J. Flakoll (1996), and *Hear my Testimony: Maria Teresa Tula: Human Rights Activist of El Salvador*, by Maria Teresa Tula and Lyn Stephen (1994), have elucidated very clearly the agency of Salvadoran women in their struggles against the hegemonic state. It becomes very difficult then, to construct Salvadoran women's participation in relation to their 'otherness' (that is, that they are not feminist because their organisation does not follow Western feminist ideals) when these testimonials reveal in detail the politicising process that each testimonial teller has gone through (Stephens, 1994:226).

As a feminist researcher committed to the need for public recognition of Salvadoran women's agency during the civil war, I had originally envisaged that I would be using a

testimonial-type method during my fieldwork. The more I reflected on this style of approach, however, the more I was convinced that it may not be the most appropriate method for achieving what I hoped to accomplish with my fieldwork. For a start, I was concerned with the focus on the *individual* testimonial teller. While I recognised the importance of the collective truth contained in the testimonial of an individual, I still felt that I would like to listen to the experiences of a number of women. This would ensure a research project which reported on the diversity of Salvadoran women's experiences, and in addition, would allow for the potential empowerment of more than one individual.

On the pragmatic front, I also envisaged difficulties with using a testimonial method. My ability to converse in Spanish before leaving for the field was limited, as were my contacts with potential testimonial tellers, making the formation of an in-depth relationship with a stranger nearly impossible. Along with these concerns, I felt uncomfortable with the idea of taking so much time out of someone's potentially extremely busy day. Although I realised that a testimonial approach was a collaborative effort between two people committed to a view of history that challenged the status quo, I felt that in my case, with my constraints of access and language (to be discussed later in this chapter), that the testimonial exercise may have been little more than an extended and time-consuming interview.

After much consideration then, I decided to use multiple interview techniques and participant observation as my principle methods of primary data collection in El Salvador. There were many reasons for this choice. Firstly, I was concerned that my interviews, which I hoped would reveal aspects of women's experiences throughout their lives, may have the potential to retraumatise participants, especially when discussing the recent civil war. I felt that participant observation in the first instance and multiple interviews in the second, would allow me to form trusting relationships with participants who would then potentially feel more comfortable and even (I hoped) empowered by the opportunity to talk through and analyse aspects of their gender-related experiences of life in El Salvador.

Secondly, I felt that multiple interviews would be an excellent way of encouraging a participatory approach to my research, as participants would have more of an opportunity to direct the interviews, as well as keep a check on, and re-evaluate what had been discussed in previous interviews. As a feminist researcher committed to confronting issues of power in the research process, I felt this advantage of multiple interviews would be useful particularly in my cross-cultural setting. Thirdly, and perhaps, most pragmatically, I envisaged that using participant observation when I first entered the field would give me a chance to become familiar with Salvadoran Spanish. I hoped that after three or four months of observation, I would be in a much better position not only in terms of my ability to conduct interviews in Spanish, but also, in terms of my ability to relate to participants.

To be able to answer the research question posed at the start of this thesis then, that is *What has been the importance of Las Dignas' mental health programme for gender and development practice in post-conflict El Salvador?*, I planned to do the following over a period of seven months in El Salvador:

- Make contact with Las Dignas to discuss possible research ideas and design.
- Begin intensive Spanish classes.
- Observe self-help groups run by Las Dignas in San Salvador and if possible, in rural settings also.
- After three months of observation, float the idea with group participants of individual intensive interviews
- Conduct life-history style interviews with participants in rural and urban areas in their own homes and communities.

During discussion of the above research plan with various people before I entered the field, there were some issues raised on the efficacy of my plan in 'proving' that participants had been empowered as a result of Las Dignas' self-help programme. I was asked how my methods would actually test the empowerment of participants and it was suggested that I include in my plan, interviews with women who had not participated in the programme as a kind of 'control' to my research proposition. While scales to measure individual level empowerment do exist, they are often those which have been tested on US college students and are thus, both inappropriate in a cross-cultural setting,

and an anathema to feminist research because of their long battery of questions and ideas on statistical validity and reliability (Stein, 1997:68).

Moreover, as I was concerned with the potential for harming participants during interviews when traumatic experiences would be revealed, I felt that conducting interviews with women who were already integrated into a therapeutic process would prevent this potential harm. Facilitating the reclamation of memories with women who were unprepared for such a process, would be, I believe, a dangerous undertaking especially in a country such as El Salvador where virtually no professional assistance is available for traumatised individuals, families and communities.

Hence, I had decided that my participant group would be formed from those women already receiving support who were interested in talking to me in more depth about their experiences of trauma and healing. Throughout, their own perceptions and experiences of empowerment would form the basis for theorising. In this way, my research plan would concur with Wedeen and Weiss (1993 cited in Stein, 1997:69), who have called for an 'indigenization' of the research process which contextualises empowerment concepts such as self-esteem in the local setting.

Plans can only be used up to a point, however, and often the reality of the fieldwork experience, that 'stunning roller coaster of self-doubt, boredom, excitement, disorientation, uncertainty ... [and] ... exhaustion ...' (Wolf, 1996:128), can create problems in even the most organised of research projects. Consequently, as Storey has stressed, 'methodology in the field should be flexible ...' (1997:4).

Next my experiences of 'doing research' in El Salvador, of simultaneously using, adapting and abandoning aspects of the above methodological principles and methods, will be examined.

Research in Practice

Entering the Field

While I had been warned to expect 'culture shock' on entering the field (Storey, 1997:10), I felt heartened, if not a little bemused, before I even left for El Salvador by the following statement on culture shock contained in Peggy Golde's edited volume *Women in the Field*:

The severity of the experience of dislocation will ... depend not only on the individual and his ... [sic] ... previous exposure to total novelty, but also on the degree to which the new beliefs, values, norms, and style of behaviour conflict with the individual's own core values and emotional profile (1986:12).

In my arrogance and naiveté I considered that.: a) the several years I had previously spent travelling through the developing world including eight months of travel in Latin America, and: b) my Roman Catholic background and emotional personality, would lessen the incompatibility of my world and experiences with the the world and experiences of women in El Salvador.

Hence, I had certain expectations of El Salvador which, according to my ideas on compatibility, would lessen the culture shock I would experience when first entering the field. I had for example, expected El Salvador to look poor. I expected to see mangy dogs, adults and children begging in the streets, and people living with deformities that would have been corrected by simple medical procedures at birth in the developed world. I expected to see sub-standard housing, poor roading and over-crowded, falling apart, buses. I expected to see rubbish in the streets, pollution in the air and crazy traffic jams rendered impossible to control when there is either no concept of traffic order or of compliance with traffic rules. I expected the people to be friendly and to be ever-patient with my futile attempts to communicate with them in Spanish. I expected to be eating a lot of beans.

I had also expected El Salvador to smell and sound different to the winter-time quietness and freshness I had left behind in New Zealand. I expected noise and I expected those often acrid smells that come from rubbish being left to rot in the streets in 35 degrees celcius or higher temperatures. Thus, I was not too concerned about the forthcoming onslaught of surprises and ensuing experiences of dislocation when I crossed the border from Guatemala into El Salvador on the 21st of July 1997.

After an extremely easy crossing (I had been nervous about there being some sort of problem with my visa and that my 'pretend' status as a visitor, would be discovered and dealt with accordingly),⁵⁶ free from any-trace of Cold War suspicion, I was immediately struck by two things. One, the state of the Pan American highway on the Salvadoran side of the bridge (run-down and pot-holed), and two, the fact that there were people everywhere. People were walking all along the highway and they appeared, as if by magic, clean and well dressed, from narrow mud tracks that led to their villages or farms.

Although the rural housing was more or less as I had expected, it was, however, more impoverished and basic than what I had remembered Central American housing to be. I had expected to be driving through quaint cobblestone villages full of neat adobe houses with red roofs, but instead, I was driving through medium to large settlements that could neither be described as quaint nor even faintly picturesque. They were invariably dusty and, almost without exception, litter filled their cracked cobblestone streets (Photos. 3 and 4).

Driving into the capital city of San Salvador was also not as I had expected it to be. Witnessing a dead man lying on the side of the road as we neared the city boundary instilled a sense of fear and dread in me that would be simultaneously fed and challenged in the months to come. I had expected to be met at the bus depot by a representative from Las Dignas, but I was not. I had expected the taxi driver to understand my limited Spanish and to know how to find the address of a guest-house I

⁵⁶ I was not able to apply for any manner of 'research visa' as the El Salvadoran diplomatic representation in New Zealand (one man) informed me that there was no such visa to apply for. The only option I had was to secure a visitor's visa for 30 days and then visit immigration in San Salvador on its expiree.

had written on a piece of paper clutched in my sweaty hand, but he did not. I had expected the American researcher who had given me the address of the guesthouse and who had corresponded with me prior to my arrival to be extremely friendly, helpful and welcoming - but she was, due to her own time constraints and stresses, preoccupied.

Even after the amount of surprises encountered on my first day in the field, there were, as I discovered, many more to come. In the days following my first lonely weekend in a small room in a middle-class suburb that backed onto a massive area of poor housing, I discovered more and more aspects of life in this new country for which my supposed experience and temperament would never have adequately prepared me. The greatest shock, perhaps, was the culture of violence that permeated every sector of society (Photos, 5 and 6)

Although I had been told by Noam Chomsky that El Salvador had surpassed Colombia in terms of its murder rate per capita, and although I had read volumes of literature prior to my arrival discussing the impact of civil war on a society such as El Salvador, nothing could have prepared me for what it would feel like to actually live in that kind of environment. On my first day in San Salvador, I was told by the landlady of my guest-house that it would be too dangerous for me to walk alone in the streets. She informed me that while public transport was cheap and easy it would be more advisable for me to take taxis - especially after 5.00pm in the afternoon. Fellow researchers and aid workers also filled me in on the 'do's' and 'don'ts' of San Salvadoran life. They told me anecdotes of robberies, assaults, and rapes, and also advised me not to take the bus if I could help it. Every time I stepped out the door of my guest-house I was told to 'be careful'. My friends at Las Dignas said the same. It was not long before I became almost as paranoid as everyone else.

The violence was not only manifest in the paranoia of the people, however, it was physical, obvious and constant. Bank security personnel confiscated a wide variety of arms from suit-wearing businessmen before they were able to line up in the same queue as me to conduct their banking business. Every night on the television there would be news of another shooting, another kidnapping or another robbery. The violence was

gruesome and brutal. The gangs would regularly mutilate their victims using techniques not unknown to the war-weary population.

Violence against women was also constant. Every day, along with thousands of other women, I was subjected to sexual harassment while simply walking down the street, and on one occasion I even witnessed a man strike his wife while they were walking just a few metres away from me. The violence of this macho society was a real culture shock for me and could not be mediated by any prior life experience or 'positionality'.

In addition, the poverty was violent. After expecting to see poverty, it really surprised me how upset I felt every time I saw someone struggling. It tore at my heartstrings to see whole families living on the streets, and I felt sick to the stomach at the children who spent their days washing car windscreens for the promise of a few pesos. I wrote to an old friend about some of these initial fieldwork experiences and she replied that she was surprised I could feel this way after all that I had seen and done. If I had been less confident about what I would see in El Salvador, perhaps I would not have been so surprised myself.



Photo 3 Poor housing in rural El Salvador



Photo 4 Typical poor housing in the capital, San Salvador

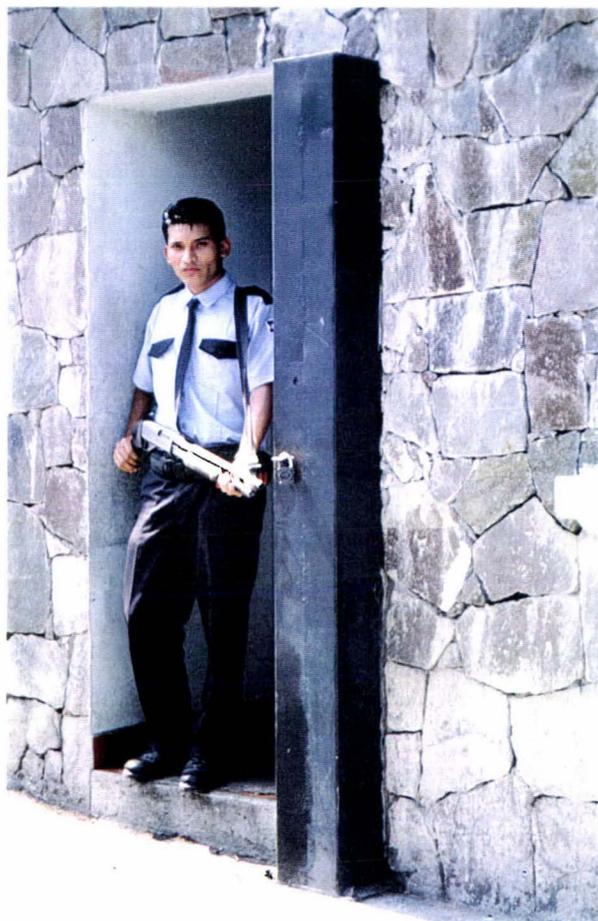


Photo 5 Defending wealth and privilege: security guard in upper-class suburbs, San Salvador



Photo 6 Signs of war: remnants of FMLN bombing campaign in San Salvador

I was also surprised about just how tiring living in a violent environment could be. I knew that fieldwork could be tiring, but for some reason, I never imagined it would be totally exhausting. Nor did I envisage that communication would be so difficult. Having arrived with proficiency in conversational Spanish, I felt it would simply be a matter of time before I could communicate on a more or less fluent basis and conduct my research independently. I was later surprised at my naiveté. Notwithstanding the fact that the Salvadoran accent was difficult and that popular language employed an enormous amount of colloquialisms, trying to communicate with people was very hard. I undertook Spanish classes when I first arrived for six weeks and I tried to practise grammatical structures in my spare time, but I still was not able to operate independently in the language. I found my lack of ability to be myself in the language soul-destroying at times.

Not all the surprises I encountered, however, were dislocating or anxiety producing. One of the most positive surprises of my fieldwork was the friendship and warmth of the people I met through my research. Not only was I surprised at the ease with which I was accepted into Las Dignas and given access to many forms of resources, but also, at the generosity of my participants in telling me the stories of their lives. This next section deals specifically with the implementation of my proposed research plan highlighting these and other fieldwork experiences.

Doing Feminist Research in El Salvador

Once I had recovered from the initial culture shock of my first week in San Salvador, I approached Las Dignas and requested to speak with the coordinator of Las Dignas' mental health programme Cristina Ibáñez, with whom I had been corresponding for some time. I had planned to spend my initial fieldwork weeks discussing with Cristina and the rest of the mental health team my ideas on a research topic and to incorporate some of their research priorities into my overall research design. This did not prove to be an easy task. My first discussion with Cristina on this issue was almost comical in hindsight. In what I was fast discovering was my very limited Spanish, I had indicated to Cristina my wish to research women's experiences of the recent civil war. Obviously

my conjugation of some important verb in the above sentence was incorrect as Cristina responded by taking a deep breath and then explaining in great detail right there and then for close on an hour, some of what the team had discovered in their work with women ex-combatants and civilians. While I understood around 60 percent of what Cristina told me, I felt angry at myself for not having made myself clear in what I was asking. I wanted to have been prepared before asking Cristina about this important issue (I had neither my tape-recorder or note book with me) and I felt bad that I had taken so much of her time on one of our first encounters.

Despite my agonising, however, Cristina seemed non-plussed by what I felt was a very demanding first meeting. In fact, immediately after the interview, Cristina proceeded to show me around the office introducing me as 'Helen who is going to be working with the mental health team for six months'. She seemed clear about my role as a researcher and as I wrote in my diary that day, 'it felt really good to hear her being so inclusive'. I was given a timetable of events (beginning with Tai Chi sessions the following day) and we planned together when it would be appropriate for me to begin observing the self-help groups run every Wednesday in the city.

While I had hoped there would be more of a chance for me to collaborate with the whole team (numbering at that stage, five psychologists) about my research design, it was clear that it was Cristina who had 'taken me under her wing'. Besides, my plans to share ideas and to formulate a participatory approach in my work with Las Dignas were fairly much thwarted in those first weeks by my inability to effectively communicate in Spanish. Coupled with this very real constraint was the fact that all the members of the team were extremely busy and overworked. Many of them spent days away from the city working in rural areas and I felt like I would be placing extra burdens on their shoulders by asking for the kind of dialogues necessary for such an approach. In all honesty I was relieved and grateful to simply be accepted as a researcher in what was a large and dynamic feminist organisation already extremely competent and active in producing their *own* research.

The implementation of the second point in my research plan 'to begin intensive Spanish classes' was not so difficult. I was introduced to the *Cuzcatlan Escuela de Idiomas* and

at this language school I received the kind of tuition that was to prove invaluable. Not only were my four hours of classes a day an excellent motivator (in terms of getting me out of bed and planning my days) but they also provided me with much needed friendship and support to help me through those first few months in El Salvador.

In addition, the school's commitment to cultural awareness enabled me to make sense of some of the more 'alien' aspects of life in El Salvador. I learnt for example, that people choose to sit on the aisle seat in the buses (something which irritated me immensely) not because they were rude or 'individualistic' as I had construed it, but rather because sitting in a window seat placed them in greater risk of armed robbery. My fears of being 'discovered' as an unmarried woman with a live-in lover (my partner was joining me in El Salvador half way through my research) were similarly quelled. During our discussions on words which signified marriage, I discovered that it was quite acceptable, especially amongst the working and middle-class women that I would be dealing with, to call your partner 'husband', even if you were not officially married. This was a great relief to me as I had agonised over the fact that I may have had to lie to my participants to gain acceptability as Wolf (1996:11) notes has happened with many women researchers trying to gain acceptability or access in the cross-cultural fieldwork environment. Thus, Cuzcatlan provided me with a safety net to test ideas and actions that may have been detrimental to my future ability to relate to Salvadorans in a research situation.

Having improved my language and cultural awareness to a certain extent, I felt confident with moving on to the third point listed in my research plan: participating in the self-help groups run by the mental health team. I had been told by Cristina that there would be another Salvadoran student observing the groups with me, and I was at first, slightly disappointed with having to 'share' this opportunity with someone else. As luck would have it, however, the other 'student' turned out to be a bright, bubbly, fluent English speaker by the name of Natalia who had gained her psychology degree in the US and who was doing her 'practical' with Las Dignas for her Masters degree at a local San Salvadoran university.

I will never forget the day I met Natalia. She strode confidently into the courtyard where I was nervously sitting waiting for the group participants to arrive, kissed me in the customary fashion and then began asking me about myself in fluent English. I felt a great surge of relief come over me as I had already discovered that what I thought was my 'improved' Spanish would still not be sufficient to understand the highly colloquial Spanish spoken by the group participants. I asked Natalia almost immediately if she would be interested in helping me with translation in the groups and in the various interviews I was planning. She said she would be delighted and after some persuasion, agreed on being paid for the service she would provide for me.

Having Natalia as my assistant made my research much easier. During group sessions both she and I would take notes which we would then compare at the close of the session. In the interviews I performed Natalia would assist me in formulating my questions in Spanish. It was almost as if Natalia's presence, especially in the groups, legitimised mine. We were thought of as a team by the participants and as such, we were accorded the same kindness and care. Even though I hardly even spoke during the group sessions, Natalia's input seemed to be enough for the both of us. Hence the group sessions in the city were very rewarding and I was able to fulfil my hopes of forming trusting relationships with the group participants prior to the interview process.

The self-help groups observed in the rural town of Berlín, were, however, a little different. For a start the group was new (as opposed to the city group which had been together for 10 months when I arrived) and therefore, the participants were more reserved and apprehensive. Secondly, Natalia was unable to participate in some of the sessions due to her commitments at university during this time. Nonetheless, I seemed to be accepted by the group and on the days when Natalia could not join us, I was simply obliged to communicate and concentrate more carefully in order to correctly represent what I had observed. In hindsight, being on my own was an experience in growth and even though I found it exhausting, it was something I would not have missed, given the choice.

Ironically, acceptance in the Berlín Group was made easier by the fact that I resembled a Spanish woman who had spent years working in one of their local villages. This

Spaniard had helped improve the lives of these women and for this she was remembered with much love. I felt almost guilty listening to them talk about me in the same enthusiastic tone with which they spoke of the Spanish woman, as compared to what she seemed to have done, my contribution to their lives was negligible. At the end of the day, however, it was my own personality that enabled me to gain acceptance by both groups. I did a lot of smiling, and a lot of hugging, and often my inability in the communication arena was discounted by my readiness to listen. Sometimes it did not even matter if I remained silent, because it seemed that what the women needed principally, was an empathetic ear.

Hence, after four months of observation in both the rural and urban groups, I felt that it was appropriate to float the idea of conducting individual interviews with group participants. Natalia, once again, was of great assistance with this endeavour. After discussing the idea with Cristina, we asked, firstly, the city group whether they would be interested in being interviewed in their own homes in the weeks that Cristina (who was facilitating their group) would be away in Spain. I was nothing short of amazed at the response. All the women in the group were keen on participating and a party atmosphere prevailed as Natalia and I organised directions and logistics for the interviews. Of greatest excitement to the women was the fact that we would be coming to their homes to conduct the interviews. This contradicted sharply with what I had expected. I presumed that because most of the women lived in urban poor neighbourhoods, they would be unwilling for us to see the environment in which they lived. I could not have been more wrong!

What I had not expected, however, and what actually proved to be the most challenging part of my interviews, were the physical difficulties associated with the mechanism of interviewing itself. Prior to my first interview for example, I had jotted down a brief plan of how I would conduct the interview. I discussed my plan with Natalia and we both agreed that we would need to explain the purpose of my research, gain consent to conduct the interview and use a tape-recorder, before we began to ask my three or four unstructured questions related to various aspects of participants lives. As it turned out, this neat plan proved problematic. Almost without exception, the women from the city group would begin talking immediately after Natalia and I had explained the purpose of

my research. Often they would begin with some of their most painful memories and it was both inappropriate and impossible to stop their narrative to gain consent. Consequently I found that I missed out on taping some very important parts of their narratives and in all honesty, I felt rather frustrated at times that I had committed myself to such an unstructured style of interviewing.

Originally, I had planned to use multiple interview techniques which would have allowed me to return to the aspects of narrative that I had been unable to tape-record previously. I decided, however, that multiple interviews were not appropriate in my particular research situation. For me it seemed an unnecessary burden to place on the group participants to have Natalia and I returning again and again to their homes (they all made considerable effort to prepare for our visits and many of them operated businesses from their homes, such as selling soft-drinks or tortillas, along with their activities to maintain the household), and the advantages inherent in multiple interviews in terms of gaining trust and giving participants control over the interview content, were already occurring in the way in which I combined my regular observations of the group with the in-depth interviews. In a sense the combination of observing and interviewing was even more effective than simply performing multiple interviews because at least in the group situation the participants had the power to discuss whatever they wished. The input from me was non-existent.

There were also other physical constraints that made the interview process quite a challenge. As previously mentioned, the participants from the city group lived in an urban poor neighbourhood. Thus, there were not only issues of security we had to be concerned about (gangs predominate in urban poor areas of San Salvador and Natalia was so worried about the security of her car that we had to park a couple of kilometres away and walk into the neighbourhood), but also, the neighbourhood abounded in background noise that tape-recorders pick up. Between the roosters crowing and the children screaming, I was amazed that my little tape-recorder had the ability to record anything. But it did, and the transcripts that resulted were truly enlightening.

My interviews with participants of the Berlin Group, however, were not as successful. I had planned again to interview participants in their own homes, but when I began to

discuss the idea with Natalia and other members of the mental health team, my plan was met with strong disapproval. Although the four participants who had volunteered for the interviews were happy to have me come to their homes, Cristina and other members of the team attached to the Berlin office were concerned for my safety. Of particular concern were the recent instances of rape especially of foreign women in the area where most of the participants' villages were located. For a while, I tried to ignore the warnings but I was dependent on Natalia for both transport (there was very little public transport available in the area) and language support, and it soon became clear that Natalia was unhappy about the potential danger in which the interviews would place us.

It may have been judicious of me at this stage to enlist the support of another research assistant who would feel comfortable accompanying me to the villages, but for several important reasons I did not want to do so. Firstly, as discussed earlier, Natalia was trusted by the group participants and I felt that it would be unfair to expect participants to discuss painful aspects of their lives with a complete stranger. Secondly, she was a mature person and her specific counselling skills and empathetic style were essential for the kind of interviews we were conducting. And thirdly, as Natalia was the person who would be translating the interviews into English for me, having her present at each interview, I felt, would increase the validity of the translation process.

Hence, making sure we reimbursed participants for their travel, and ensuring that they would receive some refreshments when they arrived, we arranged to interview participants at the Berlin office. As I observed in my diary that day, however, this interview environment proved less than comfortable for some of the group:

Julia arrived first and looked absolutely terrified at the prospect of an interview - unfortunately we had to do the interviews in a side room and Julia looked as though we were leading her into a torture chamber!

After some reassurance at the beginning of each interview, the participants soon felt comfortable enough to reflect on their lives. Unlike the interviews with the city group which lasted up to two hours, these were all rather short ranging from 20-60 minutes in

duration. Nevertheless, and once again, I was amazed at the openness and fluidity with which most of the women spoke.

Listening to the women from each group recount stories of their lives was, at times, very difficult. Not only were the interviews draining in a physical sense, but emotionally also. There were many tears shed and often I found myself feeling quite depressed long after an interview had actually taken place:

We [Natalia and I] were both feeling extremely tired and filthy dirty - My back and neck were aching from leaning forward during the interviews to respond to the women and my head was pounding with dehydration I felt shattered when I got back to San Salvador and when I lay down on the bed I ended up sobbing uncontrollably...It would have been so much worse I'm sure if I'd understood everything that was being said - understanding the main ideas was bad enough! (general field observations, 14/11/97).

Thus, rather paradoxically, my poor Spanish became something of a coping mechanism. While it did not prevent me from acting appropriately (I still understood enough Spanish to act empathically during the interviews), it had the advantage of allowing me to control my exposure to the most painful of memories. This may seem selfish, but if we are committed to responding to the subjective in the research process, then coping mechanisms such as this, I believe, simply make our research survivable.

My original research plan would have ended about here. I had more or less successfully completed my interviews and I was happy to end the data collection at this stage. Fieldwork, however can never be a neat, structured exercise with a clear start and finish. I was constantly being guided by community organisations, and the friends I had met, to more and more sources of information and insight on aspects of my research topic. In this way, I ended up conducting further interviews with members of the mental health team, women's organisations, government departments and other community development organisations.

In addition, and towards the end of my time in El Salvador, a friend working for the Salvadoran Women's Movement (MSM) asked me if I would be interested in interviewing women ex-combatants in a village where MSM was based. MSM had

obtained the funding to begin a mental health project similar to Las Dignas' programme, and was interested in assessing the level of enthusiasm of village women for such an initiative. Hence, it would be a collaborative research endeavour where both MSM and myself would discover information valuable to both parties.

At first I was unhappy with the idea, feeling that the exposure of memories for women unfamiliar with the therapeutic value of narration, may be psychologically harmful. After being reassured that the women were happy to be interviewed, and knowing that I would be assisted by my friend who was well known to them, I decided to go ahead and conduct the interviews. The fact that I had experienced the empowering effect of such a development initiative first hand, also convinced me of the importance of participating in a process which could be an impetus to the implementation of similar initiatives in the future. It is important to note, however, that I did not intend the interviews to be used as the 'control' that I mentioned earlier, but rather, as further data on women's experiences of the civil war.

Thus, with the assistance of my friend, I interviewed a further four women in a small village in Usulután province. Contrary to what I had imagined, the interview process was very similar to my previous interviews. The physical demands were more or less the same (although the village was located on the coastal plains and was therefore warmer than Berlín and San Salvador which are both located at some altitude) and I struck the same sorts of emotional responses from both myself and the participants to the content of the interviews. Consonant with previous interviews, gaining informed consent was also problematic. In fact, I was unable to tape one entire interview due to both the physical environment (we were positioned about five metres away from the participant) and the outpouring of grief by the participant in response to our introductory statement: 'we'd like to talk to you a bit about your life during the war'.

In sum then, to say that the interviews I conducted were in any way harmful to participants would be incorrect. As it turned out, they were neither psychologically nor politically harmful. I had been concerned prior to my arrival in El Salvador that my interviews may have revealed information that could have potentially placed my participants in danger with the authorities. Given the nature of contemporary

Salvadoran society where the war and all its intricacies are talked about openly, and where former guerrilla leaders and right wing army officers now sit down at the same table to discuss issues, my concern proved to be misplaced. While I still took the usual precautions, using pseudonyms on participants' request and keeping my notes and tapes safe at all times, there really was no danger of my information being expropriated by the government and its associated armed forces.⁵⁷

If my research had very little negative impact on the lives of my research participants, could I then say it was an empowering experience? Was my research in fact *feminist* research or was it merely research *about* women, neither challenging the power brokers in Salvadoran society nor contributing to the emancipation of my participants? These and other questions will be considered in the following section which briefly but critically reviews the empowerment potential of my fieldwork in El Salvador.

Empowering Research or Damage Control?

As discussed in previous sections, feminist research confronts issues of power differentials in researcher/participant relationships throughout the research process. Through reflexivity and reciprocity, feminist researchers can overcome some of the more harmful aspects of cross-cultural research and work towards the formulation of empowering research methodologies. Such methodologies demand an action orientation to research methods that impact on the lives of both researchers and participants on both individual and collective levels.

In order to determine whether my research practice contributed to the empowerment of participants then, it is necessary to determine whether or not my research was in itself feminist. Using the principles of feminist research outlined in the first section of this chapter as an analytical guideline, the following conclusions can be drawn. Firstly on the principle of action-orientation, it is difficult to state definitively that my research

⁵⁷ At an ethical review meeting of my proposed fieldwork plan, peers of mine had questioned how I would protect my participants should my material fall into the hands of the authorities. I was even asked if I would submit to torture to protect my participants' identity to which I honestly replied 'probably not'.

resulted in the transformation of gendered power relations in the lives of the participants in my study. If we break down the component parts of the principle of empowerment, however, we see that reflection, in the Freirian (1972) sense of the word, is a necessary step in any empowerment process. Thus, when oppressed people are given the opportunity to reflect on their lives the conscientisation or empowerment that follows can lead to emancipatory action.

During some of my interviews, especially with women from the city group, this process of reflection did take place. As I asked very few questions in the interviews, participants were free to reflect on aspects of their lives that they found oppressive or disempowering. Occasionally this reflection would result in statements by participants about the unfairness of a situation or about the need to alter this aspect of their life. The following statements by participants from the city group elucidate these points:⁵⁸

Since you know how things that have to do with money can make you sick ... the rich people if they have more they always want more, and it is through the poor they become rich The poor are always looking for ways to survive and you are always the one to lose But as I say we have some hope that maybe one day things will change because with all the new governors...one day we will claim our rights Yes we have to fight for our rights with all our might for our children We have to remember a lot of blood has been shed...(Matilde, author interview, 1/10/1997).

If they ask me to make tortillas ... I'll starve to death since I can't do it! My mother in law has really tried to make me learn how to do it, I've done it three times but I get burnt and I can't stand the heat My husband told me that as a woman I wasn't complete because I couldn't make tortillas...and I answered to that, that I am complete since I have all my body parts, I'm not lacking anything I do know how to cook. I had to learn ... because of being a woman From early on they are identifying you by giving you a doll, even with the colours From an early age I had responsibilities (Norena, author interview, 16/10/1997).

Sometimes they tell me how nice it is to see that I've grown old with my husband, and I can't be telling them how much I've suffered When the community started ... [the Christian Base Community] ... I was able to break away a little And it was funny because when I got involved with the community he would never come, maybe because he wanted to be with his women calmly and peacefully When he tried to stop it , I was too involved

⁵⁸ The biographies of participants from the Wednesday Group and Berlin Group, along with lists of all other participants involved in my research can be found at the end of this chapter

and I didn't listen to him It made me feel free since lately I've lost all respect for him ... (Mama Telle, author interview, 8/10/1997)

While my interviews were obviously not the first time participants had had an opportunity to reflect on their lives, they nonetheless, provided a space in their busy days to take stock, and re-evaluate, some of what they had discovered in the self-help groups and in their dialogues with other women in their communities.

Secondly, and in relation to the principles of subjectivity and reflection in the research process, I can confidently assert that these aspects of feminist research were given considerable attention during my fieldwork. As has been described in the previous section, the expression of emotion was an integral component of each research technique I employed, whether it was in the groups I was observing or during an interview situation. I felt it was impossible to retain an objective stance with the women with whom I was forming relationships. Emotion thus gave me access to participants' lives as well as providing me with much needed legitimacy.

Of utmost importance also, was the process of reflecting on this emotion. As is the usual practice of researchers, I would write fieldnotes every day on my research progress (referred to in this thesis as 'general field observations') reflecting, amongst other topics, on my feelings during interviews and group sessions. These fieldnotes then became a tool for analysing the impact of my presence in the research process, and in this way a form of re-evaluation and transformation of the research project could be realised. Attention to the subjective hence had the result of protecting participants from a potentially over-zealous and unthoughtful researcher.

In regard to 'making use of the situation at hand', Fonow and Cook's (1991) third feminist research principle, it would be difficult to clearly show that I was able to use this principle in my research. While I did make use of the opportunity to interview various people to whom I was led, this did not really allow me to reveal aspects of gender inequalities otherwise hidden, which is the hallmark of this feminist research principle. In the case of the interviews performed with the women in the coastal village, however, there could be some arguments in my favour. If I had not been there to record

these women's reflections for instance, who else would have done so? But on the other hand, it is pure and simple arrogance to suggest that only I could contribute to the revelation of aspects of gender inequalities in this situation. In fact, you would not have had to look too far to find a researcher with good Spanish who may have been far more competent than I to do so. Thus, I did make use of the situation at hand but I would not go as far as saying that this allowed for a more emancipatory research agenda.

Summary

Chapter Five has charted the process of my research. Discussion on aspects of feminist epistemology and methods has elucidated the processes inherent in identifying and choosing appropriate research tools prior to entering the field. Critical reflection on the fieldwork itself has revealed both problematic and successful areas of the research design, and the final discussion on empowering research has acted to legitimise the research endeavour in terms of its ability to meet feminist principles and goals.

What can I conclude about the nature of my research in El Salvador? In seeking to reveal gender-related experiences of the recent Salvadoran civil war, and the gender-focused development strategies employed by Las Dignas to assist women in reclaiming their identities, my research did become research *for* women. It was research for women, not only because women participants benefited from the cathartic nature of the interview process and from the personal relationships that were formed during my time in El Salvador, but also, because the model of development practice formulated by Las Dignas may be applicable to the emancipation of women who have been through similar experiences in similar contexts.

The methods employed, while falling short of being truly emancipatory, did contribute, I believe, to an increase in self-esteem in many of the participants. The fact that I had come from so far to hear their stories was of great significance to almost all of them. For Natalia, the exposure to people and ideas she would most probably never have come across herself, was a growing experience for which she felt very grateful. While most of my conclusions have been gleaned from personal conversations with participants,

occasionally I was able to record some of these. Thus, before we end this chapter I feel it would be interesting to present these comments along with an excerpt of a letter from Natalia as a way of ensuring that participants have the last say about the nature of my research:

thank you for having chosen me to help you, because let me tell you I feel so good to have collaborated in what you are creating, I feel proud ... thanks for the ego-boost (Natalia, 1998).

I feel good because I never have had the chance to express a little of the suffering, not even a little bit, because if you weren't here, I couldn't have said all this ... (Angelita, author interview, 1997).

I feel I was dependent, but not any more, I feel that I have a family now, because from you and Las Dignas, who are not from around here, it feels good that you have come here from so far away (Matilde, 1997).

The following chapter will continue with the theme of fieldwork by examining the context which informed my research, namely the civil war and its aftermath in El Salvador.

Epilogue

Looking out over the searing tarmac as our Taca jet took off on its international flight to Los Angeles, I was overwhelmed by a feeling of intensive grief. I had spent seven months in El Salvador, and I had made many friends. The idea that it would be unlikely that I would ever see them again was almost unbearable. It felt as if I was conforming at last to all the distasteful aspects of cross-cultural research I had tried so hard to prevent. I had come, I had 'collected my data' and now I was leaving.

While I had promised to keep in touch with all the people I had met through my research, I knew even then that this would be extremely difficult. With around 80 percent illiteracy amongst my participant group, any future input into the production of the research product would be fraught with difficulty. The fact that many of the women did not have mailing addresses also meant that even personal correspondence would be

impossible. Nonetheless, I did have Las Dignas as a go-between and I knew that I would definitely be able to keep in contact with Natalia and some of the members of the mental health team.

Hence, after some reflection I was able to quell my grief. I said goodbye to the volcanoes, the coastal plains and the mountains of the north, and instead of feeling sad it now felt celebratory. To have been given the opportunity to experience all those things was a privilege. It was a privilege to have met and interacted with every single person with whom I had formed a relationship, and while I may not have been able to meet with them again, I will always, as the participants of the city group expressed to me at our last meal together, hold a piece of them in my heart.

Thesis Participants⁵⁹

Wednesday Group Members:

Marta (pseudonym) is a working class woman in her early forties. She has two adult children and lives in San Salvador with her parents and extended family in a house next to where she lived as a child. Marta has been a member of a Christian Base Community for many years and it was through her involvement with the community that she became involved in the opposition movement during the civil war.

Mama Telle (pseudonym) is a working-class woman in her early seventies. She lives in a poor area of San Salvador with her husband and extended family and, like Marta, has been involved in her community for years through the Christian Base Community movement. Mama Telle is the oldest member of the Wednesday Group.

Matilde comes from a working-class rural background and moved to San Salvador during the early years of the war. Prior to her migration, she spent several years working and living in a guerrilla controlled zone in central El Salvador. Now in her

⁵⁹ Pseudonyms have been used when requested by participants.

sixties, Matilde lives with her husband and extended family in a poor area of San Salvador and makes her living by running a small shop from her home.

Lucila is also from a working-class rural background. She moved to San Salvador in the early 1980s when conditions in her village became intolerable. She has twelve adult children and lives with her elderly father and two grandchildren in a poor area of San Salvador. Lucila was widowed prior to moving to the city. She is presently sixty years old.

Lidia (pseudonym) is a working-class woman from San Salvador. She lives with one of her daughters and her four children in a small house and amidst a menagerie of ducks, chickens, geese and dogs. During the 1989 offensive of San Salvador, Lidia's home was occupied by government soldiers and the street on which she lives was used as a battleground. Lidia now makes her living by making and selling cloth flowers for use on special occasions and festival days. She is in her sixties.

Norena is originally from a lower middle-class rural background but moved to San Salvador with her family when she was a child. Norena was a tertiary student during the latter part of the war and became involved in the opposition movement in this capacity. She now works with rural women as an 'awareness raiser' on issues of domestic violence and gender oppression. Norena is married with two young children and she is in her late twenties.

Maria (pseudonym) is a working-class woman in her sixties. She lives in a housing project which was established after the 1986 earthquake destroyed much of the housing in her area. During the war, two of her sons were killed by government soldiers and she now has one daughter and one remaining son alive. Maria attends the Wednesday group intermittently but is prevented from attending on most occasions because of her work commitments.

Berlín Group Members

Francisca is a working-class woman in her fifties from a small village in rural El Salvador. She has eight surviving children (out of nine) but also, cares for the children of her son who was killed during the war. Francisca's husband left her for another woman and now lives in San Salvador. She provides for her family through subsistence production.

Julia (pseudonym) is a working-class woman in her fifties from a small rural village. She has ten children (most of whom now have partners) and six grandchildren. During the war she lived in a battle zone with both the guerrillas (FMLN) and government soldiers (FAES) present at various times. Now, one of her older daughters lives with her and helps her around the home and her husband is involved in subsistence production for the household.

Elena (pseudonym) is a working-class woman in her early sixties from a small rural village. She has a husband and ten surviving of eleven children. During the war she stayed in her village, surviving by hiding out from government troops and carrying water to support her family.

Sylvia (pseudonym) is from a rural working-class background. One of her daughters has been working with rural women in the area and was the catalyst for Sylvia joining the Berlín Group. Sylvia's son was a guerrilla commander during the war. Sylvia has a husband and together they are involved in subsistence production.

Usulután Province Women

Angelita is a working-class rural woman in her mid fifties who spent most of the war years in a refugee camp in Honduras. She now lives with her five children in a repopulated village on the coastal plains of El Salvador. Angelita makes a living out of subsistence production and is not involved with any of Las Dignas' programmes.

Haydeé is a working-class rural woman in her late twenties who was a child soldier during the war. She now has one daughter and lives in the same repopulated village as Angelita. Haydeé works for the Salvadoran Women's Movement as a health promoter but is not presently involved with Las Dignas.

Lilian is a working-class rural woman in her late fifties who lives with her extended family and partner in the aforementioned repopulated village. Lilian was a refugee during the war and of her seven children, only four now survive. Lilian is involved in subsistence production with her partner but again, is not a participant in any of Las Dignas' programmes.

Paula is a working-class rural woman in her early forties who was in the same refugee camp as Lilian and Angelita and now lives next door to Lilian's family. With the loss of one child during the war, Paula has 13 children remaining. Paula's husband lives with her and together they are involved in subsistence production.

Other Participants

Margarita: Spanish teacher, graduate in English language from the National University of El Salvador. Worked as a popular educator in a guerrilla controlled zone during the war.

Lisencia Yesenia Segovia: Psychologist, works for CEMUJER, a Salvadoran women's organisation.

Concepcion Aparicio: Psychologist, works for MAM, a Salvadoran women's organisation.

Dra. Marta Romero: Coordinator of women's programme in San Salvador for UNESCO.

Dra. Delgado: Representative of the ARENA government's Ministry of Health.

Margarita Velado: Attorney at the Human Rights Office, a government organisation set up by the Truth Commission to act as an ombudsman in the area of Human Rights.

Lisencia Sandra Carranza: Works for the Government organisation The Salvadoran Institute for Women's Development.

Maria Moreno: Works for FUNDE a non-government organisation allied to the FMLN which provides technical assistance and research on development initiatives with ex-combatants in repopulated communities.

Dr. Mendoza: Psychologist, works for FUNDO, a non-government organisation which provides economic assistance, health services (including mental health services) and technical assistance to the war disabled and the families of fallen combatants.

Ernesto Cordoba: Psychologist, works for ACISAM, a non-government organisation which trains mental health promoters and runs self-help groups in urban and rural communities.

Cristina Ibáñez: Psychologist and coordinator of the mental health team at Las Dignas. Cristina also works for a Salvadoran Organisation which looks for children who disappeared during the war.

Montserrat Arévalo: Psychologist in mental health team at Las Dignas. Works specifically in the area of war trauma.

Holy Smith: An Australian Overseas Service Bureau Volunteer who worked for an organisation which provided a safe house and health assistance to sex workers in Central San Salvador.

Chapter Six - El Salvador's Civil War and Contemporary Context

Introduction

As was alluded to in the introduction to this thesis, the Salvadoran civil war was a result of centuries of poverty and inequality in Salvadoran society. By the late 1970s, when the civil had all but begun, agricultural industrialisation had seen the marginalisation of subsistence production in favour export cropping (Montgomery, 1995:47). Landlessness had increased from 12 percent in the early 1960s to 41 percent of the total rural population by the 1970s (Murray and Barry, 1995:xv; see also, Pearce, 1986:26), and the military had controlled the apparatus of the state for almost fifty years, overruling election results and putting down opposition with increasingly brutal repression (Acevedo, 1996:22; Murray, 1997:13).

In response to this worsening social crisis, a popular movement of workers, teachers, peasants and students began to gain momentum, culminating in the formation of a revolutionary alliance designed to, 'take control of the state by military means and to restructure the economy to the benefit of the poor majority' (Murray and Barry, 1995:xvii). Beginning with a discussion on the rise of this popular movement and the concomitant formation of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), Chapter Six will chart the history of the Salvadoran civil war. It will examine the mechanisms employed by the Salvadoran Armed Forces (FAES) and the FMLN to respectively subdue and organise the Salvadoran population, and it will contend that had not the US provided the FAES with the amount of military aid that it did, the civil war would have ended long before 1992.

Having established the history of the civil war and the events leading up to the signing of the peace accords, Chapter Six then turns to examine the state of contemporary Salvadoran society. Focusing particularly on the position of women, it will show that whilst there has been some progress made in society in terms of electoral freedom, for

example, poverty and inequality still prevail to dampen the hope of long-term peace in this small and turbulent nation.

The Pre-War Setting

The Popular Movement and the Impact of Liberation Theology

The 1960s and 1970s were a time of mass-movement by those who dared to resist oppression.⁶⁰ From the streets of central San Salvador, to the hamlets of the rural north, the sight of students, workers, peasant farmers and teachers (to name a few groups) marching through the streets and staging land occupations was commonplace (Leo-Grande, 1983:101). As Barry (1991:145) explains, it was as if the popular sectors had decided to break,

the silence of fear that had settled over the country after the 1932 blood-bath The booming economy and expanding reach of the electronic media created rising expectations among the country's downtrodden majority. As if overnight ... it suddenly seemed that Salvadorans were organised and demanding change.

Between 1973-1980, the number of co-operatives increased from 246 to 543. Labour unions became more militant in demanding fair wages and their membership swelled from 44,150 in 1970 to 71,000 by 1977. In the countryside peasant leagues were more and more active in pressing the government for land reform and higher agricultural wages (Booth and Walker, 1989:78) and coalitions of these groups along with workers, students and intellectuals operated by pressing their demands outside of traditional party systems, preferring direct action to party politics and negotiation (Zamora, 1991:185; Arnson, 1982:33). Significant during this period also was the establishment (with the exception of the Communist Party which had formed in 1930) of the five revolutionary organisations which would eventually coalesce to form the Farabundo Martí Front for

⁶⁰ The role of women in this popular movement will be discussed briefly in Chapter Eight when women's organisations in El Salvador are examined.

National Liberation (FMLN), and the political parties and popular organisations to which they were forged. Table 2 presents a summary of these five groupings:

Table 2: Five Member Organisations of the FMLN

Political-Military Organisation	Popular Organisation	Armed Forces
1) Popular Forces of Liberation: FPL	Popular Revolutionary Block: BPR	Popular Forces of Liberation: FPL
2) National Resistance: RN	United Popular Action Front: FAPU	Armed Forces of National Resistance: FARN
3) Party of the Salvadoran Revolution: PRS	28 th February Popular Leagues: LP-28	Revolutionary Army of the People: ERP
4) Communist Party of El Salvador: PCS	Nationalist Democratic Union: UDN	Armed Forces of Liberation: FAL
5) Revolutionary Party of Central American Workers: PRTC	Popular Liberation Movement: MLP	Revolutionary Party of Central American Workers: PRTC

Adapted from Montgomery, (1995:102)

Crucial at this time of mass conscientisation was the role played by the Church of the Poor and its founding philosophy, Liberation Theology, as introduced in Chapter Two. The Church of the Poor in El Salvador, as Sobrino (1991:169) stresses, 'gave voice to the voiceless, light to the confused and hope to the oppressed ... [and as such] Its social influence was incomparable'.

Pablo Galdámez (1986:27-29),⁶¹ a Belgian priest who worked in the poor community of Zacamil in San Salvador in the 1970s, gives a potent example in the following narrative of the impact of Liberation Theology on a group of market women from his community burdened by unjust debt to loan sharks:

In early June, the 'market place women' came to see me. They wanted me to celebrate a mass in honour of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. These women are an institution in El Salvador. Many are single, abandoned by their husbands. They are very poor ... [so] ... I started mass In the homily I opened a dialogue

⁶¹ This name is a pseudonym chosen for the priest to reflect his commitment to the 'missions' (Sobrino, 1986:xi).

with them on their love for each other, on the big problems they had ... up came the subject of the moneylenders. Some of the women expressed gratitude for their services Others were silent. Then, timidly somebody said they [the moneylenders] only made things worse. There was a moment of confusion. Majestic on his makeshift pedestal, the Sacred Heart of Jesus presided over this decisive moment of conscientization when the poor had the floor, when the poor could speak out. Then one of the women shouted out, 'the interest sure is high!'. Others seconded her, then quickly covered their faces with their shawls, reciting prayers, as if asking forgiveness for their rebelliousness. That was when the moneylender left in a huff. Then there was fear. Some of the women realised they'd put their foot in it, that their business was done for if they didn't have the loan shark's help. And then in the midst of the anguish, God's light shone. Couldn't they get together to start a co-op? One woman said 'They've got this in some places And they're doing fine - better than with the money-lenders that are on our necks!'. The next day the woman met with our community to start a new co-op.

Hence, when the popular movement came under attack by the forces of repression and the deaths and disappearances of students, teachers, peasants and other groups reached almost epidemic proportions of up to 1000 a month (Thompson, 1996:325),⁶² the priests and nuns and members of Christian Base Communities came under attack also.⁶³ The Church of the Poor in El Salvador paid an enormous price for its role as advocate for economic and political change. To the Salvadoran oligarchy and military, priests and nuns espousing liberation theology were 'subversives' or 'communists' and flyers circulating at this time called on the population to: 'Be a Patriot! Kill a Priest' (Arnson, 1982:36). Between 1972 and 1981, approximately twelve priests were tortured and murdered by right wing death squads and the National Guard, and many others were intimidated by bombings and death threats. Nuns were not spared either. Countless suffered intimidation and harassment and on the second of December, 1980, American Maryknoll sisters Maura Clark and Ita Ford, Ursuline sister Dorothy Kazel, and lay missionary Jean Donovan, were raped and murdered by the National Guard on their way home from the airport (Montgomery, 1995:97).

⁶² In July 1975, for instance, Students marched in protest over the amount of money being poured into the 'Miss Universe' pageant when tens of thousands of Salvadorans lived in extreme poverty. Government troops opened fire on the peaceful protest killing at least 20 students and injuring many more (Schooley, 1987:540). Also typical of the mid 1970s, were the murders and disappearances of peasants in the town of La Cayetana near San Vicente. These peasants, members of the recently formed Union of Rural Workers had been engaged in a land dispute with local hacienda owners (Arnson, 1982:31).

⁶³ The purpose of such human rights violations, were, as the Mayor of San Salvador observed in 1977 'to instil terror in the population as a whole. In this way people come to accept the violation ... as something inevitable, a force that cannot be resisted' (cited in Arnson, 1982:31).

Of all the priests, nuns and parish-workers who were killed during this time for their commitment to the poor, Archbishop Oscar Romero has been the most celebrated. Originally chosen for this highest position in the Salvadoran church because of his political moderation, Archbishop Romero became a ray of hope for thousands of Salvadorans. Through weekly national broadcasts he denounced repression and pleaded for social justice and his cathedral became a focal point for the defence of human rights (Barry, 1991:189; Schooley, 1987:59). Romero chastised the oligarchy, 'you torture and kill and you love your money more than you love the people', and pleaded for justice with the military, 'in the name of God and in the name of these poor people ... I beg you, I implore you, I order you in the name of God ... stop the repression!' (cited in Sobrino, 1991:171). Thus, only months before his murder at the hands of a sniper acting for Major Roberto D'Aubuisson's death squads while celebrating mass in the chapel of the Hospital de la Divina Providencia (United Nations, 1995:354), Romero had sensed that his death was imminent. In February 1980, during an interview he gave to a Mexican newspaper, Romero had stated the following:

My life has been threatened many times. I have to confess that, as a Christian, I don't believe in death without resurrection. If they kill me I will rise again in the Salvadoran people. I'm not boasting, or saying this out of pride, but rather as humbly as I can. As a Shepherd, I am obliged by divine law to give my life for those I love, for the entire Salvadoran people, including those Salvadorans who threaten to assassinate me. If they should go so far as to carry out their threats, I want you to know that I now offer my blood to God for justice and the resurrection of El Salvador (Erdozain, 1983:353).

Romero's death, coupled with widespread election fraud, the economic crisis and continual repression of the popular movement (which culminated in the 1977 public order law prohibiting strikes, demonstrations, and any sort of 'subversive meeting' (Leo-Grande, 1983:101)), created a climate in Salvadoran society described by Murray (1997:11) as a 'pressure cooker heated by injustice'. In addition to this, the toppling of the 1979 reformist junta of junior officers of the armed forces by powerful officers of the army high command and the impunity with which right wing death squads operated,

was no longer possible to bear (Arnson, 1982: 41-47; Murray, 1997:13-14).⁶⁴ Resistances against the very foundations of the elite classes were so widespread that by 1980, when the five main revolutionary organisations coalesced to form the FMLN, full-scale civil war had already begun.

A Society at War: 1980-1992⁶⁵

The Final Offensive

On the first of January 1981, the FMLN launched its first general offensive. Named the 'final offensive' it aimed, in the view of Rafael Menjivar (1988:64), spokesperson for the FDR (The FMLN's political wing at this time), to consolidate areas of the country controlled by the revolutionary army, cause the military to disperse its troops throughout the country and to mobilise large contingents of the revolutionary army. While hardly a 'final offensive', within one month the FMLN had managed, with overwhelming support from the peasantry, to secure the provincial capital of San Francisco Gotera and the city of Metapán in Santa Ana province, force a revolt of the government troops in EL Salvador's second largest city, Santa Ana, destroy important Salvadoran air force installations, and launch a massive attack on the garrison in Chalatenango. In just one month, almost two thirds of the entire country had witnessed major military actions (Armstrong and Shenk, 1982:184).

As ambitious as the offensive was, however, the FMLN's *triumfalismo* (a belief that victory is certain) was short-lived. Imperfect co-ordination between the five fighting units of the FMLN's member parties, insufficient weaponry, a lack of presence in the capital and the difficulties the FMLN faced with endangering the position of its peasant support base, ensured difficulty and danger for future offensives (ibid: 185-186). The offensive was in the final analysis a costly exercise. Hundreds of guerrilla soldiers were

⁶⁴ The junta which consisted of reformist business and military factions and several former opposition party candidates, attempted wide reform including land reform but were unable to stem the tide of widespread repression by rightist factions supported by the oligarchy. These factions eventually took over the junta causing the civilian parties to break with the junta (Booth and Walker, 1989:81; Tulchin and Bland, 1992:2; Diskin and Sharpe, 1986:11-14).

⁶⁵ Women's roles in the civil war will be dealt with explicitly in Chapter Seven.

killed while others fled into the mountains. From this time on therefore, The FMLN's focus was to be rural insurgency on a large scale, rooted in the mountains of the north (Danner, 1993:32).

For the guerrilla army, the 'people were [their] mountains' (Pearce, 1986:124) but for this honour, the 'people' would pay dearly. Below we briefly examine what it was like to live in guerrilla controlled zones during the conflict and the price paid for doing so.

Living Rural Insurgency

In the mountains of northern El Salvador, the revolution was organised through the complete restructuring of rural communities. Here peasant knowledge and experience would be called upon to sustain the life-lines of the revolution:

You would think it was difficult to understand all the tasks of administration of a place, especially for the peasants, many of them illiterate. But it really wasn't because the people knew what the needs were. We really know the function of each secretary. For the secretary of production and popular economy, we look for and elect a compañero who knows about farming, who himself [sic] uses a machete, a plough, who understands commerce. The compañeros involved in health need preparatory courses; the auxiliary health workers know how to manage a pharmacy and give talks on health. In education, there's usually a compa who can read, who has been to school until the fifth or sixth grade and has shown willingness to teach those who don't know. The same applies to self-defence. A compa is chosen from the militia who has shown he [sic] can guarantee successful retreats when the army invades. Those responsible for the PPLs have much to do. There are no grand and easy solutions, but slowly we are learning things (participant, cited in Pearce, 1986:244).⁶⁶

The PPLs (Local Popular Power) the participant is referring to, emerged in areas the guerrillas had 'liberated' to provide an organ of local government and administration to a rural community (Pearce, 1986:241). This community, usually numbering from 200 to 600 people, consisted of guerrilla combatants and a civilian population who were both locals as well as those from other regions who had decided to join the struggle

⁶⁶ *Compañero/Compañera* can be translated as partner, friend or comrade. It is often shortened to 'Compa' in everyday usage.

(Thompson, 1986:122). Following the 1981 offensive, urban cadres also became members of such communities (Zamora, 1991:184).

While the PPLs were manifestations of political conceptions of the guerrilla army (namely that they reflected the establishment of people power as a political alternative to the 'illegitimate' authority of the Salvadoran government and military), they endured primarily because they answered the real and direct needs of the community (Pearce, 1986:242). In the liberated areas administered by PPLs, production and industry took place through co-operatives, land (expropriated from large landowners who had fled the area, or donated from small-holders) was communally held and preventative health and education relevant to the needs of the community was available to all. Although there were difficulties in maintaining such services due to lack of resources and training, for peasant families who had been accustomed to a subsistence diet of tortillas and beans, the availability of a glass of milk for their children, for example, represented a significant advance in their dietary intake (Thompson, 1986:122-124; see also Binford, 1997:56-79).

For all its benefits, however, life in the controlled zones especially during the first few years of the conflict, was a veritable minefield of danger and fear. For the FAES, there was no distinction between guerrillas and civilians (Danner, 1993:43). Their counterinsurgency strategy, as with Vietnam, took the form of a 'war against the people' (Armstrong and Shenk, 1982:195) and as such, it was particularly savage (Danner, 1993:43). It is hard to imagine the brutality suffered by Salvadoran citizens during this period. At the hands of the armed forces and their associated death squads (which had been institutionalised within the High Commands' intelligence sections by this stage (Montgomery, 1995:134)), tens of thousands of people were tortured, raped, murdered or made to 'disappear', and their homes and resource bases destroyed by napalm and shrapnel throwing bombs (Armstrong and Shenk, 1982:195).⁶⁷ By the end of 1981, 300,000 Salvadorans had fled to neighbouring countries or into exile in the US (Brauer,

⁶⁷ The damage caused by the use of such weaponry coupled with the mass movement of people away from the north and east to the central and south western section of the country during the war has added to the ecological disaster that characterises El Salvador's environment today (see for example, Murray and Barry, 1995:203; Barry and Ross, 1996:233-238).

et al., 1995:26) and it is estimated that between 1980 and 1982, some 25,000 civilians had been killed (Popkin, 1991:60).

In its 1981 report on human rights abuse in El Salvador, Amnesty International (1983:315) cited widespread abuses against alleged 'subversive' groups including academics, peasants, human rights workers, refugees, teachers and foreign journalists. In one exercise alone, a house to house search in a poor neighbourhood of San Salvador, the FAES detained 62 youths aged between 14 and 22. Two days later, their bodies were found dumped in two different locations. All showed signs of torture.

Massacres, where hundreds or thousands of civilians were killed in one swoop, were also common during this period. On May, 14 1980, in a joint venture between the Honduran army and the FAES, approximately 300 peasant refugees were slaughtered in their makeshift huts and in the Sumpul river where they had fled from the killing. Officially, these men, women and children were all victims of a massacre that never took place. When an American Catholic priest, Father Earl Gallagher attempted to expose the incident after citing dead and decaying bodies in the Sumpul river, he received death threats and was warned with expulsion by the Honduran government (Blundy, 1983:337-339).

The Massacre at El Mozote, a small hamlet in the north of Morázon, was similarly heinous (Photos, 7 and 8). On the 11th of December 1981, 800 soldiers of the crack US trained Atlacalt Battalion entered El Mozote. Three days later they left, leaving behind a carnage of burnt out buildings and the bodies of over 1000 men, women and children (Brauer *et al.*, 1995:249). Rufina Amaya, one of the few survivors of the massacre who had escaped death by hiding out in the woods, described her escape from the events of those horrific days in this way:

I was sitting on the bench with my kids ... when they came back [the soldiers] they began separating the women from the children. They pulled the mothers away leaving the children there crying. They took one group of women and then in a while they came back and took another. That was the saddest thing - little by little the mothers disappeared, and the house became filled mostly with crying children It must have been five o'clock. There were maybe twenty of us. I was crying and struggling with the soldiers, because I had my baby on my

chest. It took two soldiers to pull the baby from me. So when I came outside into the street, I was the last in the group. I was crying and miserable, and begging God to help me ... [the soldiers marched the women down the street past houses they had already 'cleansed'] ... The first woman screamed . 'There are dead people! They're killing people!' And everyone began resisting, hugging one another, begging the soldiers not to kill them. The soldiers were struggling with them trying to push the first women into the house. One soldier said, 'Don't cry, women. Here comes the Devil to take you'.... I was crying and begging God to forgive my sins Where I was kneeling I was between a crab-apple and pine tree. Maybe that was what saved me. In all the yelling and commotion, they didn't see me ... when I crawled between the trees (cited in Danner, 1993:72-73).



Photo 7 " They have not died, they are with us, with you, and with all of humanity" inscription on memorial plaque at El Mozote



Photo 8 Monument to the dead of El Mozote

Such appalling crimes against humanity did not, however, effectively counter the support for the FMLN amongst the poor in El Salvador. Following the 1981 offensive, the guerrilla army mounted several more successful campaigns against a Salvadoran military which, structurally governed by the *'tanda'* system,⁶⁸ was a hotbed of dysfunction and inefficiencies. The army was internally divided over the 1979 coup by young reformist officers and neither prepared nor equipped to contain an increasingly successful guerrilla army (Manwaring and Prisk, 1988:54-55). Thus, it was not superior guile and battle readiness that tipped the balance of forces towards the FAES by the mid 1980s, it was in fact, US economic and military aid that 'held the Salvadoran army together long enough to increase its size and capability so that it could effectively counteract the FMLN' (Booth and Walker, 1989:84).

As US involvement in the civil war arguably caused its prolongation, and hence, the continued misery of the Salvadoran people, it will be now discussed in some detail.

The United States Occupies Centre Stage

US involvement in Central American affairs has a long history. From as early as 1902, when US Marines were sent to Panama to put down a revolt that threatened its economic interests, the US had regarded Central America as a zone in which it could call the economic and political shots. The following excerpt from a 1927 state department memorandum clearly elucidates this point:

We do control the destinies of Central America and we do so for the simple reason that national interest absolutely dictates such a course Central America has always understood that governments which we recognise and support stay in power, while those we do not recognise and support fall (cited in Schooley, 1987:10)

⁶⁸ The tanda system allowed for graduates from the same class at the military academy to assist each other to jointly rise in grade until Colonel status is reached, making it impossible to combat abuses of power or corruption within army ranks (Murray and Barry, 1995:45-46; see also, García, 1992:95-104).

This control over foreign policy has historically taken three forms. Economic imperialism, such as the establishment of banana republics at the turn of the century, and the support of import-substitution industrialisation (namely US investors who moved their factories to various Central American locations) in the modernisation period was the first. Economic aid such as the USAID modernisation-type development packages sponsored by the Alliance for Progress was the second. The third consisted of covert counterinsurgency campaigns such as those which deposed the 1954 democratically elected Arbenz government in Guatemala. All three forms were initiated to pacify Central American communities who were threatening US economic and political interests in the region and to consolidate US leadership in the global arena as defender of democracy and freedom (from communism) (Barry, 1991:26-27; Burbach, 1986:80-84).

Couched in the rhetoric of this Cold War Realpolitik, El Salvador became the place for Ronald Reagan to 'draw a line in the sand' against alleged Soviet and Cuban sponsored communist aggression in Central America (Barry, 1991:15). Military aid, while relatively modest at \$5.9 million during the Carter years, increased dramatically under the Reagan administration to \$533 million by 1985 (Booth and Walker, 1989:83). Although US troops never officially set foot on Salvadoran territory (with the exception of US military advisers stationed in El Salvador), they were able to participate directly, in terms of intelligence, logistics and military infrastructural development, in the Salvadoran conflict from their bases in the US puppet state, Honduras, and through the training of Salvadoran military personal in the US itself (Schulz and Sundloff Schulz, 1994: 54-55,152-153).

US covert intervention in El Salvador was responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of Salvadoran citizens at the hands of death squads,⁶⁹ and it was US weapons and US trained battalions that killed and destroyed entire villages of civilians such as at

⁶⁹ The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) together with US green beret instructors, set up ORDEN (National Democratic Organisation) and ANSESAL (Salvadoran National Security agency), rural and elite paramilitary intelligence networks out of which grew death squads such as the White Hand (Barry, 1991:166).

El Mozote. Thus, as more information was leaked to the American public on what was really going on in El Salvador, it became increasingly difficult for Reagan to secure congressional support for continued military aid to a murderous regime which was internationally denigrated, lacking in support from the majority of the Salvadoran population and which had been held publicly responsible for the murder of peace seeking American citizens (namely the American churchwomen) (Arnson, 1982:65).

José Napoleón Duarte, leader of a moderate Christian Democratic Party that had enjoyed support from the US since its inception in the early 1960s (Montgomery, 1995:54), and the promise of free and democratic elections, became the bait by which Congress could be persuaded to prolong the civil war. This, tactic, as Sundaram (1991:137) explains, 'was partly a counterinsurgency technique carried over from Vietnam, where building popular support for the client regime was recognised as necessary to win war'. The elections, first held in 1982, would, according to Reagan (cited in MacDonald, 1983:19), 'give the suffering people of El Salvador ... a chance to vote ... to choose the government they wanted' and Duarte would become the candidate who would lead the country to peace. The fact that the threat of extreme violence against any manner of dissident speech was acute at this time, and that no party of the Left was able to organise or present candidates (Herman and Chomsky, 1994: 93-99), was of no matter. The elections were held, the media took their photos of long lines of voters (a result of the inadequate number of polling booths in San Salvador and in other large cities), and the US embassy was euphoric (Montgomery, 1995:160).

In fact, Duarte's Christian Democrats failed to gain the majority necessary to govern and it was a coalition of the extreme Right led by D'Aubuisson that took the reigns following the 1982 election (Vickers, 1992:28). Damage control was thus the order of the day, and the US government, through a series of initiatives which included calling on the army to keep D'Aubuisson 'under control' and to install a government of 'national unity', was able to convince its Congress that the Salvadorans were making progress in the three areas of agrarian reform, development of democratic institutions and human rights, that had been delineated by them (Montgomery, 1995:162).

Throughout the conflict, this type of misinformation endured. US reports would emphasise gains in all three areas while in reality human rights abuse, lack of reform, and control of the government by right wing forces continued unabated. This was because the Salvadoran government, as Herman and Chomsky (1994:50) stress 'was not centrist and reformist - it was a military regime of the Right, closely linked to the death squads, and it used them regularly as proxies'. Even when the US managed to successfully install Duarte as president in the 1984 elections (after channelling around two million dollars through the CIA and the Institute for Free Labour Development to ensure Duarte's victory (Norton, 1991:199)), real progress worthy of such reports still failed to materialise:

Duarte had little real power. He was not capable of fulfilling his electoral promises of greater justice for the poor and ending the war. He had not attempted to remove the legal obstacles blocking the implementation of the key phase of agrarian reform. His promise to prosecute human rights violators in a few outstanding cases had given way to government accusations that human rights groups were fronts for the FMLN. Despite his campaign promises to favour 'the majority' in economic policy, Duarte was implementing US designed policies which benefited the private sector and placed the burden of the economic crisis on the poor (Sundaram, 1991:143).

Hence, when the ARENA government, led by wealthy businessman Alfredo Cristiani seized power in 1988 in the wake of widespread economic chaos and corruption within the Duarte administration, it became increasingly difficult for the US to mask its real agenda: 'an obsessive opposition to the revolutionary movement' (Norton, 1991:202; see also Martín-Baró, 1991:307)', with its false objective of building a democratic nation with a strong social base. Focusing on the persona of Cristiani, an English speaking member of one El Salvador's most distinguished coffee growing families, who had received his degree in business administration in the US and who was untainted by the party's death squad origins, became one method (ibid:200-201). The constant vilifying of the guerrilla army as 'communist insurgents' endured as another.

From the very beginning, the Carter and the Reagan administrations had tried hard to link support for the FMLN to the Soviet Union, Sandinista Nicaragua and Cuba. In 1981 a white paper (based on evidence from 19 'captured documents') was released purporting to show these linkages in the form of arms shipments from 'Arab Radicals',

Vietnam, Cuba and Nicaragua (Moreno, 1990:90-91; Schooley, 1987:265). Inasmuch as the report was later acknowledged to have been overemphasised and unconvincing by White House officials (Armstrong and Shenk, 1982:200), it served as a 'justification for the Reagan Administration's determination to cast the issue of El Salvador in East-West terms' (Leo-Grande, 1983:109). The Reagan administration, in the final analysis, was not so concerned with El Salvador *per se*, but in how it could use the conflict to further its own geo-political ends:

El Salvador provides what appears to be a geopolitically safe testing ground on which the United States can probe the depths of Soviet commitment to national liberation struggles, assess the cooperativeness of the allies, and begin to purge the national psyche of the 'Vietnam syndrome' that Reagan ... so denounced (ibid:110).

Accordingly, by the mid 1980s, continued US military aid was allowing the FAES to gain ground against the guerrilla army (Booth and Walker, 1989:85). High intensity conflict had been replaced by low intensity warfare and this signalled the usurpation of 'unbridled terror with a policy of cooptation and more selective repression' (Zamora, 1991:185).⁷⁰ In the countryside, the government's United to Reconstruct Programme (URP) saw the establishment of development organisations and programmes which were dependent on the government and the armed forces. In those areas where this 'development' was deemed unlikely to succeed, the armed forces continued to work on 'draining the water from the fishes' or depopulating conflict zones in order to starve the guerrilla army of their support and resource base (Barry and Castro, 1991:112-113). For those forced to migrate into the cities, the impact of depopulation was worsened when a massive earthquake hit San Salvador in 1986, killing close to 4000 people, injuring thousands more and destroying large areas of the city's infrastructure and housing. This event, coupled with rising unemployment and increases in the cost of living, caused incredible misery amongst the urban poor (ibid:114).

⁷⁰ Interestingly, the mid 1980s were also a time of increased protestantisation of the Salvadoran population. While some Salvadorans believe that the rise of conservative Protestant sects in El Salvador can be linked to a wider project by US imperialists to defeat leftist movements (Williams and Peterson, 1996:879), commentators who have researched this thesis suggest instead, that one of the principle reasons for Salvadorans joining Protestant sects during this time was their desire to seek solace in a religious doctrine that was viewed as apolitical. Thus, Protestantism became a survival strategy rather than an explicit ideological transformation (Aguilar, Sandoval, Steigenga and Coleman, 1993:136).

The FMLN Re-Groups

While the urban poor may have been spent, the FMLN, despite FAES reports to the contrary, were not (Murray, 1997:28). In response to the FAES' low intensity warfare, the FMLN changed its tactics, breaking down its larger brigades (which usually numbered between 200-1000 troops), to small units of eight to twelve persons. These units were charged with carrying out small to medium scale attacks but occasionally would regroup to implement larger operations. The FMLN stepped up its economic sabotage activities at this time also, costing the country around 300 million dollars a year and tying up government troops in the protection of economic infrastructural targets (Sundaram, 1991:146-147). In many ways this tactic placed further strain on the poverty and movement of the guerrillas' support base. When the FMLN blew up the main bridge that carries the Pan American highway over El Salvador's principle river, the Rio Lempa, it was if a powerful blow against national unity had been struck (Murray, 1997:5).

In addition to its operations in the countryside, the guerrilla army had also begun to rekindle its support amongst urban cadres. During 1988, urban commandos had successfully attacked economic and military targets in San Salvador, and in November 1989, the FMLN launched a massive offensive with simultaneous attacks on over 100 military targets throughout the country. The guerrilla army held large areas of the capital, including some areas of affluent Escalon. The guerrillas even installed themselves in the Sheraton Hotel for a period of seven days until aerial bombardment by government troops forced them to abandon their positions (Murray, 1997:5,15).

The 1989 offensive was the turning point in a civil war that had up to this stage claimed around 80,000 victims and exiled one in six people (Booth and Walker, 1989:85). For those citizens not directly touched by personal loss, the civil war had caused unprecedented hardship economically and socially. The collapse of El Salvador's agro-export economy, for example, saw real wages for agricultural workers drop 63 percent

between 1980 and 1991,⁷¹ and the entire population was left reeling from the extreme polarisation and divisiveness that characterised every sector of Salvadoran society (Murray, 1997:14, 28). Thus, when, during the 1989 offensive, an elite US trained FAES unit entered the Jesuit run University of Central America and murdered six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter, it became clear to all actors in the civil war, that the nightmare had to end (Murray and Barry, 1995:xviii). This single act spoke volumes as to the impossibility of the FAES ever being a force for democratisation.

For the US, the end of the Cold War, the election of a more pragmatic US administration in the 1988 election, and the lessons of the 1989 offensive, proved that there was no longer any geo-political point in continuing the conflict in El Salvador. In a report titled 'Violations of the Laws of War on Both Sides', *Americas Watch* (cited in Montgomery, 1995:220) summarised the US position in El Salvador following the offensive in this way:

After nine years of a stubborn defence of the Salvadoran regime, and after more than \$4 billion have been spent in propping it up, the urban offensive of November 1989 has put the Bush Administration once again in the awkward position of defending the indefensible. It is clearly not enough to say that A. Cristiani is an elected official. If he has effective control over his country's armed and security forces, then he is ultimately responsible for the unspeakable abuses that those forces commit, as well as for those committed by shadowy death squads with close links to his own political party. If he is in fact powerless to exert any meaningful control over them, then the Bush administration fiction that the U.S. supports a legitimate government is really no more than a thin veil to cover up its support of a murderous military.

As for the FMLN, there was growing international disquiet about its role as an armed movement resulting from human rights violations perpetrated by its own cadres.

⁷¹ It has been estimated that the civil war cost the economy over two billion US dollars. Exemplary of this cost was the 22 percent decline in agricultural production for export and the 21 percent decline in industrial output over the course of the war (Meza, 1992:107-108).

The 1990 election loss of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua also saw it without any real regional or international support (with the exception of Cuba) for its prolonged revolutionary war (Vickers, 1992:48). All parties including war weary Salvadoran citizens, the elite, the US and the FMLN had a vested interest in ending the war and thus, by early 1990, the road to peace finally began.

The Peace Process

In 1984, when newly elected President Duarte first attempted to enter into a dialogue for peace with the FDR-FMLN, it was clear that the government's negotiating position was nothing short of a propaganda exercise aimed at presenting the 'democratic face' of the new government to the international community. In 1984 and later in several other thwarted attempts at negotiations, the government had failed to acknowledge the inequalities in Salvadoran society that were the root of the civil war as part and parcel of their negotiating position. By May 1990, however, when the ARENA government and the FMLN sat down together with the United Nations in serious negotiations, flexibility had finally prevailed over rigidity (Barry and Castro, 1991:104).

The Salvadoran journey to peace which began in Esquipulas in 1987 with the heads of Central American States registering their desire for peace in El Salvador, was kick-started anew in Caracas in May 1990 with the setting of an agenda for subsequent peace talks. Following this, the San José Agreement on Human Rights established a mutual commitment to human rights, even as the war continued and gave the job of monitoring this compliance to a UN commission ONUSAL (The United Nations Observer Mission in El Salvador). Next came the Mexico agreement of April 1991, which planned the establishment of a Truth Commission and worked out amendments to the constitution which were needed to reform the armed forces and the electoral and judicial systems. Finally, the agreement signed in New York in September 1991 set aside a percentage of positions in the newly established National Civilian Police force in return for a cessation of demands by the FMLN for its units to be integrated into the armed forces. This agreement also set in place another monitoring body, COPAZ (The National Peace

Commission) which would co-ordinate and supervise the implementation of all peace agreements (Murray, 1997:21). Thus, by December 1991, following the signing of all the above agreements, the ARENA government and the FMLN announced that they were ready to sign an accord on January 16th 1992 that would enact a cease-fire as of February 1st 1992 and establish lasting peace in El Salvador. The main tenants of this accord, known as the Chapultepec Accord, are summarised below in Table 3:

Table 3: The Chapultepec Accord

ARMED FORCES AND NATIONAL CIVILIAN POLICE	ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL QUESTIONS	POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF THE FMLN
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mission of the Armed Forces is to defend the sovereignty of the state • Education of the armed forces to include scientific and humanistic studies and to be overseen by an academic council appointed by the President of the Republic • Armed forces should be purified in accordance with an ad hoc commission and impunity will be ended • Forced recruitment will cease following cease-fire • National Civilian Police under the control of civilian authorities will be established to safeguard public security and the National Guard, the Treasury Police and all paramilitary bodies will be abolished • Police will be trained by a National Public Security Academy and former FMLN combatants along with members of the National Guard may join once trained 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agrarian reform including: the transfer of state owned lands not in forestry and land in access of the constitutional limit of 245 ha to intended beneficiaries of agrarian reform process • legalise current land-tenure system in conflict zones • Government to ensure that the national financial system has the resources needed to meet the demand for credit in the agricultural sector and in micro and small scale enterprise • Government will put in place measures to alleviate the social cost of Structural Adjustment Programmes including the establishment of a forum to work out agreements concerned with economic and social development • The Government will institute a National Reconstruction Plan designed to facilitate the reintegration of the FMLN into civilian life and to promote integrated development initiatives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FMLN to be legislated as a political party • FMLN combatants shall be able to exercise fully their civil and political rights • Freedom to be granted to all political prisoners • Full guarantee of security for the return of exiles, war-wounded and other persons currently residing outside the country due to the armed conflict
<p>THE JUDICIAL SYSTEM</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The composition of the National Council of the Judiciary should guarantee independence from the organs of the state and from political parties • A National Council for the Defence of Human Rights will be appointed 	<p>THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An electoral commission is to be set up by COPAZ to promote a comprehensive reform of the electoral system 	<p>CESSATION OF THE ARMED CONFLICT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cessation of the armed conflict will be effective as of 1st February 1992 and shall be completed on 31st October 1992 • Both parties to follow measures put forward in this document to achieve this cessation

Adapted from United Nations Document: El Salvador Agreements: The Path to Peace (1993)

The Chapultepec accord set in place a system which would not only end the civil war but also, through its reform of the army, the institutions of the state and socio-economic conditions, eliminate its root causes (Boutros-Ghali, 1995:23). Whether the grand promises of the accord have transformed post-war Salvadoran society into the kind of place where the root causes of the civil war are now only a distant memory, is subject to much debate. Below the nature of contemporary post-civil war Salvadoran society will be examined with particular reference to the position of women.

Contemporary Salvadoran Society: Will Peace Endure?

Violence and Mental Health

When the United Nations Commission of the Truth published their report in 1993, calling on some of the main perpetrators of human rights abuse during the war to be dismissed from their positions or disqualified from holding public office, and recommending that measures for national reconciliation be undertaken immediately (United Nations, 1995:379-386), Salvadoran society was in a state of disarray. Twelve years of bloody civil war had transformed the fabric of society into one characterised by social polarisation, violence and lies (Martín-Baró, 1990:28). Values ceased to have collective significance, as the 'good guy' 'bad guy' mentality prevailed and corruption, deceit and violence were endemic (ibid:29-30).

During the conflict, violence was channelled into the destruction of the enemy, but now in contemporary society, this violence has been normalised. Society learned during the conflict that violence had an instrumental value, and thus violence is rationalised today for similar reasons (ibid). In 1997 the World Bank rated San Salvador as the second most violent city in the world after Johannesburg, South Africa (Cristina Ibáñez, author interview, 1997). According to public opinion polls, Salvadorans consider crime, stoked by the persistent presence and availability of firearms, to be the most serious problem in their country (NACLA, 1995). Thirty four percent of respondents to a

February 1993 survey by the University of Central America said that either they or their families had fallen victim to robbery in the past four months (Stanley, 1995:45). Furthermore, in an additional national survey that took place in June and July of 1996, 79 percent of all respondents identified crime as the number one problem they had to face in their day to day lives (Montgomery, 1997:1).

A 'culture of violence' is a notion employed by Nordstrum (1994:17) to emphasise the,

...formative nature of violence ... [a nature that] ... does not pass through a society, leaving it unmarked when it ends ... [but instead] ... demands a reaction, and the reaction to ... [that] ... violence takes violence as a template.

This culture of violence is evident everywhere in contemporary Salvadoran society. On occasions, during the course of my fieldwork, I found myself overwhelmed by it:

More deaths today on the news. Yesterday it was one robber shot dead by a guy on the bus he'd tried to rob and today it was another one - this time a vigilante guarding the commercial area the robber entered - It's so unbelievable the way the killings are reported in the press - it's like no big deal whatsoever that someone has been shot dead - they (the press) actually revel in zooming in right onto the body that is lying dead on the pavement in a pool of blood (general field observations, 22/10/1997)

Signs outside my local supermarket in San Salvador politely asked customers to leave their guns at the entrance and if one rented an apartment which had the telltale graffiti marks of the gangs or *maras* outside, you were, according to many locals, making a big mistake (Photos 9 and 10).



Photo 9 "Please leave your gun in the entrance": sign outside supermarket, San Salvador



Photo 10 Mara graffiti on city market

These gangs are a relatively new phenomenon in Salvadoran society and are yet another product of violence that has become normalised especially in the psyches of Salvadoran youth.⁷² They have their antecedents in the Los Angeles neighbourhoods where several hundred thousand Salvadorans made their home in the 1980s (Montgomery, 1997:61), and not surprisingly, the two main rival gangs, numbers 13 and 18, are named after two of the most popular neighbourhood streets. Like the gangs of North America, they are involved in international crime such as stolen car rings and black market weapons trading. In the years following the signing of the peace accords, their methods have become increasingly violent (Murray and Barry, 1995:72):

Read in the newspaper today about another attack on a family by a gang in San Miguel. Apparently the family had a relative living in the States and was therefore 'at risk' of robbery. But the family wasn't just robbed of course. Four members of the family were viciously murdered - they were beheaded and their faces chopped up - all, it seems, for their stereo (general field observation, 1/11/97).

For many Salvadoran citizens, the presence of the gangs predominantly in poor communities, represents yet another war to fight. Marta, a participant whose brother was stabbed to death by a gang in retaliation for a member's death, describes the fear engendered by the gang presence in her community that led her family to take matters into their own hands:

You see they came into our land all the way inside ... and we couldn't stand it any more The leader, he was throwing stones at my nephew. They wanted to take him and so they came to kill him. That night 30 men were here, and they confronted him [the nephew] came face to face with him. We had some money saved up and used it to buy something with which we could protect ourselves ... [after the death of the gang leader] I felt really bad, I was waiting for the men to come back and rape the girls, since so many men would come here. Then my brother was coming home from visiting a couple of friends and that's when they got him ... [crying].... When we got there my brother was still warm, he was badly hurt, they had stabbed him 75 times (Marta, author interview, 8/10/1997).

⁷² Children who were building their identities during the war have been impacted upon the most, according to Martín-Baró (1990:35). They only know how to identify with the social relations of conflict - that is, violence.

Violence against women in El Salvador's post-war environment is also endemic. Having intensified during the civil war because of what Enloe (1993:1) has labelled, 'the pressures of a civil war fuelled by classic Cold War anxieties', violence against women in 'peace-time' visits many on a daily basis. Salvadoran women's organisations estimate that 57 percent of women are physically abused by their life partners in their own homes, a figure which would further increase if sexual and psychological violence is also taken into account (Las Dignas, March, 1997:6). While rape against women outside the home is officially recorded at four per day, some women's organisations again estimate that this figure represents only five percent of the actual rapes taking place.

In addition to these shocking figures, fifty one percent of all women workers are said to experience sexual harassment and blackmail on hiring, and throughout their working lives (Las Dignas, March, 1997:6). On a positive note, however, violence against women is finally receiving official recognition. The media are participating in making this violence visible and recent legislative changes have made rape a public crime which no longer requires a witness for validation (Montgomery, 1997:62).

Despite these small advances, the psychosocial trauma caused by the war and by the continuance of this culture of violence in contemporary society should not be underestimated. Using the categories of social class, involvement in the conflict and the duration of involvement in the conflict to determine the impact of the war on the mental health of the Salvadoran people, Martín-Baró, (1990: 24-30) believes that although all Salvadorans have been impacted by the civil war in some way, their experiences in relation to their mental health will differ. The direct impact of the war for the poor, for example, has already been discussed in this chapter. For the middle and upper classes, however, Martín-Baró, (1990:33) stresses that although they did not feel direct impacts of the war like the lower classes, they still experienced a 'radical questioning ... toward their social position and life schemes'. This questioning caused shock and then aggressive denial characterised by a mania of pleasure and a sense of living life for the moment. Thus, while the urban elite sip cocktails in their private clubs, poor rural men lie comatosed on cheap spirits in the doorways of rural towns (general field observations, 1997).

Martín-Baró (1990:38) believes that the only way possible to reconstruct Salvadoran society is through 'humanising relations'. Hence, the social relations of violence that have characterised Salvadoran society for centuries have to be altered. Next, the ability of the institutions set up by the peace accords to initiate this social change will be examined.

Elections and the Police Force: The New Players

The election of 1994, dubbed in the country as the election of the century, was seen as a test case for so-called freedom and democracy in the new El Salvador. While it represented a defeat for the Left with the ARENA party capturing 68.35 percent of the vote as opposed to the FMLN's 31.65 (Lehoucq, 1995:179), the election nevertheless operated within conditions of relative freedom of movement and association, a stark contrast to the show elections of the 1980s. Notwithstanding these conditions, it would be incorrect to hail the 1994 elections as an example of democracy in action in El Salvador. The idea that a party of the extreme Right which had been associated with death squads and which represented the wealthy minority, could be victorious in a country like El Salvador, reinforced, according to Montgomery (1995:268), 'one truism known to every serious student of politics: elections do not equal democracy'. Serious irregularities in the areas of electoral registration and identification saw that, by election day, 300,000 out of a possible 2.7 million voters had not received their election cards (Lehoucq, 1995:181). Along with these technical problems, human rights groups reported increased death squad activity against opposition candidates which culminated in the gunning down of three FMLN candidates, one of whom was killed in full view of his three year old daughter (Murray, 1997:31).⁷³

The establishment of a professional civilian police force (PNC) was fraught with similar difficulties. Creating a totally new institution in a post-war environment characterised by social dislocation, economic insecurity and the availability of armaments, was an

⁷³ Brauer *et al.*, (1995:41) point to the financial advantage and political experience of the ARENA party and a distrust of the newly formed FMLN as some of the reasons why the FMLN lost the 1994 election.

extremely difficult task. Hence, when the government took actions which threatened the spirit of the peace accords in relation to the development of the PNC, such as supporting policing groups that operate outside of police command structures, fears about the remilitarisation of law and order arrangements in El Salvador were further realised ((Spence, Dye, Lanchin, Thale and Vickers, 1997:17; Stanley, 1995:34). Given the context for their establishment, nonetheless, much has been accomplished. For the first time in the history of El Salvador, women have been included in the mechanisms of law and order (albeit while discrimination continues), and importantly also, the old security forces which caused untold repression have gone (Murray and Barry, 1995:149-150; Spence *et al.*, 1997:17).

With the reduction in security forces that characterised the creation of the PNC, however, crime soared and human rights abuses once again surfaced. Watchdog organisations such as the South and Meso American Indian Rights Center (1997) have documented abuses such as the murder at the hands of the Jaquar Battalion Death Squad of the an entire family who were members of the National Association of Indigenous Salvadorans (ANIS). Amnesty International (1993:121), in its 1993 report, also spoke of a resurgence of death squad activity following the signing of the peace accords. They noted that this violence was most often targeted at individuals and groups with links to the FMLN and cited an example of a prominent member of the National Council for the Defence of Human Rights who was left paralysed after an attack by two unidentified gunman just days after the council was appointed in July, 1992. Throughout this violence, poverty, itself a product and an example of violence, has endured.

Economic Inequality and the Battle for Poverty Alleviation

The structural adjustment package initiated and followed through by the ARENA administrations of Aldo Cristiani and of Calderon Sol under the tutelage of international financial institutions, installed a neoliberal model of economic reform. This was aimed at rolling back the state to increase the role of the market and reorienting the economy towards export led growth in non-traditional exports such as shrimp, textiles and melons (Murray, 1997:28). By its own measurements, this reform

in the post-war context has been extremely successful. According to Segovia (1996:61), the economy is now,

Less protected externally and more reliant on market mechanisms for its internal functioning ... the space for accumulation by the private sector has been expanded through the process of privatisation and a reduction in the size of the state ... [and] ... in addition to consolidating the support of the international financial institutions, this structural change has generally reinforced the confidence of the private sector, with favourable effects reflected in the modest but sustained recovery of private investment.

Economic growth has increased throughout the post-war period reaching as high as six percent in the early 1990s, and inflation has been kept under control at around seven percent (Wood and Segovia, 1995:2080; Drake, 1996:76). The colon (the country's national currency) has remained relatively stable and reserves of hard currency have increased (Murray and Barry, 1995:78). In recent years however, this growth has declined to as low as 3.4 percent (in 1996) and has been mainly associated with the creation of foreign owned *maquilladoras* or factories (Montgomery, 1997:62).

The massive influx of remittances, El Salvador's largest single source of foreign exchange, has managed to stave the initial social impact of this structural adjustment package by virtue in one instance, of their redistributive effect especially amongst the poorer sectors of society (Segovia, 1996:5). Despite this, the institution of neoliberal reform has not rescued Salvadoran society from its traditional traits of poverty and inequality.⁷⁴ Crucial to our understanding of this failure, is, as Boyce (1996a:3) suggests, the 'lamentable lack of co-ordination between economic policy and the peace process'. It has been as if the UN on the one hand and the IMF and the World Bank on the other have been treating El Salvador as a patient's body 'lying on the operating table with the left and right sides of ... [the] ... body separated by a curtain and unrelated surgery being performed on each side' (de Soto and Castillo, 1994:74). The government has not committed the necessary resources needed to fulfil the agreements in the peace process and because of this, many of its principle measures to initiate social

⁷⁴ Remittances which had reached \$US 965 million by 1994, are highly dependent on changes to US immigration policy and as such are an unstable source of foreign exchange (Murray and Barry, 1995:89). During the course of my fieldwork the Salvadoran government only just managed to stall changes to US immigration laws which would have witnessed the expulsion of thousands of Salvadorans from the US.

transformation and thus consolidate peace, have not been realised.⁷⁵ The government's National Reconstruction plan, a requirement of the peace process, aligned itself too firmly with the market-driven ideology of structural adjustment and as such, has not been able to deliver the kind of integrated development package that would promote a viable economy in which consultation could be practised and communities' ideals and aspirations taken into account (Murray and Barry, 1995:102; Binford, 1997:71). In fact, it has been argued by the FMLN, that the government has discriminated against oppositional NGOs' participation in the reconstruction process in previously conflictive areas and has thus ensured that the vision of sustainable development enshrined in the peace-accords will be difficult to achieve (Murray, Coletti, Spence *et al.*, 1994:16-18, 50).

One pertinent example of this has been the delay in the peace accords' programmes aimed at the transfer of land to former combatants and to those, mainly poor peasants, who had occupied lands in war zones (Spence, *et al.*, 1997:35). In their 1994 (p. 20) report on post-war reconstruction, Murray *et al* reported that out of the 32,500 potential FMLN beneficiaries identified by the UN in 1992, only a quarter have received title to a piece of land. The statistics are even more striking for the 15,000 potential ex-government soldier beneficiaries. The same authors reported that only 2,872 of these beneficiaries had received title to land by mid-February, 1994. While it has been identified that the main difficulties in implementing the programme have been bureaucratic, technical and political in nature, it is clear that the government's insistence on market-driven principles has caused real problems for the implementation phase of this extremely important initiative (Spence, *et al.*, 1997:35-37).

Most importantly, poverty, acknowledged by the peace accords as the root cause of the civil war, has increased as the social impact of the government's structural adjustment programme places further burdens on the economic lives of the poor (Murray and Barry, 1995:148; Murray, 1997:29).

⁷⁵ The IMF has reported that in 1992, El Salvador allocated the largest amount of total government spending to defence (16 percent) and the smallest amount to social security and welfare (3 percent) (cited in Boyce, 1996a:4).

The Feminisation of Poverty in Contemporary El Salvador

As women in El Salvador have historically been over-represented in poverty statistics, an account of the feminisation of poverty in contemporary El Salvador is a useful tool for understanding the depths of poverty existent in Salvadoran society in the post-war context. It is also relevant in the context of this thesis which looks at the experiences of predominantly poor women who are the principal beneficiaries of Las Dignas' gender and development programmes.

As a starting point, if we hold with the well tested theory that female headed households are poorer than their male counterparts for a variety of reasons beyond the scope of this chapter (Chant, 1997:48-63), then in El Salvador, where almost one third of households are headed by a female (Lazo, 1996:76), poverty will obviously be widespread. In urban areas for example, 66 percent of female headed households are considered to be poor in comparison to 59.6 percent of male headed households (Herrera, 1997:242). While female headed households and poverty do not always equate,⁷⁶ a 1992 study of the six Central American countries showed that El Salvador and Nicaragua had higher levels of female headship among the poor (cited in Chant, 1997:49). In both female and male headed households, the double working day for women is common and this contributes to the vicious cycle of continuing poverty and lack of personal autonomy (Herrera, 1997:244). Laurens Manning (1997), a New Zealand medical student who spent 3 months in El Salvador on his elective placement, describes the daily life of a typical patient in a rural area as follows:

The typical patient would be a woman, approximately 38 years old and early into her 16th pregnancy. Her husband has left the house - leaving her with her 12 children at home (the other four died). Every day she gets up at 4am to make tortillas, feeds the children with the meagre food, does all the household chores - often on an empty stomach - to fall into bed last, exhausted It is not surprising she has anaemia, tiredness and pain in her whole body but it is frustrating because the solutions to her problems are: time, decent food, rest and

⁷⁶ There are, of course, female headed households in all socio-economic strata and many studies have shown that women are often better off economically as lone-parents than in a partnership with a male (Graham, 1987:57; Lewis, 1989:595).

*freedom from sexual subjugation - not half a dozen Voltaren and thirty days worth of vitamins.*⁷⁷

The gendered division of labour in paid as well as unpaid work also contributes to the feminisation of poverty in El Salvador. In general urban women receive salaries that are 71.5 percent of those of men and in the large urban areas make up 69.3 percent of workers in the informal sector (Herrera, 1997:243). Prostitution has become for some women, the only viable way to earn sufficient money to feed their families (Holy Smith, author interview, 5/11/9).

In the much hailed export processing zones, a product of the governments trade liberalisation programme, where 80 percent of the labour force are women (Murray and Barry, 1995:148), sexual and psychological harassment is commonplace, wages are often below the minimum wage of US\$4.40 per day and labour rights are severely restricted (Dijkstra and Alemán, 1996:104; Drake, 1996:92; Murray and Barry, 1995:148). In the following testimonial on labour conditions in the *maquilladora* where she worked, Judith Yamira Vera, an eighteen year old Salvadoran elucidates these points:

The supervisors often screamed at the women, They would hit us with the shirts and tell us to work faster. Even though we worked a 14-hour day, we were only permitted to go to the bathroom twice The women are not allowed to go to an outside health clinic even though they deduct medical insurance from our pay. Instead if a woman feels sick, she must go to the plant's doctor. He takes advantage of the situation to give them contraceptive pills so they won't get pregnant (cited in Briggs and Kernaghan, 1996).

In other social indicators of the impact of structural adjustment such as health, Salvadoran women also suffer. To this day there remains only one maternity hospital in the whole of the country: some 609 specialised beds for the 150,000 births that take place per year. In 1992, El Salvador had one of the highest rates of maternal mortality in Latin America, and it is estimated that around 70 percent of mothers received no prenatal care (Murray, 1997:37). While the majority of Salvadoran women still lack

⁷⁷ Officially, Salvadoran women have an average of four children. My observations during my fieldwork in El Salvador, however, align with those of Laurens. In fact, a large percentage of my research participants had given birth to 10 or more children.

control over their own fertility due to the influence of the church and family, the government's health programme for women launched in 1996 under the banner 'Salvadoran Women Your Health is First', is primarily concerned with population control measures (Dra. Delgado, author interview, 20/1/1998). Abortion remains illegal in El Salvador and it is estimated that complications from illegal abortions are the leading cause of death amongst Salvadoran women of child-bearing age (Murray and Barry, 1995:147).

Machismo contributes to Salvadoran women's particular experience of poverty which is further reinforced by the economic mechanisms of structural adjustment. Participants in my research project describe their experiences of the above features of the feminisation of poverty in contemporary Salvadoran society in the narratives below on household responsibility and economic insecurity:

I've always had the short end of the stick since they operated on him eight years ago to take out ... what they call hernias When you look at him you can see he is a little overweight, he can't work any more. So that's why I say that growing old with your spouse is not easy Once I had to attend a meeting with a priest and the young men and women and I told them 'the husbands and companions are always enjoying other women, drinking, and one is left in the house with the children trying to make sure you have food' (Mama Telle, author interview, 8/10/1997).

I earn a living by washing clothes, ironing and the bread I sell If they tell me to make tortillas, I do, if anybody asks me to do anything I do it (Maria, author interview, 15/10/1997)

If only I had a job, maybe just a little one ... you could cover all the expenses, your needs that you have at home The only thing you can grow here is sorghum, and because there was a drought this year ... I'm not going to be able to get corn Who knows if it'll be enough for next year, if I'm alive (Angelita, author interview, 17/11/1997)

We are poor and even if we have a piece of land in which to live, we don't have enough money to build something ... we are just trying to survive (Lidia, author interview, 1/10/1997).

It's worse [since the end of the war] ... robberies are worse, and they kill for nothing The unemployment, they ask as a minimum requisite a high school diploma, and there are so many people illiterate here From this is where all the vandalism comes from, its causes are poverty (Haydeé, author interview, 17/11/1997).

Despite the appalling conditions that characterise the lives of many Salvadoran women, it would be wrong to leave the impression that these women appear as victims. To do so would deny these women the agency which has enabled themselves and their families to survive the tragedy of centuries of oppression and which today contributes to the possibility for long-lasting peace in Salvadoran society. Salvadoran women seem infused with a special kind of vitality that can only be described as strength. They are the ones who, at the end of a long day of toil, still find time to laugh with their families and to share dreams with their friends. That the many Salvadoran women's organisations that have formed in the post-war context are so successful (a point which will be examined in Chapter Eight), is no coincidence. Their constituents are the best kind of human capital.

Summary

Commencing with an exposé on the rise of resistance against oppression in the 1970s, Chapter Six has charted the economic and political features of the Salvadoran civil war. It has discussed the horrors of a war where the civilian population is targeted as the enemy by the military and it has shown how, by the early 1990s, the promise of peace could become a reality in El Salvador.

Following on from this examination of the civil war, this chapter then examined the state of contemporary Salvadoran society. It showed that while there is certainly more freedom of expression and movement in present day El Salvador (it is now legal for example, to fly Che Guevara banners in public places), for the majority of the population, the prospect of lasting peace is still a long way away. While some feel hopeful that the recent election results of March 16 1997, which saw the FMLN victorious in 53 municipalities (governing nearly half the country's population), may allow for the institution of a system of government committed to genuine social change, others feel that a government of neither the Right nor the Left will provide the necessary ingredients to transform Salvadoran Society into one in which all citizens feel they can belong and participate.

The discussion in this chapter has established an understanding of the context in which my research took place. Because its analysis of poverty and inequality in post-war El Salvador was achieved through an examination of the feminisation of poverty, however, Chapter Six has also established an understanding of the subjugated position Salvadoran women still occupy in the late 1990s in relation to their gender and class. While Chapter Eight will examine the dynamic and successful work being done by women's organisations to reverse this position, this next chapter, which focuses on women's experiences of the civil war, will identify the specific needs of women that arose from the civil war.

Chapter Seven - Women's Experiences of Conflict in El Salvador

Introduction

The previous chapter discussed the horrifying events of the civil war in El Salvador. It showed that this war, which raged for twelve long years and which was explicitly supported by the United States (US), was responsible for the deaths of over 70,000 civilians and combatants, that one in six people were exiled, and that thousands of others were forced to disappear. It showed that the civil war caused unprecedented economic hardship and that the entire population was left reeling from the extreme polarisation and divisiveness that affected every sector of Salvadoran society.

In addition to these losses, the previous chapter also examined the resistance to injustice that had characterised El Salvador's political history and which was played out in the FMLN's military campaign against the Salvadoran government's armed forces (FAES). It highlighted the struggle of rural and urban working class people to create a better life for themselves and their families through participation in the FMLN's campaign, and it found signs of hope in the political changes that had taken place since the formal cessation of the civil war in January, 1992. What the previous chapter did not show, however, was specifically how this loss and resistance was experienced by women.

Martín-Baró (1990: 32) stressed that the categories of social class, involvement in the conflict and duration of involvement in the conflict, influenced individuals' experiences of the civil war in El Salvador. What Martín-Baró failed, or was unable to see, however,⁷⁸ is that the social construction of gender, a category which is in itself overlaid by class and ethnicity, *also* influenced the way the civil war was experienced. Gender influences the way men and women experience conflict. The fact that women

⁷⁸ Ignacio Martín-Baró, was one of the Jesuits murdered at the University of Central America in 1989.

are constructed in many societies as 'the keepers of culture' or as a 'man's property', for example, makes them particularly vulnerable to rape in times of conflict. Further examples of the gendering of conflict were discussed in Chapter One. Understanding how conflict is gendered is thus necessary if we are to improve our understanding of the outcomes of conflict on the human community and to deconstruct the myths which have been assigned to women as the 'collective other to the male warrior' in historical and contemporary contexts (Elshtain, 1987:3-4).

This chapter will use the analytical category of gender to analyse the experiences of women's participation in the civil war. Drawing from fieldwork observations, in-depth interviews and previous research conducted by Las Dignas and others, it will examine, in relation to the main themes which have emerged from this research, how the social construction of women in Salvadoran society has been simultaneously challenged and reinforced by this participation. Throughout this analysis the questions of whether participation in such a conflict has in itself led to empowerment, whether this experience has in fact been a disempowering one, or whether aspects of both empowerment and disempowerment are evident, will be mooted. Finally, the disempowering impacts of the civil war El Salvador will be further discussed in terms of Salvadoran women's mental health.

Women's participation in the Civil War

Forms of Participation

Analogous to other struggles for national liberation in Central America (see for example, Randall, 1981 on Nicaragua), women participated in the Salvadoran conflict in great numbers. Dependent in part on social class factors (insofar as social class influences where and how Salvadoran women live their lives), Salvadoran women joined what was seen as 'the struggle' for a wide variety of reasons. For middle-class urban women for example, romantic and idealistic notions of a better society, often influenced their decision to join the FMLN:

My involvement in the war was conscious but dream like, romantic, it was the idea that to give oneself to others was the best way to live life, to construct a more just, more humane society where there wouldn't be so much sadness in the eyes of the people. I remember this clearly, how this was an initial idea of mine, that there wouldn't have to be more sadness in the eyes of the people Since my childhood, I assumed responsibilities for others, and it was great to organise. It attracted a lot of people with whom I felt a sense of belonging (participant in Las Dignas self-help group, Garaizabal and Vázquez, 1994:34, translated by author).⁷⁹

On the other hand, in rural areas, where persecution by the FAES was a daily occurrence, a decision to join the FMLN may just as likely have been motivated by fear:

I joined the 'frente' [the FMLN] when I was fourteen years old. When I joined I was afraid of persecution I wasn't conscious of what I was doing, only that I was afraid of being in the community, that they would capture me, what I mean is. I thought it would be more difficult for them to find me in the frente (participant in Las Dignas self-help group, Garaizabal and Vázquez, 1994:35).

Thus, participation in the FMLN represented something of a safe haven for many women. As Matilde observes, 'I was more afraid living here [in San Salvador] than back there [in the rural areas] because the FMLN were guiding us, helping us, getting us out of places so that nothing could happen to us' (author interview, 1/10/1997). For some women living in conflict zones, then, joining the guerrillas may not have been so much of a conscious choice based on political beliefs or a utopian vision of society, but rather, simply a matter of survival.

⁷⁹ From this point on the reader should be aware that all quotations from Garaizabal and Vázquez have been translated by the author.

For other women, however, the principal reason for becoming involved in the struggle was the influence of family. Witnessing their children/husbands/brothers/fathers experience torture or death at the hands of the FAES or their associated death squads, forced some women to participate, while for others, the need to support and nurture family members who were guerrillas was also a contributing factor. Matilde for instance, talked about participating more directly in the FMLN by moving to a guerrilla controlled zone in the mountains once her son became a guerrilla soldier. Notwithstanding the fact that her decision to move her family was also based on the repression they were experiencing at the hands of the FAES, Matilde felt that by being close to her son, she could help him and the other 'boys' cope with their difficult life in the mountains (group observation, 24/9/1997).⁸⁰

Haydeé, who joined the guerrillas at the age of eleven, was influenced by her family in a slightly different way. Her parents declared themselves guerrillas in 1980 and from then on she lived in a guerrilla controlled zone. Growing up in that kind of family and community environment meant, therefore, that Haydeé had no choice but to join the struggle:

I was young when they joined [around the age of nine]. The guerrilla army opened a school where they only talked about Farabundo Martí They told us why there was a need to have a war, and so they made me realise many things. I was very convinced that I had to participate and that surely I was going to be killed, but I knew why (author interview, 17/11/1997).

In addition to the influence of family, the importance of the popular wing of the Catholic church in motivating women to participate should also be referenced. As Thompson stresses,

It is hard to underestimate the influence of the Popular Church in the lives of Salvadorean women who have become involved in the opposition movement. For many it has been the crucial eye-opener, the starting point for what many describe as the transformation of their lives and their commitment to revolutionary change (1986:47).

⁸⁰ The guerrillas are often referred to as 'the boys' by participants.

For Mama Telle and Marta, for example, their involvement with a Christian Base Community was accompanied by support for the 'boys' despite the fact that they, themselves, were never guerrillas:

[I didn't participate] with the boys, only the church Well, the only thing is that when we had our meetings at the church we collected money, a contribution for the boys. It was this kind of help only: we never ran around with them, we only knew what they were doing, how their work was going (author interview, 8/10/1997).

There were times where I would kneel down and I would ask the Lord that if I was involved with something that wasn't right, being involved in the community, I asked to please take me out then, I asked for him to put obstacles to what I was doing. Sometimes we allowed people who were combatants to spend the night in the house, or we kept medicine or food for them. Maybe I collaborated, but I wasn't part of any organisation/communist party, but I did help in a way (author interview, 8/10/1997).

The murder of Archbishop Romero, in addition, was almost a watershed for the participation of many women. In my interviews and conversations with participants, the death of Romero became a reference point by which political involvement or commitment to the struggle could be measured. 'After the death of Romero', Lillian observes, 'we became involved in the struggle around the San Vicente region'. 'After the death of Romero', Haydeé states, 'my mother and father declared themselves guerrillas' (author interviews, 17/11/1997; 24/11/1997). While the intense repression that existed at the time of Romero's death may have also influenced women's participation in the FMLN, there is no way to deny the depth of feeling Romero engendered in Salvadoran women. Marta, a participant, and Bernanda, a member of a women's group in Suchitoto talk about Romero in the following ways:

Monseñor was killed on the 24th. That day we were at a meeting from the church when they killed him. Monseñor was really a man of the people, he participated. If they told him to come to San Antonio Abad, he would come. We really loved him a lot and we still love him since we know he is with us (author interview, 8/10/1997).

You mentioned Amatitán. I survived the massacre [over 200 men women and children were killed]. My little girl and I survived.... They [the FAES] were killing everyone then. They lined up the children, then the women and the old people. I buried myself in the ground and threw grass over my little girl and

me I kept saying, "The blessed blood of Monseñor Romero" I escaped to a place a little further off I feel that Monseñor Romero saved me from that massacre.... Later, I had a little boy who was deaf and dumb. I took him to specialists and my little boy didn't get better I became discouraged and I went to cry at the tomb of Monseñor Romero, and I told him about my son. I gave him his name. Now my son can talk and hear. He's called Oscar Arnulfo, Monseñor Romero's name. He hears, he speaks, he goes to second grade, he is big and dark [like Romero was] (cited in Best and Hussey, 1996:109).

Hence, through the influence of the church, family, political beliefs, fear, and romantic ideals of a better society, women participated in large numbers in the opposition movement against the Salvadoran government and the FAES. And just as the influences for this participation were varied, the actual forms this participation took were also diverse. When Cecilia Criollo, a spokeswoman for the ERP (one of the five member organisations of the FMLN) toured Germany in the early 1980s, she stated that approximately 40 percent of the military commanders of the ERP were women (cited in Women's International Resource Exchange, circa 1980:4). In reality, however, women's participation in the opposition movement as military commanders and combatants was less marked than their participation in other forms of revolutionary work (Thompson, 1986:127).

Nevertheless, women did 'take up arms' in infantry battalions and occupied important command positions in the guerrilla army. Anna Guadalupe Martínez, for example, who is now a member of parliament for the FMLN, held one of the highest command positions in the FDR, and the late Commandante Ana Maria was second-in-command in the FPL. The all-women Sylvia Battalion's defeat of the US trained Atlacátl and Ramon battalions in February 1982, also became a famous example of women's participation in the opposition movement as military combatants (Thompson, 1986:127-128). Official estimates of wartime participation by Salvadoran women (calculated for the purpose of compensation following the peace-accords) state, however, that out of a possible 16,000 combatants in the guerrilla army, only 2000 were women (Dr. Mendoza, author interview, 3/11/1997).

Women combatants in the guerrilla army lived and worked in both rural and urban settings. In rural areas, their work included that of paramedics, radio-operators and front

line troops. In urban areas, particularly in San Salvador, women combatants were responsible for providing logistical support to the guerrilla front line, attacking the economic and military interests of the government and the FAES, lessening the pressure of the armed forces in rural areas, supporting and assisting the work of the mass popular organisations, and creating terror among the dominant classes (Murguaiday, Olivera and Vázquez, 1997:24).⁸¹

In contrast to women combatants living in rural areas, who often resided in guerrilla controlled zones, women combatants in urban areas resided in the heart of enemy territory where the FAES had control and where repression was constant. Their work thus took on a clandestine nature which many described as living 'a double life' (Murguaiday, Olivera and Vázquez, 1997:24). At all times they were expected to maintain the principle of the '3 D's', that is, discipline, discretion and distrust, and this burden, along with the continual fear of discovery, made life particularly difficult for urban combatants (ibid.):

One could hardly ever think when you were having to live a life of different roles. You only thought about how you had to behave depending on the place or who you were with. It's certain that in the night I would go to bed tired and with a great need to cry because I thought it was too much for me I also felt that victory was a long way away. A lot of things that were done didn't advance the process. It continued the same way for a long time. This was what caused me some frustration and sadness (Sonia, cited in Murguaiday, et al., 1997:26).

Out of my 15 participants with whom in-depth interviews were performed, only three could be described as FMLN combatants. Haydeé was a guerrilla soldier who worked as a radio-operator and paramedic for the FPL. Lillian was part of the PRTC for two years before she sought refuge in a camp in Honduras, and Norena worked clandestinely for the FMLN for about a year in San Salvador, distributing propaganda and generally 'helping out' (author interviews, 17/11/1997;24/11/1997;16/10/1997). Thus, the majority of my participants, consonant with women's experiences of participation in general, participated in the opposition movement as civilian collaborators.

⁸¹ All information and quotations from Murguaiday *et al.* (1997) have been translated by the author.

If civilian collaborators as a group can be described as the back-bone of the FMLN's campaign, then women civilian collaborators were the heart. Exploited mainly for their traditional roles as mothers, cooks, nurses, cleaners and carers, women civilian collaborators cared for, provided for and nurtured the guerrilla army, setting aside any desire to question this sexual division of labour, to ensure a final victory for the revolution (Vázquez and Castañeda, 1996:46).⁸² In urban areas too, women civilian collaborators were also exploited for their traditional gender roles. Because women are seen as unthreatening, they were often called upon to provide essential support, especially for the FMLN's military campaigns in the cities:

We use older women in the urban organisations. These women go out with their children and in their bags and baskets, instead of carrying nappies or extra clothing for their children, they have the bombs or weapons which we will use a few blocks further on (interviewee for Radio Venceremos, cited in Thompson, 1986:127).

Often middle-class educated urban women would collaborate in the struggle by providing their skills in guerrilla controlled zones. Margarita, for example, spent two years living in a guerrilla controlled zone in the mountains as a popular educator. Her task was to teach basic literary skills as well as some English to the guerrillas and their civilian base (author interview, 9/12/1997). Ana, in addition, worked for a year as a member of a team charged with political education and intelligence in a guerrilla controlled zone in the centre of El Salvador. She was studying journalism at the National University in San Salvador when she was approached about the work (Ana, cited in Thompson, 1986: 125).

For other participants, however, collaborating with the guerrilla army was simply not an option. For many of the women in the Berlín Group who had spent the civil war living in zones which were controlled by the FAES, but constantly under attack by the FMLN, participating in the FMLN would have spelled certain danger. As Julia, for example, observes:

⁸² All information from Vázquez and Castañeda (1996) has been translated by the author

because they visited us [the FMLN], the soldiers came by and then the FMLN again, maybe asking for food. You couldn't take anyone's side, because if you took one side, the other would get mad, so I took nobody's side If we had done so we wouldn't be here today (author interview, 14/11/1997).

For these women then, as well as for other participants who had lived in similar environments before moving to San Salvador, participation in the civil war was a complicated feat of negotiation and fear, compounded by poverty and the threat of losing children to the struggle. Hence, the FMLN, rather than protecting and caring for these women, often only contributed further to their fear and insecurity:

Like I said before, through struggling and fighting we could finally afford to have some animals. Then the war broke out and I didn't want to move like other people did. I prayed to God that he would give me strength, because I had so many children. We suffered, - they [the FMLN] took our horse, the water, and they took our other animals (Elena. author interview, 14/11/1997).

I couldn't move because I couldn't move all my children. Where could we move to? I didn't have any money to move either or a mode of transportation to do so, and so I told my children that we would have to have faith in the Lord Then a lot of them [the FAES and the FMLN] would go to the houses and take anything they wanted. During this time, my husband took one of my sons who was fourteen years old [to join the guerrillas] and he got shot. I went to pick him up and told them that in his condition he really wasn't much help. They agreed and I took him, but they said that as soon as he was back on his feet he had to come back again. I also agreed. I brought him back home, and he never wanted to leave again (Francesca. author interview, 14/11/1997).

There were confrontations between them [the FAES and the FMLN]. Once in La Palma, they were hungry and I gave them some food.... Towards noon that same day gun fighting started and thank God it started from below where one of my sons was living. Another day some people passed by the place where we were and killed a cow.... The man said that this cow was not for the guerrillas and one of the guerrillas heard him and killed him.... You were always escaping. At night I would throw myself to the floor and grab the flashlight and run outside I dreamt and dreamt that men came by and that they had cut up my sons with a 'machete', and that the army was coming (Sylvia, author interview, 14/11/1997).

I was laying down one night, and the boys came over [the FMLN, around 15 of them] and said 'we want to eat'. I said I didn't have any food to give them. I said I could give them tortillas if they wanted. Then they told me to stand up and give them the tortillas. I had a pot of beans that I had cooked that day and a very bad tempered man was searching my house and found it I was shaking out of fear that something was going to happen to me. They took the tortillas

and the pot of beans and the next day they wanted food again. I only had two tortillas and eggs, so they took the eggs. They kept coming night after night. I made sure I had enough maize ... so I had enough food to give to them. I lived in fear. I thought about how my children [there were 10 living at home at this time] were left with no food because they ate it all. In the mornings I couldn't find any food to give to my children. They came around asking for food for a month (Lucila, author interview, 1/10/1997)

Thus, for all these women who were involved in the civil war in different ways, participation had both its empowering and disempowering impacts. This next section will discuss these impacts with particular reference to how they challenge traditional gender roles.

Participation as Empowerment/Disempowerment

As discussed in Footnote 39, in reference to Latin American women in general, Salvadoran women are socially constructed through the ideology of *marianismo*. Where *machismo* assigns to men 'natural' superiority and power over women, *marianismo* assigns to women the role of self-abnegating, self-sacrificing mothers. Women, according to these ideologies, are passive and caring, while men are strong, bold and fierce warriors. Women stay home and look after the family, while men go out to provide for and protect the family.

Hence when women actively participated in the opposition movement in the many roles discussed above, they *were* challenging the social construction of their sex in Salvadoran society. This opportunity to challenge traditional gender roles was not only profoundly empowering for individual women, but it also challenged the perceptions of the men with whom they lived and worked:

The first time I came up against a women comandante ... I realized just what a macho I was at heart. I felt it was wrong. Wrong to trust a woman with the responsibility of leading a hundred soldiers on a mission. I was convinced she would muck the whole thing up! (Pedro, 1983, cited in Thompson, 1986:127).

I learned a lot during the war, in the sense of being a woman. I learned that I have equal capacities like those that men have, because before that women were

taken for granted by men ... what I mean is that now, they believe that you are incompetent, and in the war they saw that we were capable of doing the same kinds of things that they did. Of course when talking about physical strength we are not going to be the same, because they have more of it ... but in the way we think and make decisions, I think we are equal (Haydeé, author interview, 17/11/1997).

Participation thus gave some women a sense of confidence in themselves, as well as a sense of their own capabilities. For others, it gave hope and the knowledge that life could be changed for the better. For Margarita, for example, her experience of living in a guerrilla controlled zone instilled in her a belief that people could live in peace and harmony. She described life in the controlled zones as one of 'respect and solidarity' and she was amazed at the sense of community engendered when 'each person got what everyone else got' and work was 'shared' (author interview, 9/12/1997).

For Matilde, her work as a 'camp Mum', even though it failed to challenge her traditional gender roles, was also empowering. For almost the first time she felt as though she was appreciated for all the cooking, cleaning and caring that had characterised every day of her life since she was a child. She remembers fondly living with 'the boys', cooking huge meals of beans and tortillas for them, and how that would call her 'Mama' (group observation 20/8/1997).

Due to ingrained beliefs on the 'naturalness' of women's reproductive roles amongst Salvadoran society, women were exploited by the guerrilla army principally for such roles. While some, such as Matilde, felt that they were given the respect they deserved for providing these essential roles, others felt that they received little, that the cleaning, cooking and caring services they provided 'the boys' were simply expected and not seen as a real contribution to the struggle (Vázquez and Castañeda, 1996:46).

Respect and equality was not always guaranteed for women who participated directly in the struggle either. It was often extremely difficult to shift ingrained beliefs of women's inferiority to men and because of this, women were generally under-represented in, or not given recognition for, positions of responsibility in the guerrilla army:

I knew men who simply refused, or at least found it very awkward, to salute a women military leader who was their superior in the ranks. It just went against the grain. So the male comandantes would make a special point of saluting women comandantes in front of their troops as an example for them. But even now, a woman has to achieve much more than a man in order to gain respect or 'promotion'. She has to be triply brave, triply astute on missions to win the recognition a man would receive (Claribel, 1983, cited in Thompson, 1986:127).

I felt discriminating attitudes which caused me much anger. On one occasion I mounted an operation that I was totally responsible for and it turned out really well. One day before one of my colleagues left (who was responsible for the zone and because of this took all the merit) they interviewed him on Radio Venceremos. No one, not even him, made a mention of my participation (participant in Las Dignas self-help group, Garaizabal and Vázquez, 1994:38).

In addition to these disempowering effects of participation, collaborating and participating in the opposition movement also resulted in the perpetration of gender-related violence against women. For some, this violence took the form of harassment and intimidation by the FAES, while for others, it meant rape, torture, the disappearance of family members and imprisonment. Suspected of being guerrilla sympathisers, Norena and her family, for example, suffered months of intimidation at the hands of the FAES during the 1989 guerrilla offensive of San Salvador:

They [the soldiers] camped anywhere they pleased, they didn't even ask permission. They came and stayed here. I was afraid at night because my husband left for work at night and sometimes my mother-in-law left too. There were about ten soldiers here in the house, and I was afraid of being left alone. So when they saw I was coming into the house, they were already standing there in the corridor. That gave me so much stress and I felt even more fear. I said to my mother-in-law that we were going to take everything out so that we didn't have the need to go into the house any more. But one time we were watching TV, they wanted to watch it too, and they were smoking and drinking. My husband told them not to because we had a small child. They told my husband that if he didn't want them coming inside the house to watch TV, he should take the TV out for them. They would watch TV until two or three in the morning. They stayed for about three months. They cooked where we cooked, and bathed where we bathed so they felt as if they were home until they picked up their things and left (author interview, 16/10/1997).

Living in this atmosphere of harassment and fear was particularly disempowering for Norena who had witnessed the gang rape of a neighbour by the FAES in the kitchen of her home when she was a young girl and who had been terrified of soldiers ever since. Although neither she nor her mother-in-law Lidia explicitly stated the fact in their

interviews with me, it seemed clear particularly in Lidia's testimonial, that either Norena herself or Lidia's grand daughters, had experienced sexual harassment and even rape, during this period. Lidia talked, for example, of how the soldiers were always 'harassing' Norena and her grand daughters and how since her grand daughters were 'getting older' that they lived with this 'preoccupation'. These vague statements were accompanied by facial expressions and knowing looks, which seemed to suggest that we (Natalia and I) should be aware of what she was talking about without her having to actually say it (author interview, 1/10/1997).

For those women who were imprisoned by the FAES, rape and sexual torture was a universal experience. As with the rape and sexual torture inflicted on Latin America women from the Southern Cone described in Chapter Three, the FAES and its associated death squads used rape and sexual torture as a method of disempowering their women captives. Ana Guadalupe Martínez, for example, describes the gender-related violence inflicted on her when kidnapped by a group of men in civilian clothes. She recounts their statements as follows:

[They shout at her] "Shoot the whore". "No, no. Hold her nose and choke her! Beat her up!"

[They tie up her arms and legs, they cover her head and face with a cloth and throw her to the floor of the car, beating and insulting her]

"You know why we picked you up, you whore. You're Ana Guadalupe Martínez and we're gonna fuck you. Look at 'er'!. Some ass she's got. Lets take her to the river bank. That's where we'll screw you, ya whore".

[After arriving in prison she is interrogated, forced to reveal her real name and is subject to further sexual harassment and rape]

"It'll be better for you if ya tell us; if not, you're gonna end up with black and blue tits "This bitch is gotta get fucked. We're not gonna let 'er get away without that are we, are we?" "Aw, lay off. It's my turn anyway" . "Help me hold her down, so she can't yell." "Aw the sarge's going to come along and get his turn first." "Hurry up, help me." (cited in Women's International Resource exchange, circa 1980:24-25).

Ana Guadalupe Martínez goes on to describe the psychological torture she was forced to endure while imprisoned:

Suddenly I hear the sound of people clattering up the wooden steps, then the sound of a key turning in the lock, and I know that I am in the presence of my executioners. They come close and then kick me; some of them bend down and I feel their hands all over me, as they whisper obscenities. Being nude adds to my sense of helplessness and I feel all the more vulnerable Every time the door opened I expect the torture, the abuses, to begin again. That is precisely what they want a woman to suffer (cited in Women's International Resource Exchange, circa 1980:25).

While seldom acknowledged by commentators on the Salvadoran conflict or by women participants of the struggle, my conversations with Salvadoran women, as well as research conducted by Garaizabal and Vázquez (1994:89-92), have revealed that women participants in the opposition movement were also subject to sexual violence at the hands of their male *compañeros*. Being raped by a fellow member of the FMLN was perhaps even more disempowering for women who felt not only demoralised by the experience, but also, that their commitment to the struggle had been betrayed:

The party used women. It has hurt me the way people were treated, especially the way women were treated by the leaders. The problem was that we formed idols, that we couldn't believe that those compañeros that we respected could destroy us. For those three months I was in 'el frente', a compañero raped me. He was the boss and it was horrible because he had seemed like the best man of all the men that were in the camp. I entered with a romantic idea of the war. That the 'boys' were the best and the most courageous.... I had the idea that there [in the camps], there were the best people, an example for the rest. And it was totally the opposite. They treated us women very badly. I was very disappointed (participant in Las Digans self-help group, Garaizabal and Vázquez, 1994:90).

Although the FMLN ostensibly punished the perpetrators of rape severely (Thompson (1986:130), cites, for example, punishments such as imprisonment in a hole in the ground for 15 days), in reality, many rapes went unreported. This may have been because women felt that their own fight for justice should take second place to that of the people's struggle, or, as in one case that was reported to me, a woman who was raped by a comandante felt that she had neither the power to go through with a formal complaint nor the resolve to cope with the inevitable accusations of lying and divisiveness she would be made to shoulder by the community (general field observations, 1997).

Thus, by participating in the opposition movement, women found their traditional gender roles simultaneously challenged and reinforced. These challenges led, at times, to a sense of empowerment for many women, while for others, the disempowerment which had been the traditional hallmark of their gender, was only entrenched.

Next, we examine further disempowering and empowering impacts of women's experiences in the civil war through another significant theme to have emerged from my research, that of 'flight and movement'.

Flight and Movement

Life during the civil war for my participants generally entailed some form of flight or movement. Lucila and Matilde for example, migrated to San Salvador during the early and mid 1980s. Lilian, Paula and Angelita became refugees and spent a part of the war living in a refugee camp in Honduras. Haydeé moved camp with the guerrilla army on a regular basis during her active participation in the conflict. For all participants, therefore, there was a need to hide out and flee from the FAES on an intermittent basis.

These flights or *guindas*, as they were called, were a defining event of the Salvadoran civil war. Described by Wendy Shaul (1990:12) as, '[being] on the run or [evading] government forces during an invasion', *guindas* occurred frequently in the lives of my participants. In rural areas they were forced to hide out in the 'meadows' and 'mountains', often for years at a time, while in San Salvador, they left their homes to sleep outside or to stay with relatives who resided in non-conflict areas. For all participants, these *guindas* were a dislocating and traumatic experience:

It was a very cruel life, sour, because I was never calm with all the trouble of having to sleep in the mountains for one night or for another. How can one think this is nice? - leaving my house with everything in it, since I only took my children. One time we had to leave when I had just given birth (Julia, author interview, 14/11/1997).

We had to hide in San Vicente for more than two years. After this we continued to escape ... my sons were alive then. We got out of there and [into] this new area to the North of the river Lempa, where we stayed for another year. When

we went back home we had nothing since they [the FAES] had burnt our houses and burned our crops - we had nothing, no pots, no pans. Our story was the same for another year, sleeping in the meadows with no water. Maybe we would find a house we could cook in. Maybe some compañeros would give us a handful of corn ... (Lilian, author interview, 24/11/1997).

At night we went to the meadows to sleep in a little piece of land that we own ... people were crying ... do you think this is a calm life to live? (Sylvia, author interview, 14/11/1997).

My mother, my mother in law, my brothers - we were a lot of people in one house. We heard bombs day and night, gunshots and everything. The road that goes by here goes up to the volcano, and so they came down this road and did what they had to do. Two days after that we left the house, it was necessary. We felt as if we were going to die ... we only spent one night outside, first of all because we didn't have any relatives nearby and secondly, we could only stay at a hostel where things weren't clean. Having such a young daughter, I wasn't even comfortable bathing her. So we decided to go back home and we put our fate in God's hands (Norena, author interview, 16/10/1997).

[Talking about escaping to Honduras to flee from the FAES] because we didn't have any money over there and the money from here was no use over there, the father of my children had to come back to buy corn. One day when he went back to buy corn, they [the FAES] were waiting for him - that's when they killed him So after I was left alone, I didn't know where to go to find corn. Because there were other compañeras there from the same place I used to live, we made a little group and together we crossed the river We came to look for corn We didn't have any Honduran money to buy corn and even if we did, we couldn't find anybody who would sell it to us. I lived like this with my children for six months (Angelita, author interview, 17/11/1997).

Then there came a guinda ... thousands and thousands of soldiers came in and we had to escape, in the rain, night and day, starving for eight days without food, the young children crying (Matilde, author interview, 1/10/1997).

Experiencing *guindas* with children was particularly difficult for participants to bear. Not only did they suffer the anxiety of having to find food for their families in such trying circumstances, but also, they had to take on the responsibility of keeping their children quiet to avoid discovery when the FAES was near. As a result of this terrible responsibility, mothers, on occasions, would smother their babies. While this was not the situation which occurred for Paula, she still blames herself for the death of her baby during a *guinda* of eighteen days duration. With tears streaming down her face, and with several of her other 13 children embracing her in comfort, she recounted the

horrifying event to me. Because I was only able to take notes rather than tape the interview, however, I am forced to describe her story in my own words.

The *guinda* was sparked by the rape and massacre of forty teenage girls in the village where Paula and her family originally came from. The massacre was horrifically brutal. The soldiers stuffed rifles into the girl's vaginas and when they screamed too loud they cut out the girls' tongues. Paula was forced to flee with her family into the mountains. They had no food and water was scarce. Helicopters were dropping bombs all around them. Her youngest child was just a baby and was becoming severely dehydrated. Because of this he was listless and couldn't take the food or water she tried to feed him. This situation continued for 18 days, during which time, her baby starved to death (author interview, 24/11/1997).

With the exception of those participants from Las Dignas' Berlín Group who resided in conflict zones for the entire civil war, most participants were eventually able to find some sort of refuge from the above traumatising situations. Lucila and Matilde, for example, moved to San Salvador and although they were still caught in the midst of the fighting in the 1989 offensive, life was not nearly as dangerous as it had been in their respective rural villages. Paula, Angelita and Lilian were offered refuge in a camp in Honduras shortly after the aforementioned *guindas*.

For the latter group of participants, nonetheless, this refuge was hardly the sort of support they needed to survive the remainder of the conflict unscarred. Again, the social construction of gender made them vulnerable to both gender-related violence by those who were providing them refuge, and feelings of disempowerment for failing to fulfil their role as nurturing and caring mothers:

someone came to take over the camp, it was a Salvadoran, he was from the FMLN He was very strict even though he knew we had suffered a lot. We couldn't do anything because he would punish us He would make you do a certain task for 15/20 days, or he would lock you in a room, or he would ask you to dig a hole, kill you there and then bury you He acted like a military man. The people he was nice to were the ones who did everything he told them to do - that's when he treated them well and gave them food There was a time when all the food went to him, and he took it all. When we would ask for a little bit of

sugar, he would say there was no sugar and that sugar was bad for the children Of course there was always sugar available for him. They gave us our little rations and if you went for more, you were treated badly, you were insulted I suffered a lot having four children there since another thing he would do is punish the children without any reason to, just because the child would go to another street, for example. He would make all the decisions about everything. You couldn't speak your rights, and the children were punished for a long time - that's why I was very sad when I was living there. There were very small children who received horrible punishments He would lock them in a room, naked, when it was very cold. He would make them take showers very early in the morning or he would burn the children's skin with candle wax (Angelita, author interview, 17/11/1997).

They told us that there was a camp in Honduras, and that they were going to take the children too. I was pregnant at the time with Roquivel. I didn't want to go because I didn't want to leave the children. They told me that I could only take the younger ones, only two of them and that the rest had to stay. That's why this was hard for me, because from the moment I left, I started crying and crying. I was in the camp for maybe two months and there was no consolation. I would cry at night. How would I get news about them [her children]. They had no food to eat! (Lilian, author interview, 24/11/1997).

After living in refugee camps for long periods, many women, such as Angelita and Lilian, returned to their own communities to rebuild what had been destroyed or were given the opportunity to set up new communities in areas of El Salvador which had previously supported large *haciendas*. These repopulated communities, as they came to be called, were often highly successful models of community development and as such, women were integrated and involved in all aspects of community life (Juliá, 1995:230). In her report on a repopulated community she visited in 1990, for example, Juliá stated that women were so active in their community's development because, 'an established gender-free division of labor [in the repopulated communities] encourage[d] and reinforce[d] equality in participation' (1994:69). She reported that the community would assign tasks based on community need and the availability of an individual's time, rather than on cultural constructions of sex roles. Conflict arising from the value assigned to men and women's labour was also not an issue in the repopulated community studied as, 'the community administers and distributes goods and services ... making irrelevant the issue of measuring work as a purely economic contribution' (Juliá, 1994:69). In terms of the actual roles women took on within this communal environment, Juliá reported, moreover, the active participation of women in key

community roles such as decision making, religious education, health promotion and teaching (1994:69-70).

Thus, when we examine the impacts of women's experiences of movement and flight during the civil war, we see how complex these experiences really were. In some ways, for example, the opportunity to move from difficult living conditions opened improved access to resources and services, ensuring that some of women's practical gender needs were met. This certainly seemed to be the case for Lucila, whose ability to care for her family in San Salvador was made easier through ready access to electricity and running water. Moving to repopulated villages, in addition, gave women the opportunity to challenge their traditional gender roles and thus must have also been empowering for many.

On the other hand, being forced to flee, and/or to relocate their homes, was also a disempowering experience for many participants. Matilde remembers, for example, how 'good' her life was in the countryside. Even though she recalls the economic hardship associated with this life, she stills feels that it was preferable to her life now. In the city, she feels dislocated and alone. She feels that her family takes things for granted, that her son does not appreciate the luxury of having good food to eat (group observation, 20/8/1997). According to Ernesto Cordoba, a psychologist working with the non-governmental organisation ACISAM, many women relate their experience of repopulation in similar ways. In one community, whose members were repopulated after 10 years of living in a Honduran refugee camp, they do not plant lemon trees to make the popular lemon *refresco* enjoyed by the majority of the population, because they do not feel that it is their home (author interview, 4/11/1997).

Disempowerment was also experienced by participants as a sense of impotence in being unable to fulfil their ascribed roles as nurturers and carers of the family unit. Furthermore, we saw how 'flight' rendered women targets for abuse and perhaps gender-related violence. Again, while it was not explicitly mentioned in any of my participants' testimonials, we can speculate that some may have experienced rape or other forms of sexual abuse in the refugee camp in Honduras, given that they reported constant 'harassment' by Honduran soldiers and that such forms of gender-related

violence were commonplace for Salvadoran women in refugee camps (author interviews, 1997).

Such a complex array of disempowering and empowering impacts were also a feature of women's experiences of motherhood and sexuality during the civil war. It is to these third and fourth research themes that we will now turn.

Motherhood

When we speak of the cultural construction of women in Latin American societies, what we are predominantly referring to, it seems, is both the way women are viewed and exalted as mothers (inside the sacrament of marriage), and chaste pure virgins (prior to marriage). In view of this, the changes or challenges that took place in the areas of sexuality and maternity during the civil war, arguably represented the most significant of all the changes and challenges to gender roles that took place. Certainly, women's experiences of motherhood and sexuality had an enormous impact on their sense of well-being during and after the war.

During the civil war, many Salvadoran women were, for example, separated from their children. For those who became guerrillas, an FMLN imperative of having no children at the front line, meant that they were forced to leave their children in the care of others. Often those 'others' would be family or friends of the family, and often children were left in care for long periods at a time (up to six or seven years). For other women, separation was due to the fact that their children had become guerrillas. But for still other women, this separation was neither purposeful nor short term. Rather, the civil war was defined by the death or disappearance of their children.

Interview data and fieldwork observations reveal that very few women who were involved in the opposition movement were spared the death or disappearance of a child. Living through such a loss, is, at the best of times, a traumatic experience. The healing process is long and painful and it requires the expression of grief and the support and guidance of family and friends (Herman, 1997). For those women who lost their

children during the civil war, however, these coping mechanisms were often either non-existent or unable to be employed. Women were prevented from grieving because it was not only dangerous to do so (open expressions of grief signified to the FAES a relationship between the griever and the FMLN and therefore put the griever and her family at risk of reprisals), but also, because of a further FMLN imperative of 'not grieving for lost ones' (Garaizabal and Vázquez, 1994:68-70). Haydeé, who lost three brothers and sisters during the conflict, explained to me that the FMLN had this policy because the war 'had to do with strong people' and that 'they couldn't really pamper us' (author interview, 17/11/1997). For other participants who had lost their own children, nonetheless, this imperative was not quite so easily understood:

In '84, after we had been here for a year [in the refugee camp], they killed Chente. He was a guerrilla and he was 16 years old. My other son was 14 years old and Haydeé was 12. They told me not to cry, they told me to feel comfort because of the fact that he had been involved in the struggle. He had said that if his time was up, he was OK with that, that he would rather die fighting than be captured and killed. He died on December 1st. He had left and told me that he was coming back for Christmas and to have new things for him since he suffers a lot. Fifteen days before Christmas I was starting to get a few things together - every eight days food was brought here. I had bananas, zapotes, pineapple, I had everything for him! Well the 20th went by and the 24th ... I didn't have a life there. I would get up at 10 pm at night and wait for him. Then dawn broke and I got desperate because I couldn't find him. My heart was aching Then one night I went to bed with fear I heard them come and say we've got news for Calete [Lilian's partner]. I fell to the ground screaming. I knew it was him They said to me to accept the news because that was the way wars went and ... that because of my reaction the soldiers were going to find out that they were guerrillas. I told them that I was going to say that they had nothing to do with the FMLN, that I was the mother of the guerrilla and that if they wanted they could take me. But I couldn't easily accept the news [she cries] My other son died sending me messages He was just a young boy, 14 years old They buried him and last year ... we contacted the man who buried him. We unburied him and took him to Santa Clara. I go every year to visit his grave and put flowers on it He is in a small box, like as if he were a kid, there were only little bones left My other daughter was killed with another 80 children [during an FAES massacre] We asked the FPL to tell us where their bodies were so we could pick them up, but it never happened. So that is all that I can say. There are a lot us of mothers who have suffered There are only a few that have all their children alive. The majority had their children murdered (Lilian, author interview, 24/11/1997).

That man [the Salvadoran controller of the refugee camp mentioned earlier] used to have meetings with the youth to try and get them to participate in the war. Some went, others refused and he punished those who refused. And so my son decided to go and he maybe lasted about a year. He had been there for nine months when he got killed. That's why I told him not to go because he was too young, 14 years old. I told him to wait until he was older and that if he wanted to go then he could. He would answer back that it wasn't possible that his father's blood was spilled for nothing, that he wanted to go and fight. He was going to fight for him.... When I found out about my son, where my son was stationed, I asked permission to go and see him because as you know at that time it wasn't certain if you were going to come out alive ... and they told me that they weren't going to give me permission to go, that I would have to wait until he sent a note saying that he wanted to see me. I waited another 15 days and I asked again for permission and they again said that they were going to let me go when the next batch of letters came in. And so I never went to see him When he died I thought about the fact that he wasn't buried, but they told me that they had buried him and that I shouldn't need to worry about that. But I didn't believe it, because once the exhumations started, I told them that I wanted my son's remains. They told me that they were going to investigate if he had been buried there. Eight days after this they told me that he hadn't been buried and that he probably had been burnt. So my son was burnt. I've gone through all that. I suffered through the war here in El Salvador. I suffered from that (Angelita, author interview, 1997).

For Matilde, the unbearable loss of her two daughters and grandchildren in a FAES bombing raid of her camp, was further compounded by the fact that she blames herself for these losses. Matilde feels this because of the fact that they were visiting her in the camp at the time of their death (group observations, 1997):

My children died over there [in San Vicente] because two men who were travelling on foot were seen by the soldiers. They [the soldiers] saw them and went to tell the others. They couldn't get out ... my daughters were in the barricade making food for the boys At this time an aeroplane flew by and dropped a bomb. When the bomb exploded I felt a pain and said 'my daughters' and I was right It wasn't just them, there were twelve people in the house, and all the twelve died. Another mother with four children. You can imagine the pain! My daughter who was thirteen years old died too. So it was two of my children and four grandchildren, there were six, my daughter's husband too (author interview, 1/10/1997).

Blaming themselves for the death of their children was almost a universal experience for women who were mothers in the civil war. For those women whose children were said

to have disappeared, however, the pain of not knowing the whereabouts of their children or whether they were still alive or dead, compounded their grief.

It is estimated that well over 100 children disappeared during the civil war. Usually they were taken by the FAES and adopted out to Salvadoran military families or, as was also often the case, they were adopted out to unsuspecting families in Europe and the US. Recently adoptees are beginning to return to El Salvador and at last, some mothers are finally being reunited with the children they feared were dead (Cristina Ibáñez, author interview, 1997). One of my participants in the Berlin Group who had lost four sons during the war, believed that her youngest had disappeared in such a fashion. During one self-help group session she asked Cristina, who also worked for an organisation which searched for disappeared children, how she would go about finding her youngest. She was crying as she asked this question, her pain seemed insurmountable (group observations, 5/9/1997).

In addition, for those women who left their children in the care of others to become guerrillas, their experiences of motherhood during the civil war, were, in the main, negative. While it must be said that many felt a sense of liberation through being able to participate in different aspects of community life without being defined or burdened by child-care, these feelings were often reversed when the time came to take responsibility for their children again. In a survey of 64 women participants of self-help groups facilitated by Las Dignas, for example, 89 percent of mothers felt that the war had adversely affected their relationships with their children (Garaizabal and Vázquez, 1994:42).

For many of these women, leaving children in the care of others was seen as abandonment. The fact that many believed that their participation was necessary to win such a war, notwithstanding, the cult of motherhood in El Salvador still often ran roughshod over their own political aspirations and beliefs. The following testimonial elucidates these points:

When I went to the front I thought that it would be easy to separate myself from my children. I had good reasons for this [for fighting]. Afterwards, I've always

felt to blame for this, it was a trauma to have abandoned them. They always reproach me for abandoning them. I think that they are never going to understand nor pardon me. Now I feel very alone (participants in self-help group, Garaizabal and Vázquez, 1994: 79).

Often, on their return, mothers would also find that the carers did not want to give back their children. Sometimes it would take years for mothers to establish normal relationships with their children again or, in other cases, they were forced to give their children up to the women who had cared for them during the war:

I was separated from my children for the war and now we remain apart. One is with her aunty who she calls mama and I have passed as her aunty. I feel bad but I don't want to break the process of childhood. Some 'compas' have taken my two sons as their own. They have cut all ties with me ... they have erased my image.

When I came down from the mountains I wanted to collect my daughters who were with my mother, but she didn't want to give them to me and my daughters didn't want to come with me either. I cried many nights because of this (participants in Las Dignas self-help groups, Garaizabal and Vázquez, 1994: 80).

It seems unlikely then, that any empowering impacts came out of women's experiences of motherhood during the war. For some, perhaps, being forced to live their lives without their children may have opened up increased opportunities in terms of mobility and the fulfilment on non-traditional gender roles. For the majority, however, motherhood during the war was characterised by the disempowering impacts of self-blame, anxiety, fear and the inability to grieve in an appropriate and necessary way when tragedy befell them.

Sexuality

Such disempowering impacts seem also to have been the predominant case with women's experiences of sexuality during the civil war. Before we discuss these in any detail, however, let us first outline some of the changes in sexuality that took place for women during this period.

For a start, living and working alongside their *compañeros* in guerrilla camps gave many women the opportunity to experience relationships with men that differed from the traditional marriage contract. Margarita observed, for example, that sexuality was 'different' in the camps. She described sleeping on the floor of a hut with many men around and not feeling threatened or scared that something would happen. In describing the relationships that formed between men and women in the camps, she stated that these relationships were 'more respectful' and 'more free' than traditional ones between men and women in El Salvador (author interview, 9/12/1997).

Due to the adverse situations under which they lived - not knowing whether they would be attacked from one day to the next, if they would survive the conflict, or would have to move camp - many men and women in the guerrilla army formed intense sexual relationships very quickly (Vázquez and Castañeda, 1996:26). In some cases, these relationships were officially sanctioned by the leadership and a marriage along with instruction on natural birth control to prevent unwanted pregnancy in the camps, would take place. In other cases, however, especially if the couple were deemed to be 'unrecognised' by the leadership, recriminations, such as the demotion of the male from whatever position he held, would occur (Claribel, cited in Thompson, 1986:130).

For many women, these recriminations reflected the same double standards they had thought the war was beginning to dissolve. Thus, while women describe the freeing up of sexual relationships during the civil war, they also describe how this experience reinforced the traditional divisions of women into 'good women' or 'whores' (Garaizabal and Vázquez, 1994:99):

When I was growing up and beginning to develop, I liked that I was starting to become very beautiful, and my mother told me that I was a whore.

My mother didn't let me go to the front because she said that girls were raped or turned into whores there.

When I let off steam with my compañero about men hassling me, he would tell me off and call me a whore (participants in self-help groups, all cited in Garaizabal and Vázquez, 1994:99).

Similar contradictions in gender roles also took place when so-called sexual freedom in the camps resulted in pregnancy. For women who had been socialised into believing that motherhood was the most important destiny for them, that it enabled them to become complete, such an occurrence was often met with much satisfaction. This soon turned to disillusionment, however, when their male partners either failed to recognise, or to take responsibility for, the children born to the partnership. The war gave men a perfect excuse to exercise a lack of paternal responsibility. Thinking about or taking responsibility for children was not only distracting, it was argued that because men were primarily accountable for the operation of armaments, it was also detrimental to the 'struggle' (Vázquez and Castañeda, 1996:26-27).

Pregnant women were thus forced to leave the camps or were sometimes given access to abortion if they chose to stay (Thompson, 1986:128-129). Hence, while relationships were ostensibly more egalitarian between men and women in the camps, it was still men who had the power to define what women should or should not do with their bodies. In discussing the repercussions of pregnancy for women combatants, for example, Mariana had the following to say in regard to her own experience of pregnancy during the war:

For about three or four months I had the threat of a natural abortion [an interrupted pregnancy]. I had to be in bed and I had to take medicines. So it was worse [than being pregnant normally]. They [fellow combatants] never appeared: it was painful for me to see how my own compañeros structured my abandonment. I think my partner will never understand my resentment towards the party for this behaviour. He saw it as natural - he never shared my feelings of abandonment. For me, this attitude signified that if you couldn't work, you didn't matter to them. They were real users, like if you didn't produce, you couldn't earn, or eat.... No one ever told me that I shouldn't get pregnant and I never thought that it would cause me problems - in fact we looked for pregnancy, we would joke with our friends about it ... it was public, our desire to have a child. I never thought that this would be a motive to isolate me from my work, so that they could deprive me of attention. Nevertheless, this was how it was, the link was broken (cited in Murguía, Olivera and Vázquez, 1997:32).

Rather than use these contradictions in gender roles that arose during the conflict to analyse and work towards overcoming women's subordination in society, however, the opposition movement was silent when it came to questions such as these:

No discussion ever existed in the party [the FMLN] about sexuality, partnership, contraception, or who should have the responsibility for children born to partnerships during war time (Mariana, cited in Murguaiday, et al., 1997:31).

For many members of the opposition movement, including women, this was because discussion on women's emancipation was seen as 'unnecessary'. In the minds of such party cadres, the Salvadoran revolutionary project, once it had triumphed over capitalism, would automatically lead to women's emancipation:

The main thing is the national liberation struggle. Feminist demands are out for the moment. What is happening is that women have shown their competence in practice and this has helped to change machista attitudes. But beyond the incorporation of women in the revolutionary organisations and the fight against machismo, we will have to wait until we can implement structural changes in the economic and social system (Julia, FDR representative, cited in Thompson, 1986:135).

Feminist liberation is bourgeois and talks about such things as the legalization of abortion. I would say that feminism is imperialist. Women participate [in the FMLN], not as feminists, but as revolutionaries to free ourselves from exploitation. Machismo is the result of the capitalist system and men treat women as objects only good for the bed. All this has to be overcome with comprehension both at home and within the community (Magdalena, trade union representative, cited in Thompson, 1986:136).

After the triumph, women will no longer be over-protected, exploited and raped (Amanda, factory worker, cited in Thompson, 1986:136).⁸³

Thus, in the two areas of maternity and sexuality which had perhaps the most potential to empower Salvadoran women to overcome their subordination in society, real change failed to materialise for many. In fact, as we have seen in the discussion above, women's experiences of sexuality and maternity during the civil war, were in the main, disempowering experiences. To lose a child, or be treated like a whore when you were doing what you felt was appropriate given the circumstances of the revolution, must have been shattering for many women, and to feel as if you were to blame for these losses, equally so.

⁸³ As was discussed in Chapters One and Three, it is common that women's rights *per se* are not tackled in most revolutionary movements.

As discussed in the testimonials above, however, many believed that it was not necessarily the time or the place during the revolution to aim specifically for women's empowerment. Thus, peacetime, the final research theme discussed here, becomes an important reference point, for not only examining women's experiences of peacetime society (a subject already touched upon in Chapter Six), but also, for analysing the long-term implications of the disempowering and empowering impacts of participating in the civil war.

Peacetime

While members of the FMLN never actually 'won' their revolution, the peace-accords that they signed in early 1992 with the Salvadoran Government had the potential to establish a new society that would allow for many of their revolutionary projects, particularly in the area of democratic reform, to be realised (see Chapter Six, Table Three). Thus, despite the fact that the revolution was now over, the enactment of peace in El Salvador was characterised by much hope.

For many women members of the opposition movement, especially those who came from working class rural backgrounds, this hope revolved around the economic and social benefits that they were promised on their demobilisation from combatant life. In compliance with the resolutions of the peace accords, all combatants on both sides of the political spectrum were entitled to receive support from the government for their reintegration into Salvadoran society. In rural areas, this support took the form of land transfer programmes, training and credit schemes (Spence *et al.*, 1997:36-37).

As we saw in Chapter Six, however, the implementation of this part of the peace accords has been plagued with conflict and delays. For women, this has been even more so the case. Las Dignas and other women's organisations feel that women have generally benefited little from the accords (general field observations, 1997). A full page advertisement sponsored by a coalition of women's organisations including Las Dignas clearly attested to their disillusionment. The advertisement, posted in early 1997

in one of El Salvador's popular broadsheets, posed the question, "what have women benefited from the peace accords?", answering only with a blank page (Maria Moreno, author interview, 28/10/1997).

The members of Las Dignas, in particular, feel that not only have women failed to reap the benefits of the peace accords, but that the accords themselves were also sexist. In their exposé of women's experiences of the civil war, for example, Vázquez and Castañeda state that women were not remembered in the peace accords and that any words referring to beneficiaries in the accords were written in the masculine form only (1996:17). Las Dignas has, therefore, campaigned hard to get women title to land because access to land is a critical economic issue for rural women. "If the man is given title to the land, what happens if we separate tomorrow?", a representative from Las Dignas has asked. "He keeps the land and I get the kids" (cited in Murray and Barry, 1995:149). According to a member of an NGO working with excombatants, only women who were married were given housing or land benefits because women on their own were seen as being unable or unfit to manage such resources (Dr Mendoza, author interview, 3/11/1997).

In their defining of intended beneficiaries as combatants, the peace accords, it can be argued were also prone to sexism. As we saw in the first section of this chapter, women participated in the opposition movement in forms which predominantly exploited their traditional gender roles as cleaners, cooks and carers. According to the peace accords, however, these women are not liable for beneficiary status. For women like Matilde, therefore, her role as 'camp mum' for all those years during the war, has gone unrecognised:

after the peace treaties they were going to give us a donation ... to the mothers that were involved ... we were taking care of all the paper work. All the mothers, they were going to receive a pension, but since the government is the one to decide, the one in power, no one received a thing, nothing (Matilde, author interview, 1/10/1997).

For those urban women who worked as combatants and collaborators, compensation was, in addition, non-existent. In fact, the FMLN now denies that urban combatants

even existed in their movement during the civil war (Murguía *et al.*, 1997:24). Given this state of affairs, it is not surprising that women urban combatants and collaborators received nothing from the government for the part they played in the 'war effort'.

Aside from this lack of recognition for the essential roles they played during the civil war, peace-time seems to have also represented a return to 'business as usual' as far as the gender roles which were challenged during the conflict are concerned. In her book on the impact of social change for gender relations, Cynthia Enloe (1993), for example, recounts the following story about a woman ex-combatant in peace-time El Salvador:

Esmeralda is a woman who spent many of her young adult years as a guerrilla in the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front One of her first post war acts was to have her IUD taken out. During the war her guerrilla tasks had made it seem politically irresponsible to get pregnant. But now she was being urged by men in the leadership to imagine her post-war life as one devoted to being a good mother (1993:1).

When asked by Marigold Best and Pamela Hussey (1996) about how they felt about the position of women in post-war Salvadoran society, many women recounted similar stories:

In the revolution, people forged the value of respect for women. This was very important. Perhaps because of comradeship, we felt that in the struggle men and women were equal, and that we all had the same capacities. Now trying to integrate ourselves into normal society, we would like to carry on in the same way, but there are little opportunities. For example, women ex-combatants who can't find a job are going back to the way things were before, to the home, to being a housewife, having children and that's it. We feel that greater achievements should have been made after all this effort (Sandra, cited in Best and Hussey, 1996:82)

The war was exceptional, so women were able to leave their kids with relatives and go off to do any sort of work. This happened to me. I knew someone was looking after my children and I never worried about whether they were eating or studying or not. Now that the war is over, it is my responsibility and you can imagine how difficult it is I'll give you an example. I have a woman who helps me with the children, but once a month she goes home for four days...my husband also works in the political field ... [so] ... when this woman is away for four days, I have no one to look after the children. So each time I

have to think where I can leave them. I have a better chance of solving the problem than many women because I have a house, a key, a refrigerator, so they can eat. That is a concrete example of the many problems that have arisen for me in fulfilling my role of political leader (Ana Guadalupe Martínez, cited in Best and Hussey, 1996:193).

For many of my participants, however, peace-time has signified not so much of a return to the disempowerment of traditional gender roles, but rather, to the return to or continuation of, the disempowerment of economic marginalisation. For these women, any forms of empowerment which they may have experienced from participating in the struggle seem now to have been largely subsumed by the reality of providing for their families in the kind of post-war society described in Chapter Six:

I think that even though not everything is negative, some aspects are negative ... what we've accomplished with the peace treaties is there is only one army instead of so many different organisations existing. We are now suffering in an economic way. We have a little bit more freedom to meet at church and to do our church work But injustice still exists (Marta, author interview, 8/10/1997).

I feel that things haven't changed for the better. I mean there hasn't been a relief to all this - maybe a little. They don't recruit any more - they nearly recruited everyone to fight in the war, so there has been some changes for the better. But after getting out of that war, another one has started. The young men have started bothering people, killing, in the gangs. The peace accords have brought little changes (Mama Telle, author interview, 8/10/1997).

Our decision to fight was so strong that we didn't mind losing our lives for it. The war is over and since what the treaties meant to do hasn't been done, I don't feel well. The reasons why the war started are still existent. I wasn't fighting so I could get a piece of land that I have now ... according to my way of thinking, I was fighting for a complete change in this country I don't feel good about the fact that the war ended, it ended and there was no change here. The only change that I see is the reorganisation that was made ... the guards, the police, the formation of the PNC, and that's the only change that I've seen I would rather be in war than here, because during the war I lived in both intense and happy times. You got to visit more places, to live with new compañeros, to talk about experiences that they had gone through like myself. We celebrated doctors' day, paramedics' day ... we always celebrated Mothers day and Christmas, even though we lived in the meadows. We always had an old radio to celebrate with, we danced to music, it was really nice (Haydeé, author interview, 17/11/1997).

In summary then, we can say that both during and after the war, the opportunities for women to empower themselves on individual, social and political levels have been very limited. What gains women did make during the war seem now to have been mostly reversed by a post-conflict environment characterised by violence, poverty and the persistence of machismo. So how do these largely disempowering impacts of the civil war make Salvadoran women feel? We saw in Chapter Six how Martín-Baró (1990) described Salvadoran society as one which, due to its deterioration in social relations, was in grave danger of disintegration. This next section will add to Martín-Baró's (1990) diagnosis of Salvadoran society by discussing the consequences of women's disempowering experiences of the civil war on their state of mental health.

The Impact of the Civil War on Women's Mental Health

Generalising Illness Experiences

In line with Martín-Baró (1990) and Klienman and Kleinman's (1985 cited in Farias, 1991:189) respective insights (discussed in Chapter Four) on the psychosocial nature of trauma in El Salvador and, the presentation of responses to political violence as an 'illness experience' rather than as a psychiatric disease, commentators have analysed the mental health impacts of the trauma of the civil war for women in the following ways.

In their studies on the mental health impacts of the civil war on Salvadoran women refugees, Jenkins (1991:146) and Farias (1991:179-188) have referenced the persistency of a indigenous phenomenon known as '*nervios*', meaning, literally, 'nerves'. Jenkins (1991: 146) defines this as, 'a cultural category widely used in Latin America for a variety of forms of distress and disease including everyday worries, depression and schizophrenia and [which] may also refer to bodily and affective symptoms'. The complaint of *nervios* was common amongst the majority of women who participated in the Jenkin's research. This reflected, as Farias (1991:179) points out, 'the overwhelming and pervasive quality of the experiences of violence and social breakdown for women'. For one woman who fled to the US to escape the terror of war-

time El Salvador, for example, her *nervios* began upon witnessing the death of a stranger in her village:

Already the man couldn't speak [but] he made signs to me with his eyes. It was during the daytime and I was going to get some chickens for a baptism. He could barely move his eyes. He had been shot in the forehead. It was the time of the fair in November. When I came back he was already dead. I returned home with a fever and it wasn't something I had ever experienced. Since it was carnival time, strangers came. They kill strangers Yes I have seen various dead bodies. Since, then, I became sick from nervios (cited in Jenkins, 1991:146).

Farias (1991:187) has reported that both men and women refugees in his sample suffered from *nervios*. Nevertheless, he found that their experiences of *nervios* had striking differences with regard to gender. While men's experiences were primarily related to what Farias has labelled 'symptoms of weakness' (clinically presented as domestic violence, alcohol abuse and the fear of acting out violent impulses), women's experiences related to their loss of control over their family lives (clinically presented as a sense of 'intranquility', headaches and other pains, feelings of anger, crying, loss of breath and the fear of falling).

Thus, for Salvadoran women, the shattering of such social relations and the feelings of impotence from which this brings, 'burdened them with the overwhelming pain of losses and separations' (Farias, 1991:188). Changes in the mental health status of Salvadoran women refugees are not therefore, totally symptomatic of a western diagnosed psychiatric condition, but as Farias succinctly observes they are 'the emotional counterparts of experiences of powerlessness and oppression' (1991:189).

The impact of the civil war on women's mental health has been expressed through somatic symptoms. As with *nervios*, the complaint known as '*el calor*', or 'the heat', has also represented the crystallisation of trauma or distress within women's bodies. *El calor*, which Jenkins (1991:152) describes as something like a 'fire in your whole body', is thought to be related to cultural sanctioning of outward displays of anger and rage in women. Although there is a possibility that such a symptom could be menopause-

related, the fact that it has also occurred amongst women in their twenties, makes this form of explanation implausible (Jenkins, 1991:151-152).

Finally, in their analysis on the impact of gender-specific terror on Salvadoran women, Aron, Corne, Fursland and Zelwer (1991:38), have shown how the forms of rape and sexual assault that were used by the Salvadoran state as 'normative acts of social control executed on behalf of a collective goal', have resulted in a post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in Salvadoran women that cannot be equated with PTSD resulting from either other cataclysmic events (such as an earthquake), or the rape of women in North America.

One of the reasons cited for this difference, is the nature of the pre-trauma environment. Whereas those 'life events' identified as significant to a rape survivors' post trauma condition and recovery in North America, include, for example, the death of a spouse, divorce, and major illness, they do not encompass other life events such as torture, the discovery that one's spouse has disappeared, or the knowledge that one's child may be murdered by the military at any time, that are common amongst Salvadoran women survivors of sexual abuse (Aron *et al.*, 1991:42). What must be added to the PTSD equation for Salvadoran women, therefore, is the fact that psychological warfare waged by the Salvadoran state against the majority of its people has 'instilled in the population at large a fear so great as to assure a permanent sense of insecurity, such that people's capacity for independent action will be dulled, diminished and ultimately thwarted' (Aron *et al.*, 1991:42). Consequently, there is a need to recognise the contribution of 'overlapping' and 'interactive' traumatic stressors when discussing the impact of sexual abuse on Salvadoran women's mental health (*ibid.*).

For my participants, these stressors can be seen to represent all the disempowering impacts of the civil war which have been examined to date in this chapter. The next section will delve more specifically into the changes in the mental health status of Salvadoran women through a discussion on how the civil war impacted on the mental health of my research participants.

Mental Health of Participants

The women involved in my study did not in any way identify themselves as being mentally ill. Nevertheless, many recognised that they were feeling ‘bad about things’ or that they were unable to ‘get over’ what they had experienced during the war. Thus, when approached about participating in a self-help programme specifically titled ‘mental health’ they were keen to give the programme a try. Lucila and Matilde, for example, recounted how they first became involved in the mental health programme run by Las Dignas:

Lorena told me about the group, she told me that they wanted to organise a self-help group . And so I asked Lorena what self-help was all about. She started telling me that this was a group of people who helped others to get to know themselves better, to be able to talk, relate to others because sometimes you feel repressed and that you can't talk to others. I said I was going since I really felt the need, and I asked if Domitila [Lucila's daughter] could go too ... since Domitila had lost her first compañero in the beginning of the war ... and she hasn't been well after that happened (Lucila, author interview, 1/10/1997).

Lorena ... came here and asked if we could talk She started talking to me about my health and if I wanted to go to the meetings. I said that if it was a place we could talk, I would go (Matilde, author interview, 1997).

Rather than expressing that they were suffering from trauma, during the self-help groups I observed, and in the interviews I performed, participants would talk about their mental health largely in emotive terms. While none of them (with the exception of Lucila who was describing the cause of death of her husband) specifically mentioned the phenomenon of *nervios*, most described, nonetheless, similar symptoms. Feelings of anxiety, nervousness, preoccupation and the notion of carrying a great weight were common, as were feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. Some talked about feeling a ‘great rage’ inside themselves and others, that they still felt afraid that bad things were going to happen to them (group observation, 1997). Many found it difficult to trust others:

[she talks about the group] I didn't come straight away ... [because] ... sometimes you are scared because other people say that people who come here, do so because they don't have anything else to do, that they don't work ...

that's why I'm fearful. I didn't invite anybody else, because I fear they will start saying those things about me. We don't talk about anything bad here, because if coming here was dangerous, somebody would tell me not to come? (Julia, author interview, 14/11/1997).

Common also, was the expression of distress through somatic symptoms. Almost all participants were suffering from some kind of physical complaint. Some had problems sleeping, others were plagued by headaches and gastritis, many suffered back and knee pain. Matilde, in particular, seemed also to be suffering from *el calor* because despite her taking antibiotics and other treatments, nothing could shift the fever she was suffering. In truth, I initially had problems accepting this explanation of Cristina's for Matilde's constant fever (the nurse in me looked instead for a quick medical fix for Matilde's distress), but, as time went on, and Matilde's fever failed to diminish, I was more able to accept that it could be a sign of Matilde internalising the blame she felt for her daughters' deaths during the war (group observations, 1997).

Some participants, suffered, moreover, from 'classic' symptoms of PTSD such as nightmares and flashbacks about the war. Haydeé for instance recalls a nightmare she had about participating in the civil war:

I was dreaming that I was in the FMLN lines - I saw the lines of 'compañeros and I saw the helicopters. Everyone had to lie down so as to stay still. I got up in the morning feeling so sad (author interview, 17/11/1997).

In view of the complex nature of Salvadoran women's disempowerment, and the overlapping and interactive traumatic stressors experienced by Salvadoran women, it is impossible to state emphatically that the changes in mental health status mentioned by participants were a result of the impact of the civil war. In fact, the disempowering impacts mentioned in this chapter such as poverty and repression, have characterised Salvadoran women's lives for centuries. Nevertheless, the war did represent not only the most intense period of sustained repression in El Salvador in contemporary times (Jenkins, 1991:141), but also, a decade where perhaps the greatest ever potential existed for women to confront and transform their subordination in society.

Thus, it is possible to argue that the civil war in El Salvador has impacted greatly on the mental health of Salvadoran women. At a time when opportunities existed for the empowerment of many of these women, the disempowering impacts of *machismo* in the opposition movement, loss, feelings of helplessness and terror, acted to entrench traditional gender roles. Because the contradictions inherent in this process were not discussed in any way by the opposition movement, many Salvadoran women feel themselves to blame for their own disempowerment during the war. This sense of culpability for such an enormity of loss must and does affect the way many Salvadoran women think about themselves and their society. It must and does impact on their mental health.

Summary

This chapter has discussed women's experiences of the civil war in El Salvador. Through an examination of the main themes which emerged from my research, it has shown how gender has not only affected the way Salvadoran women have experienced the civil war, but also, the potential for Salvadoran women to be empowered by this experience. Rather than confirm that this empowerment has taken place, however, the experiences of participants and other Salvadoran women cited in this chapter, have shown that in general, the civil war has not empowered women to challenge their gender roles in a sustainable fashion. In fact, the civil war has acted, in many cases, to further entrench traditional gender roles in Salvadoran society. Furthermore, the contradictions that arose from this simultaneous challenge to, and entrenchment of, traditional gender roles has led to the disempowerment of many Salvadoran women. Many feel that in their transgressing of society's construction of a 'good mother' they have been responsible for the death and disappearance of their children and other family members. Others feel that the sacrifices they made to participate in the opposition movement have not been rewarded in peace-time, either by the current FMLN leadership, or by the lack of change in society in general.

The lack of opportunity for women to analyse and work through the disempowering impacts of the civil war has in turn, impacted on their mental health status. Many

Salvadoran women feel unable to change the powerlessness and hopelessness they feel in themselves and have grave doubts about the potential for El Salvador to be a better place for all its citizens. Hence, the changes in mental health status that have arisen as a result of the civil war in El Salvador, should be of major concern and recognised by those working in the field of gender and development.

The next chapter, which focuses primarily on the work of Las Dignas, will show how one Salvadoran organisation for feminist political action has made mental health a priority in its work, and how in doing so, Las Dignas has assisted many Salvadoran women to learn from the pain and disempowerment of the civil war in order to rebuild themselves and their society.

Chapter Eight - The Work of Las Dignas

Introduction

In the climate of political openings that has characterised the peace-process in El Salvador, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have flourished. Working in areas ranging from indigenous self-determination to organic agricultural production, these organisations appear to be the back-bone of the immense drive currently taking place in post-conflict development reconstruction. In the cities and in rural areas, non-governmental organisations support communities and provide hope where governmental organisations and political parties have failed. The activities of women's organisations are no exception to this general observation.

As with their sister organisations in Latin America discussed in Chapter Three, women's organisations in late 1990s El Salvador are a diverse and dynamic force of social change. Some women's organisations mobilise around issues at a neighbourhood level, initiating communal kitchens and lobbying for better community services. Others, aim to politicise ostensibly feminist demands by organising campaigns against domestic violence and promoting women's rights within the law. Whereas political parties have experienced divisions and have been plagued by ideological conflicts, women's organisations in El Salvador, despite their diversity, have formed effective coalitions to develop political platforms based on a wide range of issues affecting Salvadoran women's lives.

Chapter Eight will discuss the work of Las Dignas as a part of this broad-based but often coordinated women's movement in El Salvador. Beginning with a historical review of women's organising prior the civil war, it will firstly chart the establishment of women's organisations within the opposition movement. Following this review, the state of women's organising in contemporary El Salvador will be examined. Finally, the

work of Las Dignas, and in particular, their mental health programme, will be discussed in some detail and in relation to their struggle for both autonomy and democracy as a organisation for feminist political action.

Women Organising for Change in El Salvador

Historical Review

While there is no doubt that women's organisations have proliferated in El Salvador's peace-time environment, the concept of women organising to improve their situation as women, is certainly not a new one in 20th century El Salvador. In fact, as Murray and Barry (1995:194) have pointed out, from as early as the 1950s, with the formation of the Salvadoran Women's Federation under the auspices of the Communist Party, women in El Salvador have organised to make their voices heard on issues pertaining to their needs.

It was in the 1970s, however, at a time when the popular movement in El Salvador was expanding in response to increasing repression, that women's organisations and women's participation in other popular groupings, became more recognisable.⁸⁴ Stephen (1997: 67-71), has divided this 'second wave' of women's organising into three distinct phases. The first phase, which roughly coincided with the mid 1970 - 1980 period, saw women's participation in the broad based popular movement. Through grass roots organisations such as those associated with Christian Base Communities and organisations affiliated to the emerging revolutionary Left, women became politicised around issues of human rights, wartime survival and economics (Stephen, 1997:67).

The well known Committee of Mothers and Relatives of Political Prisoners, Disappeared and Assassinated of El Salvador (COMADRES), for example, was formed during this time, as was the Association of Salvadoran Women (AMES) and the

⁸⁴ See Chapter Six for a discussion on the rise of the popular movement in El Salvador in the 1970s.

Organisation of Salvadoran Women (ORMUSA). These three organisations as well as the others that were formed in the first phase of women's organising were important for not only the programmes they executed (housing, literacy, nutrition) but also, for their mobilisation of large numbers of women in support of the revolutionary process. As Stephen observes,

the military-political organisations of the FMLN were active promoters of these women's organisations and benefited from the energy and resources that women put into the war effort (1997:67).

The second phase of women's organising during the 'second wave', took place from the mid to late 1980s. This was a time when the popular movement was experiencing a general restructuring in response to the pressure exercised on Napoleon Duarte to take a more tolerant approach to his political opposition. According to Stephens, at least ten new women's organisations were founded during this period. One of these organisations, the National Coordinating Committee of Salvadoran Women (CONAMUS), pioneered work with battered women, opening El Salvador's first and only battered women's shelter in 1989. Another, the Institute for Research, Training and Development of Women (IMU) gave support to grass-roots women's organisations in such areas as education, legal rights and communication. The first indigenous women's organisation in El Salvador, the Association of Salvadoran Indigenous Women (AMIS), was also formed during this second phase (Stephen, 1997:67-68).

While it is clear that many of the women's organisations to have emerged during the second phase were beginning to focus specifically on gender demands, few were willing to identify themselves as feminists. As with the feminist stream in Latin America in general discussed in Chapter Three, those who did affiliate themselves with feminism were inevitably branded 'bourgeoisie' and 'under the influence of foreign ideas', by the political-military organisations of the FMLN to which they remained aligned. As more women from these organisations took the opportunity to participate in international meetings and events such as the *encuentros* described again in Chapter Three, and the UN conference on women held in Nairobi in 1985, however, the potential for feminist

ideas to enter into the activities of Salvadoran women's organisations increased considerably (Stephen, 1997: 68-69).

By the third phase of women's organising, which coincided with the end of the civil war and the signing of the peace accords, feminism was being incorporated into the strategies and identities of more and more women's organisations in El Salvador. The period 1990-1992 saw the establishment of a large number of new women's organisations as well as women's secretariats and committees within existing grass-roots organisations. Many of these organisations were created with explicit feminist agendas. The opening of the Center for Feminist Studies (CEF), for example, was dedicated to the purpose of disseminating feminist materials and organising techniques, and the Norma Virginia Guirola Herrera Center for Women's Studies (CEMUJER) was founded with a feminist agenda focusing on legal aid, technical assistance and training for grass-roots organisations. During this period, a national women's coordinating committee, the Women's Coalition for Peace, Dignity and Equality was also formed, giving women's organisations a space to discuss the establishment of their own identities independent from the political parties that had always dominated their agendas (Stephen, 1997:69).

By the end of 1992, the women's movement in El Salvador was becoming a more coordinated force. Despite their associations with the member parties of the FMLN, and the difficult questions that were now beginning to be asked about the true independence of their organisations, the two national women's committees, the Coordinator of Women's Organisations (COM - created in 1988) and the Women's Coalition for Peace, Dignity and Equality, marched together with a newly formed feminist organisation, the Melinda Anaya Montes Women's Movement (MAM) on the International Day Against Violence Against Women on November 25, 1992. These three groups went on to write a platform together which called on the newly formed civilian police to eradicate violence against women (Stephen, 1997:70).

The establishment of Mujeres '94 (Women '94) galvanised these initial attempts at coordination within the women's movement in El Salvador. Formed as a women's platform for the 1994 presidential elections, Mujeres '94' represented a year of

discussion and debate on issues of importance to women. In August 1993, the platform was published and included the following goals for Salvadoran women:

- The eradication of incest, sexual harassment and rape
 - The provision of land, credit and technical assistance to women
 - The provision of adequate housing and opportunities for housing ownership
 - Equal opportunities in the workplace between men and women including equal positions of responsibility and salaries
 - Better medical attention for women
 - Equal opportunities for girls in schools
 - The ability for women to express their sexuality without prejudice and the provision of consistent sex education
 - Motherhood as freely chosen
 - The eradication of discriminatory laws
 - Development policies based on women's needs
 - The occupation of women in 50 percent of positions of power
 - The provision of a better quality of life for women including respect for the environment
 - The need for fathers to become more responsible for their children.
- (Stephen, 1997:70-71).

The above platform was sent to all political parties right across the political spectrum for comment and discussion. During this process, Mujeres '94 also undertook analyses of the political platforms of the various political parties to see what they had to offer Salvadoran women. According to Stephen (1997:71), the platform devised by Mujeres '94 was partially recognised at the FMLN's national convention in 1993.

Thus, by the mid 1990s, the Salvadoran women's movement had become a diverse but often coordinated movement able to articulate its demands at national levels. This next section briefly examines, through observations made during my fieldwork in 1997, the nature of the Salvadoran women's movement in the late 1990s.

Organising in 1997

From what I observed over a seven month period, women's organising in late 1990s El Salvador appears to have gone from strength to strength. While discussions on the use of the term feminism, and on autonomy from political parties, still dominates discussion

in many women's organisations, the women's movement nevertheless appears to be a large and powerful political force to be reckoned with in contemporary El Salvador. In addition, with organisations ranging from grass-roots rural organisations focusing on such issues as potable water and housing, to large urban organisations focusing on feminist political action, the contemporary women's movement is well placed to work towards meeting the needs of a wide variety of Salvadoran women.

Many of the organisations I observed operating in 1997 were formed in the second and third phases of women's organising in El Salvador. CEMUJER for instance, has continued its work as a resource and training centre for grass-roots women's organisations. It now has seven years of experience working with women victims of violence and takes a specifically gendered perspective in its approach to healing this massive societal problem. CEMUJER believes that breaking the cycle of violence is fundamental for the development of El Salvador and thus works not only with individual women victims, but also, with families and institutions such as colleges and the army to achieve this goal (Licencia Yesenia Segovia, author interview, 10/11/1997).

IMU, in addition, continues to work today in similar, as well as new areas of need. Its programmes now involve research and analysis on gender issues in contemporary society, education for empowerment, mental health through non-sexist education, the provision of credit for women's small business initiatives, gender and the environment, the dissemination of its research and analysis to wider society, and the maintenance of a library of information for use by the public and other women's organisations. After ten years of working with women, IMU firmly believes that a large and autonomous women's movement is not only crucial to the struggle against the discrimination and social inequality Salvadoran women face, but also, to the construction of a truly free and democratic society (IMU, 1996:8, 19-20).

Alongside these and other organisations which were formed in the first, second and third phases of women's organising, many new organisations have also formed through both non-governmental and governmental channels to respond to El Salvador's changing social and political environment. There is now, for example, an Institute of Women's Development attached to the governmental Ministry of the Family. While

acknowledging their inability to act as an autonomous unit independent of government policy, Licencia Sandra Carranza from the Institute stated that they had achieved considerable gains for women in their one short year of existence, particularly in terms of making government departments more gender aware. The Institute works in an impressive ten areas including education and training, health, the environment, work place relations, agriculture and violence against women. Their biggest programme at present involves 'healing family relations' shattered from domestic violence. the aim of which is to integrate and strengthen the family unit (author interview, 28/10/1997).

Non-governmental women's organisations aligned to wealthy sectors of society take a similar focus in their work with women. As is the tradition in many Latin American countries, women from wealthy families in El Salvador are engaged in a number of social activities principally designed to support the interests of the elite. In 1994 for example, the high profile Association of Salvadoran Women published advertisements defaming the Latin American Women's Conference to be held that same year. Women's organisations and individual women from this grouping, however, are generally involved in work of a charitable nature. Through their support for such charities as child cancer foundations and various other health projects, these women are able to maintain a profile of 'doing good' without actually challenging or altering the structures that give rise to the immense poverty experienced by the majority of Salvadorans (Murray and Barry, 1995:198).

International agencies, moreover, have taken up the mantle of women's development since the signing of the peace accords in 1992. UNICEF, one of the biggest players in this field, has incorporated women's needs into their latest programme aimed at creating a 'culture of peace' in Salvadoran society. Through well presented and easy to follow games, the culture of peace programme facilitates discussion between men and women, particularly in rural areas, on issues of gender equality and empowerment. In addition, UNICEF has a national radio show operating in 45 stations throughout El Salvador where issues of violence, health, and the environment are debated. Principally, however, UNICEF works as a trainer, coordinator and resource provider to existing governmental and non-governmental organisations. According to Doctora Romero, the need for non-governmental and governmental organisations to resolve their political

differences and work together for the benefit of women, is one of the most pressing issues facing the women's movement in El Salvador today (author interview, 27/10/1997).

Despite the political differences that divide its organisations, the women's movement in El Salvador appears to have retained much of the coordination it first developed in the early 1990s. On the International Day Against Violence Against Women, for example, events were coordinated which involved the participation of a large number of women's organisations (Photos 11 and 12).



Photo 11 Activities on the International Day Against Violence Against Women, San Salvador



Photo 12 "We have the right to decide in the country, in the community, in the home, in the bed and about our bodies."
Las Dignas banner at the International Day Against Violence Against Women

The women's movement has also developed a second platform for women, *La Plataforma de Las Mujeres 1997-2000* which contains an additional 25 demands to the platform developed in 1993 (Las Dignas, March, 1997).

Thus, we can begin to build a picture of the women's movement as a large and seemingly influential force in El Salvador's social and political life. From the smallest hamlet in a rural province to the city of San Salvador, women appear to be participating in women's committees, secretariats and organisations responding to their situated perceptions of gender need. One of the largest of these organisations to respond to both rural and urban women's gender needs has been Las Dignas. This next section examines the work of Las Dignas in the context of the women's movement discussed above and in relation to their current gender and development programme.

Women for Dignity and Life (Las Dignas)

Herstory of Las Dignas

As with almost all non-governmental women's organisations currently active in El Salvador, Las Dignas was originally born of the revolutionary Left. The group of women that formed Las Dignas were militants of the National Resistance (RN), one of the five revolutionary organisations comprising the FMLN in the 1980s. They were asked by the party in 1990 to form a women's union to act as a 'reference point' to bring together women from mother's groups, labour unions and other communal groupings, and through which economic and military support for the party's revolutionary programme could be channelled (Morena Herrera, cited in Best and Hussey, 1996:166).

Being women who had spent many years during the war setting up and running women's organisations which supported the 'people's' struggle rather than their specific needs as women, however, these 'old girls' of the National Resistance had a slightly different vision of how a women's organisation should be run. As Morena Herrera, one of the founding members of Las Dignas states:

From the beginning of the Dignas we rebelled. We thought in terms of an organisation different from the one the National Resistance wanted. We didn't want to be just a support organisation where we didn't feel we were present as women, and which didn't address our needs. We didn't want a vertical organisation: many of us had experience of hierarchical structures. We wanted something that enabled us to function as women, as equals, despite having different histories and different situations (cited in Best and Hussey, 1996:166-167).

For their first national meeting, for example, Las Dignas decided to ignore the RN's advice about organising a big public event to make a political impact, choosing instead to organise a meeting where women could talk about their needs as women and about alternatives in the fields of work, family, education, the media, and popular organisations (Morena Herrera, cited in Best and Hussey, 1996:167). It was at this first national meeting that Las Dignas adopted their motto 'the coming together of women for dignity and life - to break the silence' (Baines, Castañeda and Murguía, 1992:116).

In response to this disobedient act, the RN withdrew their economic backing for the meeting and Las Dignas was forced to delay it for a month (Stephen, 1997:72). Las Dignas also refused at this stage to join COM, stating that COM was dependent on the orientation of the FMLN and that they were not sure of their objectives as a women's movement. Thus, even during the first year of their establishment, Las Dignas was clear about its purpose as a women's organisation. As Baines *et al.* have stressed, '[Las Dignas]...didn't want to reproduce a women's movement to serve the interests of the FMLN...we wanted to fly with our own wings...we wanted autonomy' (1992:118).⁸⁵

This autonomy, however, was a long time in coming. Despite the name-calling and political marginalisation they experienced within the RN, the women of Las Dignas found it difficult to fully cut the umbilical cord. The party gave Las Dignas access to women in former conflictive zones and was one of the only sources of funding for Las Dignas in those early years. It wasn't until 1992, therefore, when many of the women from Las Dignas had participated in national and international conferences where they

⁸⁵ All quotations and information from Baines *et al.* (1992) have been translated by the author.

were exposed to feminist theory and activity, that Las Dignas felt more able to ideologically accept the concept of autonomy:

In feminist theory we found explanations for what was going on in our lives, individually and collectively. We started to make liberation a wish for ourselves. This generated self confidence and we began to value ourselves as competent reflective beings We were amazed at the rage we felt over what had happened. We learnt from the party to be faithful, but realised that this was submissive The party and the war had ruled us out as thinking, critical beings. Being 'good revolutionaries' meant giving up personal growth (Baines, et al., 1992:121-122).

Convinced of their ability to make it on their own, Las Dignas joined forces with other women's organisations committed to breaking down sectarianism, to form the aforementioned Women's Coalition for Peace, Dignity and Equality. The coalition provided Las Dignas with a further space to discuss the concept of political autonomy and thus, at the end of 1992, Las Dignas finally felt ready to break all their ties with the RN. In a letter sent to the RN for this purpose, Las Dignas defined themselves as a autonomous organisation devoid of ties to any political party. They also asked that the RN cease to consider women who worked for Las Dignas and the RN as their own property. Not surprisingly, Las Dignas never received a reply from the RN to this piece of correspondence (Baines *et al.*, 1992:127).

Shortly after this process, Las Dignas held a series of evaluations with leaders of their programme teams and found that the teams were still seen by many as intermediaries. That is to say, many of the women Las Dignas worked with had difficulty in distinguishing Las Dignas as an organisation distinct from the RN. To complete their journey to autonomy therefore, Las Dignas needed to be seen as politically as well as ideologically autonomous. By publicly defining themselves as an organisation of women for feminist political action, they completed this journey. According to Las Dignas, many women left the RN at this stage, finding in Las Dignas 'a space to fulfil personal and collective needs, to live "militancy" in a distinct way, without giving up their integrity as women' (Baines, *et al.*, 1992:128).

Being autonomous from the political Left did not, however, spare Las Dignas the inevitable ideological conflicts that are often the hallmark of social movements born of the Left. Their initial service provision and income generating programmes with women in rural areas, for example, revealed the ideological differences present between the urban, largely educated, former party leaders of Las Dignas, and the uneducated poor rural women with whom they worked. These differences often resulted in the varying interpretations on not only how the organisation should be run, but also, on its priorities (Stephen, 1997:76-77). In addition to these conflicts, Las Dignas' service provision and income generating programmes, although designed to alleviate rural women's grinding poverty and to create a sense of public value for domestic work, were generally unsustainable and made little real impact on women's freedom from subordination in rural areas (ibid.).

Believing in the need for a non-hierarchical democratic organisation proved, furthermore, a difficult task. Many Dignas activists found that their attempts to instil a sense of democracy and autonomy in locally based committees were thwarted by ideologies formed from years of participation in revolutionary organisations. As one Dignas evaluation of its earlier economic projects, for example, states:

The first thing a group develops is usually the "junta directiva" [the committee in charge]. They tend to be dependent on "those who are responsible" and it is difficult for them to establish ways of functioning that involve collective and horizontal decision making (Las Dignas, 1993, cited in Stephen, 1997:77).

Consequently, and following their redefinition of themselves as a organisation of women for feminist political action, Las Dignas decided on four distinct struggles or goals seemingly aimed at simultaneously confronting women's practical and strategic gender interests. These were: 1) the eradication of violence against women in all its forms; 2) the improvement of women's quality of life; 3) the democratisation of El Salvador and; 4) the restoration of women's control over their own bodies. Practically speaking, these goals gave rise to a number of activities including the strengthening of women's leadership roles in their own communities, sexual health and reproduction programmes, and the support of women's organisations struggling against the rising tide

of domestic violence, particularly in ex-conflictive zones (Morena Herrera, cited in Best and Hussey, 1996:170-171).

In 1997, Las Dignas has continued working within these broad feminist goals. They are now a large organisation, employing around 60 women and operative in eight cities and towns. With an understanding of this fact, and of their organisational history discussed above clearly in our minds, let us now turn to examine the structure and organisation of Las Dignas' gender and development programmes.

Las Dignas - Structure and Programmes

As it may have been gleaned from the above brief introduction to the current state of the organisation, Las Dignas certainly does not come across as a struggling, resource depleted NGO. In fact, although their funding is insecure, coming from mainly European NGOs, Las Dignas operates on a yearly budget of approximately one and a half million US dollars. Their offices in San Salvador are comfortable and they maintain houses and offices in most of the localities in which they are working (general field observation, 1997).

At present, Las Dignas has programmes in both urban and rural areas. With the exception of the mental health programme which will be discussed in some detail in the next section, these programmes will now be briefly examined:

Education

Las Dignas began their literacy programme in 1993 in the provinces of Usulután, Chalatenango, Cabañas, La Libertad and Cuscatlan. At the same time they established a post-literacy programme with a feminist education focus designed to give women leaders the tools to fight subordination in their communities. By 1996, 250 women had gained literacy through the standard programme and a further 200 women had been through the post-literacy programme. During this same year Las Dignas decided to broaden the objectives of their education programme in rural areas beginning with the

struggle against sexist education in schools and supporting women's involvement in education at all levels. In congruence with this broadened focus on education, training on gender-awareness was also offered by Las Dignas to educational institutions and NGOs. At present the education programme operates in Victoria and San Salvador (Las Dignas official literature, 1997).

Paternal Responsibility and the Child Support Quota

Based on the philosophy of the need for paternal responsibility to achieve good parenting, Las Dignas initiated this programme to ensure women received their entitled child support quota from the absentee fathers of their children. In order to receive child support, however, women must overcome many hurdles that they are often unable (because of illiteracy and lack of knowledge of the system) to confront. Thus, Las Dignas provides legal and emotional support services to ensure that women are able to succeed in this bureaucratic and alienating process.

Las Dignas has also facilitated the formation of support groups for those women who are going through the process of demanding child support. These groups are designed to raise awareness on the structure of family relations and to stress the need for paternal responsibility (Las Dignas official literature, 1997). 'For myself and for my family', a Dignas poster for this campaign reads, 'I am a responsible father'.

The programme is currently operative in Victoria and San Salvador. According to one of the Dignas workers, however, there are problems with operating the programme in rural areas. The women in rural areas are generally younger mothers than those in the cities and thus have a different concept of child support. The majority believe that they will get back together with their husbands or partners and are thus reluctant to pursue the issue. Awareness raising is consequently a big part of the team's work in rural areas (general field observation, 13/11/1997).

Non-Violence

The non-violence programme is Las Dignas' largest programme and has been operational since Las Dignas first began its work in 1990. In both rural and urban areas Las Dignas supports and networks with women's organisations working in violence prevention and runs awareness raising campaigns in schools and institutions on the public nature of gender-related violence in society. From November 1994, Las Dignas has been running support groups and providing legal advice for women victims of violence in San Salvador and in August 1995, they opened an anti-violence support centre in San Salvador's largest market.

In addition to these activities, Las Dignas has also been working with the national police, following through on women's complaints of violence perpetrated against them. At present the non-violence programme operates in Berlín, San Jacinto, Victoria, San Salvador and Perquín (Las Dignas official literature, 1997).

Local Development Programme

In reflection of the lack of basic services such as potable water and electricity in many cities and rural towns, Las Dignas supports women to fight for the provision of such services. Their activities focus on training women in gender-awareness so that they are then able to act upon this awareness in their own localities. The training principally involves increasing women's self-esteem and encouraging women to choose their own objectives to meet their needs. Once women have been through the training programme they are encouraged to participate in the design of local development programmes at the municipal level and to ensure that such programmes take into account the needs and interests of women (Photo, 13).

The local development programme operates in Chalatenango, Suchitoto, Jiquilisco, Victoria, San Jacinto, San Salvador and Perquín (Las Dignas official literature, 1997).

Sexual and Reproductive Health

According to Las Dignas, motherhood is an obligation rather than an option for the majority of Salvadoran women. Due to the lack of good antenatal care, this obligation is killing thousands of young Salvadoran women. El Salvador has the highest rate of uterine cancer in Latin America and the complications of pregnancy put women less than 20 years of age and greater than 34, at high risk of death. Because of this alarming state, Las Dignas has focused on 'opening doors of reflection' in health institutions on the issues of sexual rights, reproductive rights and sexuality (Las Dignas official literature, 1997).

Las Dignas puts pressure on these institutions to recognise women's rights to sexual and reproductive health and exposes those who continue to abuse women's rights. Their programme also provides resources for other women's organisations working in the area of sexual and reproductive health. Recently, Las Dignas has begun to open maternal houses operated by traditional midwives trained by Las Dignas, thus allowing women better access to health services, particularly in rural areas. The sexual and reproductive health programme is active in Chalatenango, Berlín and Suchitoto (Las Dignas official literature, 1997).

Training and Employment in Non-Traditional Occupations

In an attempt to break the sexual division of labour inherent in both the formal and informal labour sectors, Las Dignas has provided a space where women can receive training and employment in non-traditional occupations (Photo, 14). In addition to running a workshop in central San Salvador where women are trained in both mechanics and carpentry, Las Dignas also supports women who wish to enter non-traditional occupations. To this end they have recently facilitated the establishment of an association for those women pursuing such occupations so as to ensure that these women will have a voice in society (Las Dignas official literature, 1997).

Research, Communication and Documentation

From 1992, Las Dignas began to place more emphasis on research with women. Their Research, Communication and Documentation programme has now produced three studies focusing on the Salvadoran women's movement, the production and service industries and the struggle of Las Dignas to achieve political autonomy. Since 1992, they have also completed five research projects in the following areas: discrimination of women in land reform programmes; the presence of women in positions of power; problems associated with demanding child support; the participation of women in the 1994 election process; and the impact of the war on the perceptions and sexual practices of women participants. Las Dignas has disseminated the findings of their various research projects to not only the groups of women involved in the research process, but also, to wider society.

Las Dignas has a library which is open to the public and is active in edition and publication. It distributes the feminist magazine, *Lola* press, regionally and nationally, has radio shows, distributes pamphlets and press releases, holds press conferences, and organises public forums. All of this research and documentation undertaken by Las Dignas is available for use by students and researchers. The programme of Research, Communication and Documentation is located in Las Dignas' offices in San Salvador (Photo. 15: Las Dignas official literature, 1997).

School of Feminist Debate

Because Las Dignas believes in the importance of feminism as a way of analysing reality and as a tool to guide women into political action, a school of feminist debate was opened in 1995 to 'contribute to the construction of a political culture where dialogue and conflict enrich the women's movement' (Las Dignas official literature, 1997). According to Las Dignas, the school of feminist debate gives the organisation a mechanism with which to challenge the way women think. Attendance at the school is free but women participants do need to be literate to attend

Classes at the school are structured into three streams to suit student needs and cover such topics as gender relations, domestic work, violence, parenting, the family, sexuality, women's interests, feminist political strategies, masculinist groups, the Latin American feminist movement and feminist theory. As with the latter programme discussed above, the school of feminist debate is also located in San Salvador (Las Dignas official literature, 1997).

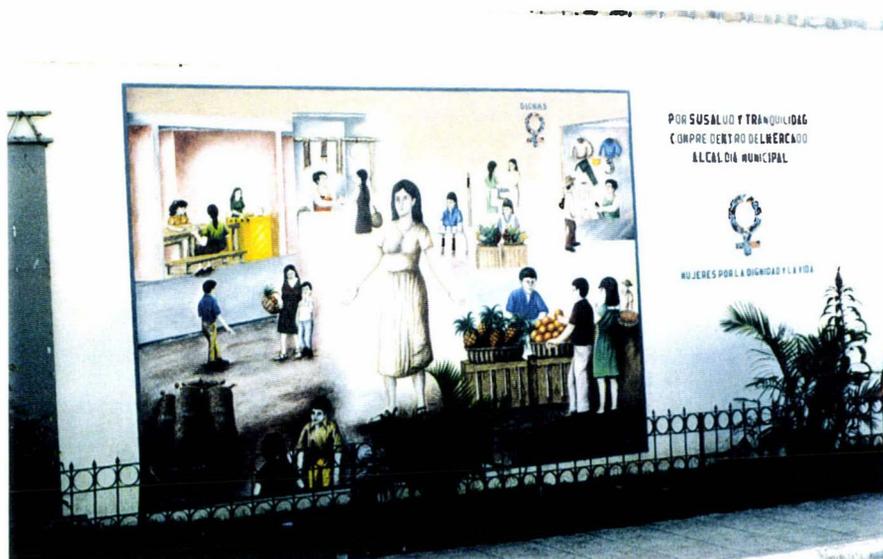


Photo 13

"For your health and tranquillity
buy from the market"
Las Dignas local development
programme, Suchitoto

Photo 14

Training in non-traditional
occupations:
Las Dignas carpentry
workshops, San Salvador



Photo 15

Central office of Las Dignas,
San Salvador

Alongside this large and dynamic gender and development programme, Las Dignas also has further programmes which ensure the smooth running of the organisation. The office in San Salvador houses fundraisers, administrators, human resource managers and finance specialists without whom the aforementioned programmes would not run effectively. An organisational chart of Las Dignas would therefore, look something like the following:

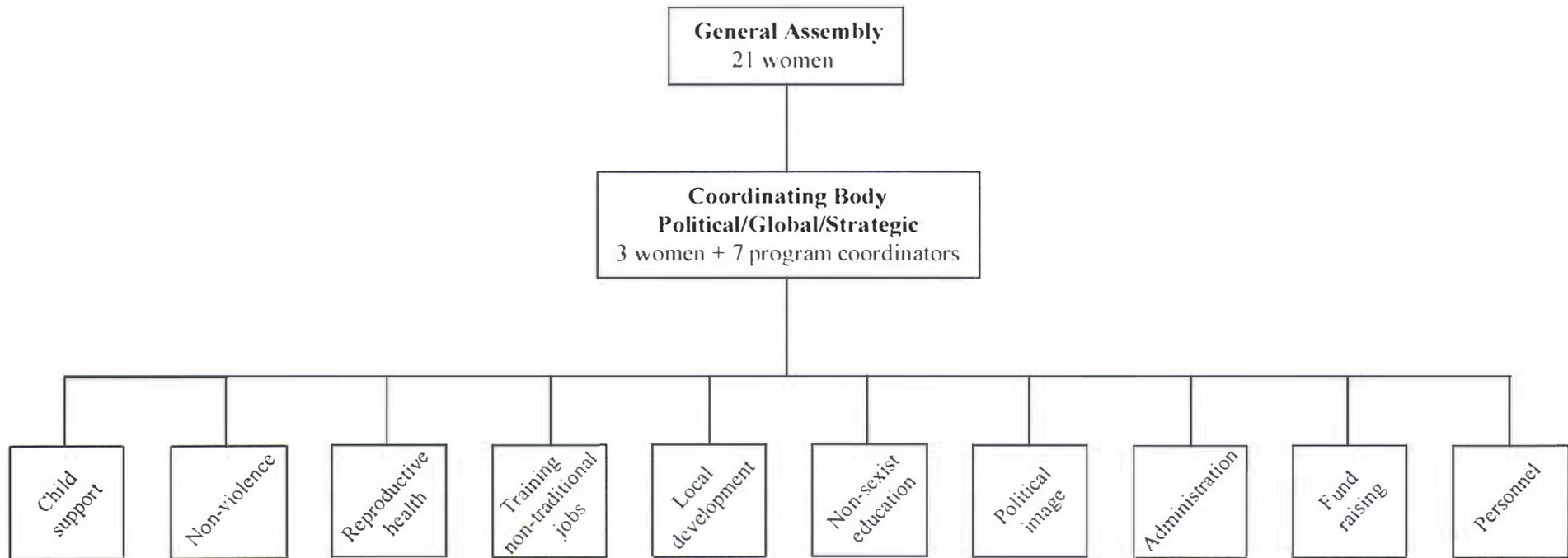


Figure 4: Organisational Chart of Las Dignas

Being such a large organisation with so many employees is not, however, without its problems. As with most other developing country NGOs, Las Dignas is dependent on funding from international government and non-government agencies. At the time of my departure from El Salvador in early 1998, funding cuts had contributed towards at least ten redundancies and the restructuring of some of Las Dignas' current programmes was imminent (a requirement also of international NGOs) (general field observations, 19/1/1998).

In addition to this, Las Dignas appears to have had some difficulty in maintaining a non-hierarchical environment amongst its staff. It is rumoured, for example, that staff in the upper echelons of the organisation (the coordinators of programmes and coordinating committee) are drawing such large salaries as to have made the aforementioned redundancies a necessity. Staff factions were also apparent and often appeared to be based upon hierarchical positions (the programmes coordinators form one group and their staff form another) (general field observations, 1997/1998).

Despite these problems, Las Dignas effectively operates programmes that are contributing towards the realisation of their mission 'to eradicate the subordination of women in order to achieve democracy and sustainable development' (Las Dignas official literature, 1997). The mental health programme on which my research was focused is certainly helping Las Dignas to achieve this mission. Let us now turn to examine both the historical precedents and the nature of the mental health programme.

The Mental Health Programme

In 1993, during a series of workshops Las Dignas was running for its activists on gender issues, strong feelings emerged on the impact of the civil war on women. Many women felt that their contribution to the 'war effort' had been undervalued, that machismo was strong in the guerrilla organisations and that they were now being punished for their participation by being 'sent back' to the kitchen in peace-time. For others who were mothers during the conflict, the war had caused the death of their children and for still

others, it had permanently affected their relationships with their families and significant others (Cristina Ibáñez, author interview, 19/11/1997).

While participating in the FMLN had signified a change in gender roles for many of these women, it was revealed in the workshops that the FMLN's lack of progressive analysis on issues such as sexuality in particular and women's subordination in general, has resulted in women distorting, denying or feeling guilty about the changes in gender roles that took place during the civil war. In response to such lack of analysis and to the massive outpouring of emotion and grief that accompanied the workshops, Las Dignas decided to create a space where the impact of the civil war on feminine subjectivity could be examined (Cristina Ibáñez, author interview, 19/11/1997).

To assist them with the establishment of such a space, Las Dignas invited a Spanish feminist psychologist to run a series of workshops on feminine emotions from a feminist perspective. These workshops represented an intensive course on gender and gave Dignas activists the confidence to formulate a mental health programme that could begin to heal the pain of war and to create new feminist life opportunities. At the same time as these workshops were being run, Las Dignas was also working with psychologists from a wide range of governmental and non-governmental institutions. By offering training on gender issues, Las Dignas could ensure that the important area of women's mental health could not be ignored in the work of these psychologists. Two of the psychologists that attended these training sessions were subsequently hired for the new mental health programme (Cristina Ibáñez, author interview, 19/11/97).

The Pilot Programme

Las Dignas began its work in mental health with a pilot programme attended by 64 women in May and September of 1993. The pre-requisites for attending the pilot were voluntary participation, a willingness to work in a group setting for three days, a feeling of having been affected emotionally from the war with no access to mental health services, and active membership in the women's movement. Participants were between the ages of 19-64 and most were from San Salvador. The majority of participants were

also uneducated and had been mothers during the war (Garaizabal and Vázquez, 1994:31-32).

The theory behind this pilot programme was to develop a process of mutual help to enable participants to share common problems stemming from the war. As a self-help process, this would ensure that these problems became conscious and that an understanding of them as issues pertaining to women specifically would be realised. The programme was not therefore designed to be classically therapeutic, but rather preventative in the way it aimed to actively promote the mental health of participants (Garaizabal and Vázquez, 1994:45).

One of the primary objectives of the self-help groups established in this pilot programme was to question the social construction of women and to challenge the structures which maintain women's subordination. In this way, the identities of women participants could be reconstructed and a space opened to discover alternatives, or new constructions of femininity that the 'feminine condition' had prevented them from assuming. The role of the facilitator in guiding this self-help process was thus critical. While many participants looked for 'recipes' to solve their problems, it was important for the facilitator to debunk the myth of the wise psychologist and to encourage participants to find ways of solving their own problems. This would also ensure that the devaluing of participants' war experiences was not reinforced in the groups (ibid:46-47.56).

The phases of the self-help process used by the pilot programme are as follows:

- *The Contract*: at the beginning of the self-help process a contract is formulated between group members. In the pilot programme, the groups formulated two rules to guide the group sessions. These were confidentiality of the group and the need to rest from the discussion during breaks in order to create a space for recovery.
- *Putting the Group to Work*: during this phase of the self-help process, participants present themselves and their problems to the group. In this way, a climate of trust is developed through mutual sharing. It is in this phase that the objectives of the groups are also formulated.

- *Group Exercises*: this phase deals with the problems expressed in the previous phase. In order to benefit all group members, the group prioritises the problems expressed and chooses those which can be generalised to the majority of women participants.
- *Self Determination*: in this phase of the process the group analyses the problems and experiences expressed. Here personal experiences are related to the social construction of gender in Salvadoran society. This enables group participants to begin to assimilate their traumatic experiences and to work towards an understanding of the positive elements they have to offer society as women.
- *Evaluation and Feedback*: in this final phase of the self-help process, the group spends time evaluating the last three days of their work. The facilitator is given feedback on her role and the group is able to record the progress they have made. (Garaizabal and Vázquez, 1994:54-56).

For many participants, the pilot programme was the first time that they had been able to express the grief and suffering that the war had engendered. Being able to share and analyse their feelings proved invaluable for women's mental health and development not only on an individual level, but also, on a collective one. Realising that they were not alone in their grief gave women strength and confidence and enabled an alternative view of the Salvadoran civil war, one which incorporated the experiences of women, to be understood. The following evaluations from participants in the pilot programme, elucidate these points:

I never have told everything that I told there. I did not imagine that it was going to be so painful and I felt so moved in my heart to see all the things that we women suffer. The group helped me a lot because I gained more courage to see that it was not only me who experienced these problems, but the majority of women there had experienced them, though I did not know the problems of the others because we never talked about them. Some things were very difficult to tell them, but in these groups of women, I felt confidence and trust to mourn that which before we did not mourn (participant in pilot programme, cited in Garaizabal and Vázquez, 1994:9-10)

They told me that I controlled my emotions too much, as if I was in front of someone who was going to recriminate me. It's true, I was used to thinking that expressing emotions was weak. If I had been in a mixed group I wouldn't have been able to express what I said there, I would have felt controlled, judged (participant in pilot programme, cited in Garaizabal and Vázquez, 1994:118-119).

It was powerful, all of us cried. I thought that peasant women were hard, that they were not moved by anything, and there I noticed my error. So much pain! So many tears in those days! (participant in pilot programme, cited in Garaizabal and Vázquez, 1994:74).

I think that the accumulated sadness that we women carry compromises the changes that feminism proposes, it impedes us displaying our energy and capacities to the maximum. For this I think that the women's movement needs people in the best emotional condition, that don't hold a lot of resentment with life because sooner or later it will draw on us and others (participant in pilot programme, cited in Garaizabal and Vázquez, 1994:120).

The group unleashed very emotional things, things of much pain. Many brought memories of sadness, others were frightened to realise that the war had been hard. We examined the war in its most human and most terrible parts, a history that has hardly ever been recognised because it is not a triumph or a defeat, it is a pain that is ignored. I was frightened to see the women cry with so much pain, but there we started to tie up things that one could not bring out and that are part of all of us. We have a grief history, a weeping accumulated history, we have been so attacked, so abused. Each one carried a terrible history and in the groups it was possible ... to see how terribly hard the war had been, how we had revoked the right to cry, to feel, because this was a symptom of weakness and because we guerrillas did not cry. Liar! We guerrillas needed to cry. We women cried in the self-help groups and this weeping allowed me to construct another history of the war (participant in pilot programme, cited in Garaizabal and Vázquez, 1994:125).

The Work of the Mental Health Team

Following the success of the pilot programme, Las Dignas began to initiate self-help programmes in San Salvador, and in those parts of the country which had been former conflict zones. They employed psychologists to work specifically in the area of war trauma and these psychologists became the facilitators of the first self-help groups run in Berlín, Sensutepeque, Santa Marta and San Salvador (Cristina Ibáñez, author interview, 19/11/1997).

While the self-help programme was being established, the mental health team was also actively working on research on mental health issues. In 1994 they submitted a winning entry to a Brazilian competition on the impact of war on motherhood, and in 1995 they began an extensive study involving 70 women on women's experiences of war (Cristina Ibáñez, author interview, 19/11/1997). From this study, Las Dignas was to later publish

three books each reflecting the diverse impact of the war on feminine subjectivity. At their well attended and highly publicised launch in 1997, Las Dignas offered the books to Salvadoran society as their contribution towards the process of social and emotional repair referenced by the Truth Commission in 1993 as an essential part of post-conflict reconstruction (general field observations, 22/8/1997).

In addition to this research, the members of the mental health team have been active in both networking and coordinating strategies for improving women's mental health within the women's movement and in reflecting on the effectiveness of their own mental health programme. In June of 1996, they organised a seminar entitled 'a feminist perspective on the emotional support of women' which 40 psychologists from governmental and non-governmental organisations attended. During August and October of that same year, the members of the mental health team attended a seminar on the use of bioenergy techniques in their work with women survivors of violence, and in October, they launched another publication, the proceedings of a conference on women's experiences in the revolutionary process in Central America (Arévalo, 1997:23-24).

Finally, in December of 1996, the mental health team, working in conjunction with the Institute of Human Rights and the Association of Lost Children, organised a Central American regional forum on the recovery and repair of lost memories. The forum was attended by organisations working in the areas of human rights and mental health throughout the region and it concluded, in the case of El Salvador, that the focus on forgiving and forgetting that had characterised post-conflict reconstruction was hampering organisations' efforts to discover appropriate ways of repairing both emotionally and materially, the victims of the 12 year civil war (Ibáñez, 1997:18-20).

Healing the trauma of war, however, is not the only area in which members of the mental health team have been working. In fact, only two out of the six psychologists in the mental health team work specifically in this area, facilitating self-help groups and more recently, gathering together groups of families to talk about their experiences of death and disappearance. The remaining members of the mental health team work with the other programmes run by Las Dignas, providing counselling and emotional support

to women victims of violence and to those women demanding child support (general field observations, 1997).

Despite only having two psychologists working in the area of war trauma, Las Dignas has been able, nevertheless, to facilitate self help groups in both San Salvador and rural areas. This has required incredible dedication from the mental health team as the groups generally last for at least a year and are often located in rural areas that require a great deal of effort to get to. At the time my research was being conducted, the mental health team was facilitating self-help groups in San Salvador and Berlín. This next section will outline the nature of the self-help groups currently being run by Las Dignas in these two locations.

Self-help in San Salvador and Berlín

According to Cristina Ibáñez, the main objective of the self-help groups I observed was to 'find a place to be able to talk about the different emotions that the war triggered, to work through guilt and bereavement in order to be able to make plans for the future' (author interview, 19/11/1997). To achieve this objective, the groups would generally meet once a week, focusing on everyday problems and worries, to come to an understanding of how gender had not only shaped their experiences of the war, but also, their subsequent recovery.

I began observing the group in San Salvador at the start of August, 1997, and continued my observation until the end of November 1997. The group met every Wednesday in a small room in the Dignas office in central San Salvador and the sessions would generally last from one and a half to two hours. The Wednesday Group, as I came to call them, was comprised of seven women aged between their late twenties and mid seventies. All were from working-class backgrounds, over half were illiterate and all had between one and twelve children. Most of the group resided in an infamous poor neighbourhood in San Salvador by the name of San Antonio Abad, and all of the group members had been effected by the war in some way.

The group was facilitated by Cristina Ibáñez, a feminist psychologist who had immigrated to El Salvador from Argentina in the late 1980s. Despite arriving in El Salvador towards the end of the conflict, Cristina had experienced first hand the trauma of living in a climate of terror and fear. Cristina had been imprisoned in Argentina for five years during the 'dirty war' period and was thus readily able to empathise with the wartime experiences of group participants. Cristina also had the kind of calm and gentle demeanour that seemed to add to the feeling of trust and warmth within the group.

When I began observing the group, they had already been together for over ten months and were hence, already good friends. The addition of Natalia and I into the group did little, it appeared, to change this feeling of solidarity and ease. In fact, the group members appeared anxious to make sure Natalia and I felt included and would go to great pains to welcome us at the beginning of each session. In this vein, my problems with the vernacular became, rather paradoxically, a subject around which group participants could rally in their efforts to make me feel included. It felt so lovely to hear their reassurances that my language would improve in no time.

At the beginning of each session we would all greet each other, usually with hugs and kisses, and set ourselves down on big colourful cushions scattered on the floor of the room. Mama Telle, although in her mid seventies, was surprisingly agile at getting herself down onto the cushions and would even offer to assist me in doing so. The session would then proceed with Cristina asking everyone how they had been during the last week. With the exception of Matilde and Lidia who often took longer to express themselves than others, group participants would begin responding to Cristina's question almost immediately. Interestingly, however, participants almost never talked about themselves, choosing instead to recount the problems they were having with their families.

It seemed, therefore, as if all group participants were suffering from the cultural constructions of their sex in relation to the arena of motherhood. Even those participants whose children were adults were not spared the anxiety and grief that often comes from assuming almost total responsibility for the lives of others who seemed to be uninterested in taking responsibility for themselves. Lucila for example, would

constantly recount the problems she was experiencing with her two teenage grandchildren who had lived with her since their mother had remarried. A common practice in El Salvador, Lucila, the grandmother, was then expected to bring up the children as her own. At over sixty years of age, Lucila found it extremely stressful having to wait up for her teenage grandson to come home from his night-time escapades. During one such incident, a bomb went off close to Lucila's home, and she spent the rest of the night worried sick about the safety of her grandson who did not return home until 4am (group observation, 5/11/1997).

Lucila's granddaughter, was similarly difficult for her to cope with. In one self-help session I observed, Lucila talked of how concerned she was about her granddaughter not coming home at night. She is sixteen years old and Lucila was worried that she was pregnant. 'If she has the baby who will care for it?'. Lucila asked (group observation, 5/11/1997). Matilde, who is around the same age as Lucila, would also constantly recount the problems she was having with her adult children. Matilde is the sole breadwinner of her extended family, and her son, who survived the war and who is now an alcoholic, is a source of great concern to her. Matilde feels that he does not appreciate anything she does for him, and that, since they moved to San Salvador in the early 1980s, he has acquired all these new vices. He is often out all night and when he is at home, Matilde feels she has to cook and clean for him (group observation, 20/8/1997).

Lorena, a more educated woman in her mid thirties, has problems with her daughter of a completely different nature. She has a close relationship with her daughter, who, as a sickly child, is teased at school about her allergies and about her mother being a feminist. When Lorena's daughter is teased in this way, her allergies become worse and Lorena feels guilty, that she is responsible. Lorena tries, therefore, to be open with her daughter and to allow her to make some of her own choices. She gave her daughter permission to go to a party, for example, despite the fact she was feeling sick at the time. Because she has such a trusting relationship with her daughter, however, Lorena is criticised by her sister and her parents. They accuse her of not being a good mother when all she is trying to do is develop a more egalitarian relationship with her daughter (group observation, 20/8/1997).

Often, such discussion concerning problems with children would lead participants to recount their experiences during the war. Although the Wednesday Group had spent considerable time when they first met discussing these traumatic experiences, they were, nevertheless, subjects that were regularly brought up in the sessions I observed. Participants had found incredible relief in the ritual they had performed in the group the year before on 'all souls day' to farewell the souls of their dead relatives and friends and thus realised the importance of talking about painful memories. According to Cristina, the ritual had caused a massive outpouring of grief that was unprecedented for many of the participants (group observation, 1997).

When discussion during the group sessions did turn to such painful memories, the atmosphere of support and trust present facilitated disclosure. Participants would hold the hand of, or put their arms around the shoulder of the woman who was weeping and there would be no distractions to prevent the speaker from telling her story. Participants seemed to have a genuine concern for each other, such that when Matilde, for example, could not come to the group because of illness, participants made sure they visited her in her home. Even Cristina made the effort to visit Matilde when she had failed to attend a several group sessions. She took Natalia and I with her and our visit seemed to be a source of strength for Matilde (group observation, 1997).

Because of the fact that the group had only just began, the participants of the self-help group in Berlin, however, did not seem quite as concerned for, and trusting of, each other. I began observing their group from its establishment at the start of September, 1997 and continued to do so until the end of November, 1997. Like the Wednesday Group, the Berlin Group was comprised of women from working class backgrounds aged from their late 20s to late 60s, the majority being illiterate. Most of the participants had spent the war years living in villages that were right in the middle of the war zone and had thus been denied the sometimes empowering experiences that were to be found with living and working in guerrilla controlled zones. All of the nine participants who became regular group attendants, had traumatic stories to tell of their experiences during the war.

Observing the Berlín Group from the onset proved a very useful way of coming to terms with not only the nature of the self-help experience itself, but also, with its effect on group participants. The Berlín Group was also facilitated by a different feminist psychologist, a younger Salvadoran woman by the name of Monserrat Arévalo, giving me the additional opportunity to observe variances in facilitation style.

The priorities for the Berlín Group during their establishment phase were therefore, quite different from the priorities of the Wednesday Group. Whereas the Wednesday Group was able to work on issues of identity and self-determination, the initial work in the Berlín Group centred around building trust and consolidating the group. In this vein, the first few sessions were comprised of setting group rules and playing games to build up trust. It was an amazing sight to see these peasant women who led such hard lives, enjoying themselves completely. One of the games, a kind of solidarity building, problem solving, 'musical chairs', involving a piece of paper in the middle of the room which the women had to all fit on to when the music stopped, had everyone in peels of laughter. The rules set by the group were slightly more serious than these games, involving such issues as confidentiality, freedom of expression, respect for each other's feelings and ideas, and attendance (group observation, 5/9/1997).

Monserrat had to work very hard during the first phase of the group's establishment to instil in participants a sense of the importance of the group time as a space for themselves. With most of the women being mothers and caring for large extended families, the idea of putting themselves first did not come easily. To combat this ingrained gender role, Monserrat would speak of the right of participants to do things for themselves and how the group would help them to feel better about themselves and their lives. Of great importance to group participants were Monserrat's assurances that their physical ailments would also diminish once they felt less burdened by their traumatic war experiences.

To create a safe space for participants to recount their stories, Monserrat, furthermore, needed to convince participants of their right to express their feelings. Having lived through a war where it was dangerous to express their feelings and having been

socialised to feel that emotion signified weakness, participants seemed to feel a great sense of relief in Monserrat's words. Tears flowed readily after this time and it was not uncommon to find the whole group, myself, Natalia and Monserrat included, crying about a tragedy that had befallen one of the women during the war.

Following this period of consolidation and trust building, the group decided on areas or themes that they wanted to focus on during the group sessions. These themes, which also acted as group objectives, included the following:

- Healthy minds
 - Happiness at home
 - Helping others
 - Learning to live peacefully at home
 - Clearing the mind
 - The losses
 - Motherhood
 - Improved health
- (group observation. 6/11/1997).

We began to work for the next couple of sessions on the themes of wartime experiences and daily life in peace-time. Interestingly, the discussion on wartime experiences led participants to discuss the importance of spirituality in their lives. Without God, many of the participants felt that they would not have survived the war and even though they lost family members and material possessions, God was their source of strength during these traumatic times. This talk of spirituality then led the group to a discussion on the role of midwives in rural communities. Many of the group participants had given birth to their children on their own, others had acted as midwives to women in their villages. Almost all felt that God had assisted them with the often dangerous task of giving birth without medical assistance (group observation, 21/11/1997).

For the last session of the year, a celebration, involving a trip to a volcanic lake north of Berlín and a picnic lunch, was arranged for the group by the mental health team. One of the Dignas workers based in Berlín had spent several days preparing a feast for the picnic and pickup wagons were hired to transport the group the 20 or so kilometres to the lake. Once we had arrived at the lake, we divided into small groups to prepare for a

ritual Monseratt had organised. All of the participants were asked to write down on one page the bad things that had happened to them in their lives and on another, their hopes, dreams and plans for the new year. As many of the participants were illiterate, however, Monseratt, myself and several other of the literate women in the group assisted the others with this task.

The next part of the ritual involved participants sharing what they had written publicly. Each woman came forward to present her feelings to the group, following which, the paper was burnt in a ceremonial urn. After all participants had come forward, prayers were said and then each of the participants talked about how much participating in the group had meant for them. When it was my turn to say my piece, I could hardly talk from the emotion I felt at the strength of these women. All participants expressed their desire to continue participating in the group in the New Year.

Hence, while initially I found observing the Berlín Group a different kind of experience from observing the Wednesday Group, after three months of being with them, I was beginning to feel the same sense of solidarity and trust that was so obvious in the Wednesday Group. For group members this solidarity and trust was a welcome and exhilarating addition to their lives. Participating in the group seemed to be a focal point in their week, and nothing, not even the wrath of their husbands, was going to stop them from being part of the group's experiences.

In 1998, the mental health team has plans to facilitate, in addition to the Wednesday and Berlín Groups, a new self-help group in the former guerrilla-controlled zone of Perquín. As Las Dignas believes that Salvadoran women need the chance to think for themselves and the chance to increase their self-esteem, the inclusion of men in this group is not part of their immediate plans for the future. Cristina believes, however, that once women have been given time to discover themselves in Salvadoran society, the time will come for the mental health team to work with men also. Cristina has plans to facilitate mixed self-help groups which will allow men, perhaps for the first time, to express the pain of the recent civil war (author interview, 19/11/1997).

Summary

Chapter Eight, through its discussion on women's historical and contemporary organising in El Salvador, charted the importance of the work of Las Dignas in gender and development practice. As one of El Salvador's largest women's organisations, Las Dignas, unlike many other women's organisations of its time, has learnt the importance of political and ideological autonomy to the achievement of its goals to eradicate women's subordination. Being independent of the political Left has allowed Las Dignas to establish a variety of programmes each designed to meet the practical and strategic needs of a wide range of Salvadoran women.

The mental health programme initiated by Las Dignas in 1993 is certainly working towards this goal. As one of the few mental health programmes on offer to Salvadoran women for healing the trauma of the recent civil war, the self-help programme run by Las Dignas is filling an important gap in post-conflict gender and development practice. By giving women the opportunity to work towards a future where they are no longer burdened by the guilt and pain of their war-time experiences, Las Dignas is helping a generation of women to become effective and capable citizens of society.

While this chapter has focused on the nature of the self-help programme, the next chapter will draw the threads of this thesis together by using empowerment theory to reveal the empowerment potential of the self-help programme for its individual participants.

Chapter Nine - Mental Health As Empowerment?: Analysing the Empowerment Potential of Las Dignas' Self-help Groups

Introduction

As I discussed in the previous chapter, the self-help groups facilitated by Las Dignas are assisting Salvadoran women to heal the trauma of the recent civil war. These self-help groups incorporate, however, something more than healing. By revealing the gendered nature of participants' experiences of trauma, the self-help groups are assisting women to gain a critical understanding of their own subordination in Salvadoran society. Does this mean, therefore, that participation in these self-help groups is necessarily facilitating a process of empowerment for individual women participants?

Drawing on interviews with individual participants as well as group observations, Chapter Nine will examine the empowering outcomes for individual women gained from participation in the self-help group process. The theoretical model outlined in Chapter Four will form a guide for analysing these empowering outcomes. Conclusions will be developed on the basis of the effects of the self-help group process in relation to participants' individual sense of well-being as well as their behaviour towards family and society. To illustrate that empowerment is a dynamic process that is neither linear nor isolated, the potential disempowering impacts of participating in the self-help group process will also be discussed in this chapter.

Before I begin to undertake such an analysis, however, let us first spend some moments reviewing the complex nature of the empowerment process.

Empowerment Revisited

Important considerations

The first point to consider about empowerment is that it is rooted in the notion of power. As we discovered in Chapter Two, however, power is not a simple concept. There are various forms of power ranging from those which attempt to control (power over), to those which seek to draw from the power that exists inside an individual (power from within) (Rowlands, 1997:13). In relation to gender and development, empowerment is generally viewed as a process (Rowlands, 1997:130) whereby power is generated from within and through alliances with others (power to and power with) to transform the inequitable gender relations which maintain women's subordination at different levels and in specific contexts.

As a corollary of this conceptualisation, the second point to consider about empowerment is that it can be sought at different levels. For Rowlands (1997:128) though, it is psychological empowerment and the self confidence and autonomy that this generates, that is most significant to the empowerment process:⁸⁶

If these core aspects of empowerment are encouraged and developed, women's self-perception will change and 'internalised oppression' will be challenged, contributing to an increased 'power-to' and 'power from within'. The changes which result take many forms and may feed back into the process, with the individual better able to identify and act in her own interests (Rowlands, 1997:130).

⁸⁶ See also, Kabeer (1994:229).

The third point concerning empowerment that should be noted then is that the levels through which forms of power are sought, are interrelated. A sense of personal or psychological empowerment, reflected in such factors as increased self esteem and confidence, may for example, simultaneously lead to an ability to work with others in a social organisation, a factor identified by both Rowlands (1997:15) and Friedmann (1992:33) as one of the core elements of social or relational empowerment. The dividing line often drawn between levels or dimensions of empowerment, therefore, is best thought of as fluid rather than rigid.

As the empowerment process requires a critical understanding of the structural mechanisms which maintain an individual's oppression or subordination, it does not always start on its own accord. Thus, a fifth point to consider about empowerment is that it requires a period of consciousness-raising. Termed conscientisation by Freire (1972), this consciousness-raising may be promoted by an outside agent such as an NGO, or as has often taken place in the Latin American context, by clergy working in the tradition of Liberation Theology.

Finally, the last point we should note about the empowerment process is its dynamic and complex nature. Empowerment cannot be viewed in evolutionary terms precisely because it takes place within a broad range of historical and political contexts. Thus, efforts to empower may have disempowering outcomes ranging from, family disapproval of a women's participation in empowering activities, to the perpetration of gender-related violence against those women who express opposition to the state. By the same token, however, these disempowering impacts can also act as an impetus to the empowerment process. Because traditional gender roles are disrupted by such conflict, women are more likely to gain a critical understanding of their own social environment and to take action to reverse this newfound understanding of their subordination.

Having refreshed ourselves with some of the main points about empowerment revealed in Chapter Two, let us now turn to review briefly the way in which empowerment was formulated in the theoretical model on approaches to healing in post-conflict Latin America presented at the end of Chapter Four.

Empowerment and the Theoretical Model

In the context of political conflict in Latin America, many women have been extensively involved in social movements which have opposed the repression of the authoritarian state. These efforts to promote social change have often resulted in women falling victim to gender related violence at the hands of the authoritarian state. The physical, environmental, social and psychological impacts of this gender-related violence have, at times, traumatised women, leading them to experience disempowerment, rather than empowerment, as a result of these efforts to promote social change. To heal this trauma in women, therefore, strategies that promote empowerment (conceptualised as an increase in the power with, the power to, and the power within) should form part of gender and development practice in post-conflict environments.

As women's lives are influenced, and at times defined by their relationships with men, a strategy of healing for women must take into account the cultural construction of sex roles and relations in Latin American society. Conscientisation could involve the deprivatisation of the trauma experienced by women to reveal the situated constructions of masculinity and femininity implicit in their experiences of such trauma. Furthermore, as women in Latin America are expected to place their wants and needs second to those of their family, this conscientisation could also involve the legitimisation of women's feelings.

Once women had become aware of the impact of gender in shaping their experiences of trauma, a process of deconstructing oppressive gender roles would then need to take place. In the context of healing, this deconstruction would not only involve a valorisation of women's participation in social change movements, but also, an identification by women of those oppressive gender roles which had contributed to their experiences of trauma.

As a result of the above two processes, it is possible for women to experience empowerment in relation to their own self (personal) and in relation to their family and

wider society (social/political). To see if these empowering outcomes have been achieved certain indicators of empowerment revealed in the literature and through fieldwork interviews and observations have been selected. These are, in relation to the self, courage, self-esteem, strength, happiness, solidarity, spirituality, a sense of control, confidence, the ability to make plans/decisions, energy and a sense of hope for the future. In relation to family and society, the empowerment indicators selected are the ability to access resources, a sense of control in relationships with others, the opportunity for fulfilling friendships, a critical consciousness of subordination in familial and societal settings, an interest in political processes and the participation in grass-roots organisations.

As empowerment is context specific, however, these empowerment indicators should not be seen as definitive. Rather, they form a framework of some of the possible ways in which empowerment can be expressed in the context of healing in Latin America. These indicators will obviously differ in meaning for each individual according to their own particular context and may also change quite considerably over time. Thus, while there is a temptation to generalise about empowering outcomes for women, it is important that an analysis of empowerment bases its conclusions on the experiences of individual women, the way they feel about themselves, and the way in which they relate to their families and wider society.

Finally, as empowerment does not occur in a vacuum, these empowering outcomes may also result in disempowerment for individual women. Again, however, this outcome is not definitive and may not be applicable to many women who have been involved in empowerment processes.

After restating the meaning of empowerment in general terms, and explaining the theoretical model, let us now examine the empowering outcomes for individual women participating in Las Dignas' self-help groups. We begin first with the Wednesday Group.

Empowerment in the Wednesday Group

Conscientisation/Reconstructing Gender Roles

All of the participants in the Wednesday Group had come to the self-help sessions because of the trauma they were experiencing as a result of their participation in the civil war. While it was impossible for me to judge to what extent they were aware of the gendered nature of their trauma when they first began to participate, it was evident in the four months I spent observing the group that many were beginning to make the connections between constructions of gender in Salvadoran society and their experiences of trauma.

During one session when we were discussing the women's experiences of motherhood during the war, Matilde, for example, began to speak of the guilt she had originally felt for taking her son away from the front-line after he had sustained an injury to his arm. Matilde felt that by taking him away from the comradeship of the front, she was denying him the experience of solidarity often gained through participation in the guerrilla army. After stating how guilty she felt about the incident, however, Matilde then stressed that she now realised she had done the right thing. By taking him away from a potentially dangerous situation (the people he had been living with at the front all subsequently 'disappeared') she had acted responsibly and thus had nothing to feel guilty about (group observation, 24/9/97).

Such forms of critical consciousness were also apparent when Matilde spoke of the economic deprivation under which most of the group members are forced to live. Matilde explained that this is because companies from the United States transfer all of the profit they make out of El Salvador and make Salvadorans work in their factories for very little (group observation, 24/9/97). While this statement does not indicate an awareness of how women are exploited in this process, it is clear that Matilde had begun to gain an understanding of the structural mechanisms which help maintain her poverty.

To be able to share these forms of consciousness in the group setting, it was necessary for the women to feel that what they had to say was important to the whole self-help group process. Many described how when they first came to the group they did not even have the confidence to speak. They felt that what they had to say could not possibly be important enough to share and thus, were burdened with feelings of fear and lack of confidence:

The first day that I went to Las Dignas, Dinora [the original facilitator of the group] asked us what our problems were and why we felt the need to come to the group. I thought about this over and over but I didn't want to speak out. Lidia was the first to speak, everybody else followed and I was the only one left. Dinora then asked me directly what the need was that motivated me to come to the group. I said to her that my need came out of my fear of speaking to others. I felt that what I said was not useful. Another need I had was that I didn't feel anything I said would be of help to others. I didn't feel capable of helping others because I didn't have any self-confidence. I was also afraid and didn't have the courage to express what I was feeling (Lucila, author interview, 1/10/97).

I got there [to the group] and everyone started saying their names and ages and how they felt. It was difficult for me since I always worry about others and not myself. I'm willing to go anywhere to help others even if I'm sick but I never take time for myself. I feel that with the compañeras from Las Dignas I've learnt a lot about these things (Marta, author interview, 1/10/97).

By instilling in participants a sense of the importance of their feelings and experiences, Cristina assisted the empowerment process. She helped participants to realise that the reasons for their lack of confidence and fear were tied up with the gender roles that had been assigned to them in Salvadoran society. Women, Cristina would stress, are accustomed to keeping their feelings to themselves and are made to feel that their opinions are unimportant. Women are thus faced with a lack of confidence and fear when it comes to speaking in public or even when sharing their feelings with family members. Conscientisation was thus achieved in the Wednesday Group through a gradual process of reflection on the wider structural factors which maintained women's subordination (group observation, 1997).

This was also the case with the reconstruction of gender roles in the group. During the civil war, as we learnt in Chapter Seven, women participated in the revolutionary

struggle in a variety of ways. With the exception of those women who were officially classified as combatants, however, the important contribution made by women has not been recognised in the post-war reconstruction process. While I did not observe this directly in the Wednesday Group, Cristina informed me that the process of reconstructing gender roles in the group had begun with the valorisation of women's participation in the revolutionary process. This allowed participants to see how cultural constructions of their sex as passive and self-abnegating mothers, had influenced the ways in which society has viewed their contribution. Cristina had stressed that during the civil war, the notion of women subverting traditional gender roles by taking up arms or working in non-traditional occupations was tolerated for the good of the revolutionary struggle but now that there is so-called peace, it is seen to be in society's best interests to play down women's participation and to encourage women to pursue gender roles which do not challenge the status quo. Once women in the group realised that their contributions to the revolutionary struggle were important, many were able to reverse their feelings of impotence and see themselves once again as agents of change (Cristina Ibáñez, author interview, 19/11/98).

One aspect of this reflection on, and reconstruction of gender roles that I was able to observe in the Wednesday Group, was in relation to participants' roles as mothers. The problems participants were having with their children and grandchildren were, as we saw in Chapter Eight, a re-occurring theme in the self-help sessions. As such, however, the sessions provided an excellent space to reflect on oppressive gender roles. During one group session, for example, conversation had centred around the various problems the women had experienced with their children during the six day national holiday celebrations. Instead of feeling refreshed after their holiday, many of the women had emerged feeling stressed and worried due to the behaviour of their children over this period. In one instance, Lucila's son had too much to drink and had ended up badly beaten and left for dead on the side of the road. When they eventually found him, he refused to go to the doctor, causing Lucila so much stress that she was unable to go and celebrate Mass. In another incident Matilde recounted that she had to work so hard looking after the kids that she was exhausted by the end of the holiday period (group observation, 13/8/97).

In response to these stories, Cristina facilitated a discussion on parental responsibility. She asked the women why they felt that they had to take total responsibility for their adult children and participants responded by discussing the fact that it was expected of them or they did not actually realise that they were doing it. Following this process of reflection, some of the participants then volunteered information about the ways in which they had decided to reconstruct their traditional roles as self-sacrificing mothers:

I did have a holiday. I allowed my family to do things instead of thinking that I had to do everything myself. It is possible to change your perceptions about your role in the family. During the vacation I didn't wash one dish or clean anything at all! (Marta, group observation, 13/8/98)

I was very involved with church activities over the vacation. God makes me feel strong and with God on my side I don't worry so much about the kids like I used to (Mama Telle, group observation, 13/8/98).

It's not just a women's responsibility to do housework. Mothers have to teach their children that it is both the women and men who should be responsible (Lidia, group observation, 22/10/97).

We are beginning to see then, how this processes of reconstructing gender roles was also healing for participants. Becoming partially free of the worries and guilt associated with assuming total parental responsibility for their adult children was a great relief to many participants. This relief, in turn, impacted on their mental health status:

I've felt a lot of relief and have gained strength from going to the group. I used to worry so much about things [family, economics], but not any more (Matilde, author interview, 1/10/97)

My children would get up and I would make them coffee or buy them bread, sometimes I would cook them beans with eggs but not any more, I've gotten away from doing this. It's not that I have forgotten about them, it's just that I don't live like that any more. This is what Cristina's words have taught me, to realise that we are not anybody's slaves, we are not slaves of our children or our husband, we are nobody's slaves, we are free. I used to also fear going out imagining that my children would come home and say that I was always out. My father would say that I was never home and that he had nothing to eat when he was hungry. But I never left them without food. If I had to go out, I would prepare some food for them, the coffee would be made, the food, everything so

that it was ready for them to eat whenever they wanted. But now I feel I have been set free (Lucila, author interview, 1/10/97).

In addition, the space the group provided to express and work through their grief and worry was of great assistance to participant's healing. As we saw in earlier chapters, many participants had not had the opportunity to grieve for loved ones and thus felt, in the self-help groups, a sense of healing in being able to do so:

[Mama Telle recounts a story about her son's death] I had never expressed this before but I expressed it at Las Dignas. There were many things that I couldn't talk about that I did talk about at Las Dignas. Attending the meetings helped me to forget the pain. Now I don't feel so burdened and pre-occupied (Mama Telle, author interview, 1/10/97).

Attending the group has helped me a lot. It has helped me to discover myself and to understand all the problems I've carried in my heart. I've relaxed a lot also, since at Las Dignas we are able to make sense of all of the illnesses we've had and how to try and avoid having them (Lidia, author interview, 1/10/97).

The first day I attended the group, I wasn't able to talk, since I started crying, nor the second day either. It wasn't until the third day that I began to talk. On that day I saw that everyone was speaking out but I still wasn't able to talk. Cristina saw this and said to me to speak out since 'we are all family here'. She then gave me a tissue because I cried and cried when I spoke of what I went through. After this the crying ceased. I felt that this helped me a lot, since I felt I had confidence in myself and I no longer felt that fear (Lucila, author interview, 1/10/97).

Going to the group has helped me with my problems, before this, it was midnight and I was still crying. Not any more. I can sleep now. Going to the group has helped me to face reality, my way of thinking has changed, I accept things with more ease. I couldn't do this before (Matilde, author interview, 1/10/97).

[attending the group] has helped me to value things and express ... what I have inside. Because sometimes with your family you cannot find a place to talk. Talking about things made me feel very sad but at the same time reflecting on things made me happy I feel that going to the group has helped me a lot to overcome my suffering (Maria, author interview, 1/10/97).

Because all group participants were Roman Catholics, spirituality also formed part of the healing process. In the self-help group sessions participants would frequently refer to the strength they received from their relationship with God. Often we would say a prayer at the end of a session if requested by one of the participants, and by all accounts,

the Mass that was held for participants for the feast day of 'All Souls' in 1996, was a source of great strength to all participants. According to Cristina, even Lidia, who rarely shed a tear in group sessions was overwhelmed by grief during the mass (author interview, 5/11/97).

By now, therefore, we are beginning to form a picture of some of the empowering outcomes derived from the processes of conscientisation and reflection on gender roles in the self-help groups. To complete the picture we need to spend a little more time examining specifically the empowering outcomes that relate to the personal and to the social/political.

Personal Empowerment

From the testimonials and observations related thus far, it is perhaps obvious to see that the empowering outcomes for participants of the Wednesday Group relate principally to the self. Participation in the self-help group process has assisted participants to draw on the power that is within each one of them and the power that is generated through solidarity with others, to gain a sense of themselves as individuals with the capacity to effect change.

This sense of individual potency, as Friedmann (1992: 33) refers to it, was clearly evident in the group evaluation I observed several months into my fieldwork with Las Dignas. At this evaluation the group was firstly asked to express in a few words how they had felt when they first came to the group. The responses to this question and the meanings of the words chosen by participants were as follows:⁸⁷

- Mama Telle: *closed* (in that she didn't know what was going to go on in the groups and felt closed because of this), *unconfident* (of others, of trusting them in the group setting) and *happiness* (to see that others cared for her).

⁸⁷ Many of the words expressed by participants cannot be translated literally into English. Thus, when this occurs, a sense of what the word represents in English will be given

- Lucila: *timid* (in that she had to think before she spoke and didn't know how to express herself) and *insecure* (in that she did not want to express things that would hurt her or anyone else).
- Matilde: *doubtful* (in that she doubted that the meetings could help her).
- Norena: *frightened* (of what she would say, of what would be said in the meetings).
- Lidia: *unknown* (in that she had no idea of what was going to happen in the meetings).
- Lorena: *necessity* (the need to attend meetings), *hope* (that the meetings would help her) and a sense that there was an *alleviation* of her problems (in that she was finally getting help).

(group observation, 27/10/97)

These feelings were subsequently written on a white board and participants were then asked to express how they were feeling now, after ten months of group participation, in the same manner. The responses to this question were:

- Lucila: *happy* (in the sense that she has no more sadness, is more organised, is able to delegate and feels liberated), *ready to fight* (in that she has learnt to consider herself as a person who is worthy of valour and has more courage now because of it).
- Lorena: *secure* (she is more assertive now and is able to make decisions) and *challenged* (by what she has learnt in the group and by what she is able to do).
- Matilde: *assisted* (in that the self-help groups have helped her a lot), *animated* (she feels more alive now than she was before) and *strong*.
- Mama Telle: *decisive* (she is able to make decisions now).
- Lidia: *happy*, *liberated* (in that she does not have the whole responsibility for her feelings now) and a sense of *being able to overcome* (the problems she has now and any that may come her way in the future)

(group observation, 27/10/97)

From the above two lists of words, participants then went on to choose words which best expressed their expectations of the self-help group process. These words which included all of the above words, and some extras, such as a sense of being appreciated,

liberation, and change, would consequently become the objectives for the group in the future.

Thus, we can see how participation in the group generated in participants feelings associated with personal empowerment. Participants felt that they had more confidence in themselves, were less burdened by the trauma they had experienced during the war and were more positive about the future. The solidarity generated within the group gave participants the feeling that they were not alone, and this in turn made participants feel happy and infused with energy. Being able to express their spirituality was, moreover, personally empowering for participants who seemed to take extra comfort in the fact that the group was respectful of their spiritual needs.

The empowering outcomes of group participation in relation to the self did not cease at the level of the individual, however. As the boundaries between personal and social/political empowerment are most often blurred, these personal empowerment outcomes also had spin-off effects into the realm of social/political empowerment.

Social/Political Empowerment

We have already seen in previous sections how participation in the self-help group changed the way the women acted in relation to their family. While there had obviously already been changes of perception made before I entered the group, I was able to observe in participants not only an awareness of, but also, a desire to take action against their subordination within the family setting. We saw earlier, for example, how Lucila was not prepared to act as a slave any more to her father and adult children and how Marta had delegated responsibility for the household chores over the holiday period. Taking action against their subordinate position within the household had thus given participants at least some ability to control the direction of their lives.

Such changes in the way the women relate to their families were only made possible, however, because of the personal empowerment gained through group participation. If the women had not felt confidence in themselves and in their ability to effect change, for

example, many of them may not have even considered questioning and taking action against the way they were positioned within the family. The sense of solidarity and support engendered by the group also contributed to the women's ability to challenge their subordinate relationships with other family members because it gave many of the women the strength to do so:

I try to put into practice what I have learnt It has helped me a lot being with my compañeras, all together, to have real trust, to be able to open up and talk because you know you are going to be understood and you know that everyone is in the same situation (Marta, author interview, 1/10/97).

This confidence and strength gained in the group also assisted women with overcoming the negative social constructions in which they had been defined by Salvadoran society. Instead of accepting their roles as passive and powerless, many of the women now felt, for example, that they were more able to participate in collective groupings. All the women who attended the Wednesday Group were involved with grass-roots organisations in their community (Lucila, Norena, Marta, Lidia and Lorena were involved with a health project which provided primary care to members of their community), and the confidence and strength they gained from participating in the Wednesday Group allowed them to feel that they were making a contribution:

Attending the group helps us with our work in the community because we feel more self-confident. You feel so good doing jobs for the community but sometimes you have to give yourself some time to go for a walk and let your mind rest (Lidia, author interview, 1/10/97).

I've become more involved in the community. Before I only had the clinic. When they told me that they were going to open a clinic in this sector, I felt the need, not to help, but a need to learn. They organised an assembly and asked if there were any volunteers who would like to work in the clinic. I was the first to put up my hand (Lucila, author interview, 1/10/97).

I used to work quite hard in the community, but not any more, since I am older. I used to make 'chilate' for celebrations or 'tamales' and to talk about the Lord's words. I still do that [talk about the Lord's words] three times a week but since I can't read, I help by supporting them [community youth] and by sharing with them the life that I've lived (Mama Telle, author interview, 1/10/97).

The group has helped me a lot. The visit from Natalia, Helen and Cristina made me feel good. I am happier now and more motivated to work in the clinic (Matilde, group observation, 19/11/97).

In addition to gaining a sense that they had something to offer in their existing work in the community, some of the women have begun to contemplate further actions that they could take to combat some of the other problems that plague their lives. During one group session, for example, participants, after recounting in some detail the problems associated with drug and alcohol abuse in their community, began to discuss the ways in which they could assist the community in dealing with this problem. The women felt that the ready availability of drugs and alcohol at practically every street corner was the principal reason for the problem, and they ended the meeting resolving to do something about it (group observation, 10/10/97).

To say that participation in the group has instilled in the women a greater interest in political processes, however, would be more problematic. All of the women had experienced first hand the repression that characterised the civil war period in El Salvador and were thus only too aware of the workings of the political sphere. Not only did they know the dates when various massacres and battles had taken place during the civil war but they were also cognisant with the way in which power was exercised in contemporary society. Whether participation in the group gave them a newfound sense of the possibility of political change and their roles in this then, is too difficult to ascertain.

Analysing whether participation in the Wednesday Group had given participants greater access to resources was a slightly easier task. According to UNICEF's Women's Empowerment Framework cited in Chapter Two, equitable access to resources such as land, educational opportunities and credit is essential if women are to make meaningful progress in the empowerment process (UNICEF, 1993:5). It appeared from my conversations with participants, and from my visits to their homes, that such equitable access was not occurring. Indeed, while some of the participants in the Wednesday Group should have been eligible for access to the above kinds of resources, the sexist nature of the peace accords discussed in Chapter Seven, prevented this from occurring.

At times, the fact that the members of the Wednesday Group were impoverished acted to impede their access to the self-help groups. This was especially the case for Maria, who, as a street bread seller, was obliged to sell all her bread by the late afternoon. As the group commenced at two in the afternoon and as she was the sole economic provider in her family, it was impossible for Maria to survive economically and continue to attend the group. Frequently, the material reality of the women's lives would result in them being physically exhausted when they attended the group thus limiting their ability to participate in its processes of empowerment. Such was the case, for example, with Lidia who would often fall asleep during group sessions. As a single parent Lidia sometimes worked late into the night to provide for her family and this obviously left her in a state of severe tiredness.

A more realistic answer to the question of whether participation in the Wednesday Group has had empowering outcomes for individual participants would hence be 'yes', but generally on a personal level. While it is clear that participation has resulted in an increase in self-confidence as well as feelings of happiness and potency for participants, it is too premature, and indeed, too difficult to say that these personal empowerment outcomes have in turn contributed to a *fundamental* transformation of the social relations of gender through which women's subordination has been maintained in El Salvador.

As empowerment is a complex and dynamic phenomenon it is moreover, impossible to say that the empowering outcomes discussed in the last two sections have been entirely positive for participants. In view of this, I will now turn to examine the possible disempowering outcomes of participating in the self-help group process.

Disempowering Outcomes

While participation has resulted in quite enormous changes in the lives of the women, these changes have nevertheless taken place within a wider cultural/social/historical and political context and thus may well have had at least some negative ramifications. What

have been, for example, the reactions of husbands to the action taken by these women to reverse their subordination within the household? Have the women had to suffer violence because of their newfound liberation and has this violence in turn contributed to their disempowerment?

In the context of contemporary El Salvador where repression against those who challenge the ideologies of the state is neither as severe nor as widespread as it has been in previous decades, the first point to establish is that participation in the self-help groups has not placed the women in a potentially vulnerable position in relation to state sponsored gender-related violence. While the actions which could result from the empowering outcomes of the self-help group process (such as protest and lobbying) may in the future pit participants against the state, it is unlikely that the action taken by the state in such instances would be in the manner of the gender-related violence perpetrated in the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s.

Where women may feel disempowered at the hands of the state, however, is in the enormity of the barriers they must overcome to effect social change. In a country where even the much hailed 'new' democratic process has been shown to be less than satisfactory, it must take a huge store of energy to feel as though there is any hope of changing policies that adversely effect women's lives. Thus, the state is able to paralyse the efforts made by women by acting undemocratically and instilling in women a sense of the futility of working for change in the political sphere.

Another area of potential disempowerment for group participants is through the responses of family members to their actions or new behaviours. If women are expected to stay home and to be submissive to their husbands' authority, then participation in the group and the changes this engenders, represent a direct challenge to this pattern of power distribution within the household. For Norena, however, participating in the group and the conscientisation this caused, helped to alter some of her husband's views on gender roles. At one meeting, Norena very proudly related the fact that her husband had accompanied her to a party organised by Las Dignas and other women's organisations on the International Day Against Violence Against Women. Apparently he had been amazed to see women dancing with other women at the party and had

commented to Norena that he was unaware that this practice even occurred (group observation, 26/11/97).

Thus, even though participation in the self-help group most certainly produced some form of conflict in the lives of participants, there was nothing to suggest that participants had experienced disempowerment as a result of this conflict. The self-help experience was overwhelmingly an empowering experience for participants of the Wednesday Group, contributing to their ability to recognise and take action to transform the oppressive gender roles and identities that had maintained their subordination in their families and in society in general. Next, we examine whether this was also the case for the Berlin Group.

Empowerment in the Berlin Group

Conscientisation/Reconstructing Gender Roles/Identity

As was explained in the previous chapter, I began observing the Berlin Group from its inception in early September up until the time it became consolidated as a group at the start of December. For those first three months of the group's life it was clear that conscientisation was the main priority.

With all members of the group coming from working-class rural backgrounds where often extreme patterns of machismo existed, Monserrat, the group leader, had to first instil in the women a sense of the legitimacy of taking time out to heal themselves. In almost all the meetings I observed in those first three months, therefore, Monserrat focused on the importance of the space which had been created for the women and, using examples of groups from the past, demonstrated how valuable it was for the women to do things for themselves.

As a further part of this conscientisation process, Monserrat also helped the women to accept their need to grieve over what they had experienced during the war. She spoke of

how dangerous it was to express their feelings at that time and how this had resulted in some of the physical ailments that plague the women today. The body, Monserrat explained, is connected to the mind and sometimes the body expresses the feelings that the mind can not. Thus, as feelings are identified and expressed in the group, the body too will begin to heal (group observation, 5/9/97).

Once group participants had accepted the fact that it was not only legitimate but also, helpful to talk about the trauma they had experienced and the problems that affect their lives now, they began the process of deprivatising this trauma. Many of the women recounted horrific stories to the group about the disappearances of their children or the fear they had felt living in the middle of a conflict zone. Through this expression, they were able to make sense of what had happened to them. Talking of such matters with women who had suffered similarly also enabled individual women to feel as though they were not alone in their trauma (group observation, 5/9/97-5/12/97).

While it was too early to observe whether the relief gained from being able to express this trauma gave the women the impetus to reconstruct the oppressive roles that had been assigned to them in society, it appeared that this process would indeed occur at some stage in the future. Even in those first few months of being together, for example, many of the women were making comments about aspects of their lives that were unfair or discriminatory. In one session a discussion on the dangers of giving birth in the countryside revealed for some of the women how their needs were not being addressed by the state, and in another, many of the women affirmed Monserrat's comments on Salvadoran women's lack of control over their bodies (group observation, 17/10/97; 21/11/97).

Despite the fact that the group had only just begun to consolidate when I left them in early December, it was clear that a process of conscientisation was commencing. Below we briefly examine whether this process has resulted in empowering outcomes for participants on personal and social/political levels.

Personal Empowerment/Social/Political Empowerment

Although I do not have the same breadth of testimony that I had from the Wednesday Group to support the proposition that participation in the Berlin Group had been empowering on a personal level, it did appear to be empowering from my observations and from informal conversations that I had with participants. Many participants reported feeling happier since joining the group while others felt a sense of relief in the knowledge that the group would help them in the future:

Well sometimes I feel shy and can't even speak, but when I go to the group I'm happy because I know that everything will change (Elena, author interview, 14/11/97).

[Francesca is talking about a friend who had attended the first self-help group Las Dignas facilitated in Berlin] She told me that I might like the group and that it was going to be beneficial for me since I had suffered a lot in my life She told me that even though she hadn't suffered as much as I had, that she felt happy being in the group, that she didn't feel as sad as she did before (Francesca, author interview, 14/11/97).

In the ritual performed during the group's end of year celebration, similar feelings were expressed. When participants were asked to write down their dreams and hopes for the future, for example, many expressed not only their desire to continue with the group but also, the things they hoped to achieve from it. Here, happiness, love from neighbours, friendships, women's rights and good family relations were expressed as goals for the group to attain in the New Year (group observation, 5/12/97).

Corresponding with the Wednesday Group, the spirituality that the women were free to express in the group also contributed to their sense of personal empowerment. Some of the women had found that it was difficult to retain their faith during particularly difficult periods of the war and thus placed great importance on the need to reassert their faith in peace-time. Believing in God was an essential part of their lives and they gained great strength from their beliefs. Hence, when participants decided that they would end each session with a prayer, this acted to increase rather than inhibit their personal empowerment (group observation, 5/9/97-5/12/97).

While it was evident that participants in the Berlín Group were beginning to experience empowering outcomes in relation to the way they felt about themselves, aspects of social/political empowerment were not so apparent. As I was unable to visit participants in their homes to gain a sense of how they lived, I was restricted to relying on the testimony that I hoped would be given during group sessions to gauge whether there had been any changes made in the women's lives in relation to family and to society in general. Because the group was still in its consolidation phase, however, this particular kind of testimony was non-existent.

I can only predict, therefore, that the feelings of happiness and relief from trauma that were beginning to emerge in the group may in the future influence such factors as the women's ability to make decisions in the home and in the wider community, their interest in political processes, and their access to resources in the community.

Disempowering Outcomes

The same applies to the disempowerment that may transpire as a result of these challenges to existing patterns of power distribution. It was already apparent, for example, that participation in the group was causing problems with some of the women's husbands. One participant reported, for example, that her husband was jealous of the fact that she was involved in the group (group observation, 21/11/99). While it is impossible to really know what the women were experiencing as a result of this conflict, it did not appear to be impeding participants from attending the group. Whether this conflict would in the future restrict women's access to the group or result in the perpetration of gender related violence, however, remains to be seen.

After three months of attending the group in Berlín I could see that participants were beginning to experience a process of empowerment. This process, centred mainly around conscientisation, had already given group participants confidence and a sense of hope for the future, feelings which one would expect to strengthen when the group resumes its work in 1998. If we accept that personal empowerment is interrelated with

social/political empowerment, then the members of the Berlin Group, like the Wednesday Group, have begun a process which has the potential to achieve the fundamental transformation of sex role stereotypes necessary to reverse the subordination of women in Salvadoran Society.

Summary

By bringing together women who are suffering from the trauma of the recent civil war, Las Dignas is not only helping women to heal this trauma, but also, to transform the way they view themselves. Through the processes of conscientisation and critically reflecting on gender roles (both during and after the war), women who attend the self-help groups are gaining a sense of their ability to effect change by drawing on the power that is within each one of them (power from within) and the power that is generated through this participation in the self-help group process (power with and power to).

In a country still reeling from the trauma of the civil war, this course of empowerment is invaluable. Feeling released from the burden of trauma gives women the freedom to pursue their collective goals (as women and as members of the poor majority) for emancipatory change at social/political levels. As such, there is a potential for Las Dignas' mental health programme to contribute to lasting peace in El Salvador.

Chapter Ten - Conclusion

Summary of Thesis

This thesis has utilised primary and secondary data from a number of sources to answer the following research question: *what has been the importance of Las Dignas' mental health programme for gender and development practice in El Salvador?* To answer this question, however, it was first necessary to demonstrate not only why I felt the need to study such a research proposition, but also, how it could add to the already extensive literature in the fields of gender and development and gender and conflict.

Chapter One achieved this task. It concluded that there is currently a dearth of information on the impact of conflict on women and especially on gender specific approaches to healing these impacts. Thus, an analysis of Las Dignas' mental health programme would provide an important contribution to our understanding of the gendered discourses of conflict as well as our understanding of the way empowerment can be utilised in gender and development practice in post-conflict environments.

An examination of the dynamic nature of development theory in Chapter Two also revealed the importance of empowerment as an approach to women's development in the Third World. It was concluded, however, that the use of empowerment in development circles is often focused on a concept of power that attempts to usurp the power of others. Thus, a view of empowerment applicable to gender and development practice would aim to reverse this use of power and focus instead on the power that is within individual women, the power that is gained through solidarity with others, and a form of power that generates the possibility of action.

Discussion on the complexity of the empowerment process continued in Chapter Three when important mechanisms of women's empowerment in Latin America - women's

organisations - were outlined. It was shown that while participation in a diverse range of women's organisations has aided many Latin American women to shift the boundaries of gender identity in the home, in the community and in society, the gender-related violence inflicted on many women who participated in such social movements for change has also resulted in the disempowerment of many.

Chapter Four analysed the psychological effects of gender-related violence. It discussed the nature of trauma resulting from the perpetration of gender-related violence in Latin America and concluded that this trauma was primarily psychosocial in character. As such, gender-specific strategies for healing the trauma of gender-related violence must be rooted in the notion of empowerment, enabling women to draw on their individual and collective power to heal their individual trauma and the trauma experienced by their societies. These conclusions on the nature of women's empowerment/disempowerment in Latin America then became the basis for a theoretical model of healing developed by the author as an example of a gender-specific approach to healing in post-conflict Latin America.

Chapter Five, through its discussion on feminist methods, incorporated the concept of empowerment into social research practice. Every effort was made to ensure that rather than being exploitative, my research was consistent with feminist principles and goals. By using methods which aimed to dismantle the power hierarchies that often exist in the practice of cross-cultural research, my research became research for women, with evidence from participants supporting how it had raised their self-esteem and often contributed to a process of conscientisation.

A detailed discussion on the nature of the Salvadoran conflict in Chapter Six exposed the horrific events endured by the Salvadoran population over a period of 12 years. It was concluded that the military and political aid provided by the United States to the Salvadoran military, prolonged the suffering of the Salvadoran population. While Chapter Six also indicated that the peace accords were a welcome relief to the death and destruction of the civil war, it was further shown that these accords have proved ineffective in securing a political and economic basis for lasting peace in El Salvador.

Chapter Seven, in its examination of the civil war from the perspective of women, revealed the diverse and contradictory ways in which women experienced the civil war. For some women the opportunity to participate in the opposition movement signalled a break away from oppressive traditional gender roles, while for others, the empowering potential of participation was superseded by trauma. This trauma, resulting from the perpetration of gender-related violence by the state and the guerrilla army, from the experience of flight and movement, from modifications in traditional sexual behaviour, from the death and disappearance of children, and from lack of recognition in peacetime of women's essential role in the opposition movement, has had a profound effect on Salvadoran women's mental health. Due to this experience, it was concluded that the healing of such trauma should be a priority for gender and development practice in post-conflict El Salvador.

Chapter Eight related how Las Dignas was attempting to heal this trauma. It showed how this autonomous women's organisation is working effectively to meet the needs of a wide variety of Salvadoran women and how the mental health programme forms part of this dynamic gender and development programme. By providing women with the opportunity to reflect on and analyse their war experiences, this programme is assisting women to reconstruct their gendered identities into ones that will enable them to actively participate in post-conflict development processes.

Whether the process of participating in the self-help groups set up for this purpose was empowering for participants, was a question posed by, and answered in, Chapter Nine. In the case of both self-help groups observed by the author, it was concluded that women participants are beginning to draw on the power that is in each one of them and the power that is generated from participation in the self-help group process (power to and power with) to gain a sense of both their agency and potential to effect change.

Findings

Simultaneously infused with enthusiasm and fear, I travelled to El Salvador in July of 1997 to discover how an organisation which I had thought so much about in the year preceding my fieldwork, was actually operating its mental health programme in the post-conflict context. I wanted to discover the need for such a programme and I wanted to be able to say, at the close of my research, whether this was a programme that was making a difference to the lives of women participants, and to Salvadoran society in general.

One of the most dramatic findings of my seven month stay in El Salvador was the obvious need for mental health programmes for women in the post-conflict El Salvador. While I had expected Salvadoran women to be traumatised from their experiences of the recent civil war, I had never considered that these experiences could leave women so disempowered. Much literature in the field of gender and conflict supports the view that participation in political conflict is essentially empowering for women and, even though it is acknowledged that empowerment does not generally outlive the revolution or the coming of democracy, the fact that women have disrupted sex role stereotypes, through their participation, is generally enough to consider that empowerment has taken place (Jelin, 1990; Safa, 1995; Westwood and Radcliffe, 1993; Waylen, 1996).

My research has questioned this notion, however, by showing how the suffering engendered by the twelve year civil war in El Salvador diminished its empowerment potential for women. The civil war was a horrific experience for the women who participated in my study. Like the majority of the Salvadoran population who became the targets of United States supported Salvadoran military (FAES) aggression, my research participants witnessed first hand the massacres of their friends and families, and the destruction of their homes and resource bases. It was they who sat huddled in the mountains, or in the undergrowth of the San Salvador volcano while the FAES ransacked their homes and raped and killed those left behind. It was they, who, like those at El Mozote, fell to their knees as the bayonets of elite US trained fighting forces slaughtered their children.

Because they were women, my participants also suffered a form of violence at the hands of the FAES which related specifically to their gender. Gender and conflict literature focusing on Latin America has shown how the strategies of rape, torture and disappearance were used by the authoritarian state to disempower Latin American women, transforming their sacred position in society, from Madonna to whore (Schirmer, 1987; Hollander, 1996; Taylor, 1993; Bunster-Burotto, 1994; Franco, 1992). This literature has been strengthened by my research which revealed that when my participants witnessed the death of their children or waited in vain for the return of their children and other family members (civilians and combatants) who had 'disappeared' in the night, they did so in the knowledge that they had failed in their roles as nurturers and carers of the family unit. By denigrating their roles as mothers, the FAES had disempowered Salvadoran women, causing them to be overwhelmed with guilt and a sense of the impossibility of change.

While participation in the FMLN may have given some Salvadoran women the opportunity to transform this disempowerment into the empowering force of action for social change, this again, was not a strong finding of my research. In fact, in many instances, participation in the guerrilla army further acted to disempower participants. Information revealed from fieldwork data and prior research conducted by Las Dignas showed how participation in the guerrilla army not only placed women at greater risk of gender-related violence (at the hands of the FAES and the FMLN), but also, that the guerrilla army, despite its propaganda to the contrary, had generally exploited women for their traditional gender roles. This finding has again questioned the literature on the empowerment potential of women's participation in political conflict.

My research does support and strengthen, however, gender and conflict literature which suggests that emancipatory change for women does not generally continue in the post-conflict context (Byrne, 1996; Peterson and Runyan, 1993; Boose, 1993, Molyneux, 1986; Chinchilla, 1995). My research revealed that what little empowerment participants and other Salvadoran women did experience through their participation in or collaboration with the guerrilla army, has now been negated by the economic, social and political reality of life in contemporary Salvadoran society. Stating that Salvadoran society is 'violent' does not adequately describe the poverty, the desperation and the

sense of fear and paranoia that is still evident throughout much of El Salvador. While the *maras* rob and murder, the right wing ARENA government slowly stifles any hope of social reform through its support of foreign and national elites and its dogged commitment to a neo-liberal economic system. Violence against women is endemic and women's lives continue to be defined by *machista* attitudes that assert the superiority of men over women in the home, work place and community. In addition to these factors, there seems to be little in the way of recognition on the part of the Right and the Left of the essential roles played by women in the civil war.

The end result of these disempowering outcomes of the civil war, of the death and disappearance of their children and partners, of the lack of recognition both during and after the war of the part they played in the conflict, of the violence in contemporary society and of the economic deprivation, has been the traumatisation of Salvadoran women. With few opportunities to grieve and to work through the disempowering outcomes of the civil war as they occurred, many Salvadoran women now blame themselves for their own situations. This sense of hopelessness is compounded by the grave doubts that many Salvadoran women hold, about the possibility of Salvadoran society to ever be a place where the interests of women and other disenfranchised groups are addressed.

Hence, there is an obvious need for programmes that focus on the mental health status of women in post-conflict El Salvador. Given the culture of violence, the persistence of *machismo* and the right wing policies of the current government, however, it is perplexing to consider how such a programme could possibly make a difference to the lives of Salvadoran women and to the society in which they live. Women's organisations are, nonetheless, making a difference throughout Latin America in places where women face similar social, political and economic odds.

My thesis has highlighted how women's organisations in Latin America are increasingly using an empowerment approach to work towards the meeting of a wide range of women's needs (Jelin, 1990; Westwood and Radcliffe, 1993, Safa, 1995). As both a guiding theory and a blueprint for action, empowerment enables women's organisations and their participants to transform the inequitable gender relations which maintain

women's subordination at personal, social and political levels. In this way, the empowerment approach has achieved many gains. It has, for instance, begun to dismantle many *machista* attitudes towards women in Latin American societies and it has also encouraged women to fight against the economic policies through which they and their families are repressed. Despite these gains, however, my thesis has shown how empowerment is not a potion that some authors suggest will provide a kind of magical cure to the forms of subordination suffered by Latin American women and to the poverty and violence that plagues large numbers of Latin American societies (Friedmann, 1992; UNICEF, 1993; Sen and Grown, 1987). Even in this age of so-called Latin American democracy, personally and collectively empowered women can only do so much in the face of political repression and massive and widespread household and societal inequality.

In working towards the heady goal of empowerment, Latin American women's organisations are, in addition, confronted by issues and debates relating to both the way they operate and the priorities of practice that they set. The potential for autonomy from the political Left to provide a way forward for women's organisations remains an unresolved issue in the literature (Waylen, 1996; Jaquette, 1989; Vargas, 1992), as do the ethnic and class divisions that simultaneously challenge and divide Latin American feminisms (Sternbach *et al.*, 1992).

It is, thus, with the above national and regional contexts firmly in mind that we must judge the importance of Las Dignas' mental health programme to gender and development practice in El Salvador. Has Las Dignas' mental health programme made a difference to the lives of women participants and to Salvadoran society and if so, how?

In reviewing Las Dignas' overall gender and development programme, my thesis has gone some way towards answering the above question posed by the literature on the potential for autonomy from the political Left to provide a way forward for women's organisations. Las Dignas is a women's organisation which has severed the umbilical cord that tied them to the party of their origin, the National Resistance. Even though this process towards autonomy was long and often painful, Las Dignas has shown that freedom from the political Left has enabled them to pursue goals that would have been

impossible to pursue within the boundaries of the National Resistance. This is particularly apparent in their mental health programme which questions the almost sacred notion of the social change potential of revolutionary struggle.

Being free to promote gender specific concerns in their work has led Las Dignas to implement a mental health programme that has clearly empowered participants at a personal level. By recognising the need for, and instituting programmes to heal the trauma of the civil war, Las Dignas has assisted women to increase their self esteem, confidence and feelings of personal agency. This in turn has opened up spaces for women to actively participate in social and economic projects currently being undertaken in post-conflict development.

Las Dignas' mental health programme uses a self-help approach to achieve these empowering outcomes. By focusing particularly on every day problems and worries, the self-help groups provide supportive and safe environments for participants to come to their own conclusions about the construction of their gender in Salvadoran society. Through the self-help group process, participants realise that they do not have to take the blame for the deaths, disappearances and abuse they have all experienced during the war and that they have the power to become protagonists for positive change in their own lives and in the lives of their communities.

Such personally empowering courses thus have some spin off effects into the realms of social and political empowerment. Empowered women such as Lucila, who was forced to provide food for members the guerrilla army while her ten children starved, have learned to question the oppressive gender roles and responsibilities that have contributed to their disempowerment, and to work towards a concept of development that is both inclusive and equitable. Other empowered women such as Matilde, who blamed herself for the deaths of her two daughters and four grandchildren in a FAES bombing raid, have learned to work through the guilt they suffer and are now helping other women in similar circumstances to address the gendered substance of the heavy burdens that they carry. As gender and development practice is concerned with questioning traditional gender roles in the pursuit of equitable development (Rathgeber, 1990:449), clearly the

mental health programme run by Las Dignas is of utmost importance to gender and development practice in post-conflict El Salvador.

This overall conclusion of my research contributes to the debates and controversy surrounding the theory and practice of empowerment in the following ways. Firstly, because Las Dignas' mental health programme has clearly resulted in personal empowerment for individual women, my research concurs with Rowlands (1997), Stein (1997) and Kabeer (1994) on the importance of individual or personal empowerment in the empowerment process. My research has shown that an increase in self-esteem, confidence and happiness, to name a few personal empowerment measures, has enabled participants to begin to make changes in their lives simultaneously at social and political levels. Thus, while there are certainly differing levels where empowerment takes place, the empowerment process must be fundamentally rooted in the achievement of personal empowerment for individual women.

It has been said, however, that the achievement of personal empowerment will not necessarily guarantee social and political empowerment for women (Riger, 1993; Yuval-Davis, 1994). Even though a woman may feel that she has more confidence to pursue her individual and collective goals, for example, this does not mean that she actually has the power or even the inclination to do so (Riger, 1993). My research makes a second contribution to the debates on empowerment theory by supporting this compelling critique. By presenting an example of personal empowerment amidst the chaos of post-war El Salvador, my research has shown that there *are* problems with the expectation that empowerment will bring about a total transformation of the social relations of gender through which women's subordination is maintained. My research has recounted the stories of women who have been enormously empowered by attending Las Dignas' mental health programme and yet these same women continue to live in a society structured by the cultures of violence and *machismo*.

When we use the empowerment process in gender and development practice, what we must do then, is to be honest and realistic about our expectations. To achieve the kind of fundamental societal transformations for which the empowerment approach aims, not only takes a long time, but is also fraught with conflicts and difficulties. Indeed, given

the enormous impact of the disempowerment that has arisen from women's attempts at empowerment in Latin America over the last three decades (expressed through such feelings as guilt, fear, terror and hopelessness), it may be difficult to find evidence of social and political empowerment for some time following the establishment of an empowerment programme for women. Social and political empowerment may also be impeded by the absence of effective development programmes for men in post-conflict environments, a point elaborated upon below.

By developing a theoretical model of the empowerment process in the context of gender-related violence, my research has confronted some of these problems associated with empowerment praxis (Figure 3). Not only does the theoretical model clearly show the inter-relatedness of personal and social/political empowerment factors (thus challenging the notion often implied in the literature of the linear nature of the empowerment process (UNICEF, 1993)), but it also acknowledges the need to constantly reflect on the disempowering outcomes of the empowerment process. This is reflected in the model through a reciprocal relationship between empowerment and the physical, environmental, social and psychological impacts of gender-related violence. Hence, while my research has not solved all the problems associated with empowerment praxis, it has provided a model which could aid development practitioners in developing circumspect views on the empowerment process.

It is clear then that not only do women's organisations in Latin America face many constraints in their attempts to institute what is nothing short of remarkable social change, but that Salvadoran society itself is still far from being anywhere near the equitable and caring place of which the revolutionary movement dreamed. Despite this, Las Dignas' mental health programme, by empowering women in the manner described in this thesis, *is* contributing an important first step to the reconstruction of a society where those Salvadorans who have been traditionally excluded, can feel that they are once again stake-holders. If there is to be lasting peace in El Salvador, and if Latin America as a region is to ever break the chains of women's subordination, this form of empowerment must be society's collective goal.

Implications for Future Research

At present, there are hundreds of conflicts currently being played out worldwide that are affecting women's mental health. Yet, as this thesis has established, there is still a lack of research on the implications of conflict for women's mental health and on approaches to healing these impacts which utilise a gender and development approach.

While this thesis has focused on the Latin American context, the model of healing developed has application to gender and development practice in the hundreds of post-conflict environments that are challenging development practitioners world-wide. As conflict disrupts gender norms and relations, it is not enough for the development industry to focus on the material realm of women's development in such environments. Conflict produces long lasting psychological and spiritual damage that must be addressed in mental health programmes rooted in the notion of empowerment. This thesis adds to knowledge in gender and development by providing development theoreticians and practitioners with a culturally-based, detailed example of such an approach.

By highlighting the importance of mental health for gender and development practice, this thesis has also brought to light the need for more research in this neglected field. The concepts and practices of mental health must no longer be seen as applicable only to Western cultures and only within the realm of psychology. Research on mental health issues from the perspective of gender and development is not only essential in the world's quest for 'health for all' but also, as this thesis has clearly shown, to the effective delivery of mental health interventions in Third World contexts.

This fear of venturing out into non-traditional research areas is also apparent with research on gender and conflict. While obviously applicable to the field of gender and development, to this day theorising on gender and conflict has not received the attention it deserves. An understanding of how conflict is gendered is crucial to devising approaches to healing trauma in post-conflict contexts. How can we expect women to participate in post-conflict nation building, for example, when they are scarred from

years of political repression? Further research on gender and conflict issues from a development perspective would therefore enrich the knowledge base of gender and development and, once again, enable more effective strategies for post-conflict development practice, to be formulated.

While this thesis has certainly contributed to this enrichment of knowledge in terms of women's experiences of conflict, it has been beyond the scope of this thesis to fully investigate the impact of such conflict on *gender relations*. Too often research on conflict from a gender perspective has ignored the experiences of men, the impact that women's experiences have on their relationships with men, and vice versa. Clearly, the field of gender and development would benefit greatly from research on conflict which considers the perspectives of men and the challenges and transformations that conflict brings to gender relations in varying cultural contexts.

Researching conflict from the perspective of gender relations would certainly add to knowledge on the civil war and its aftermath in El Salvador. While Las Dignas is reconstructing *women's* experiences of war to work towards lasting peace in El Salvador, little appears to be happening to deconstruct men's gendered experiences of the civil war. It is obvious that Salvadoran men are suffering. Increased alcoholism and violent behaviour amongst many Salvadoran men point to the need for men to be involved in a process of critical reflection. Here, the *machismo* that has defined and constrained the male sex could be critically assessed, and new gender identities, those which respect and value women's participation in society, could be developed.

Finally, the field of gender and development could benefit from further research on the long-term impacts of Las Dignas' mental health programme for gender and development in El Salvador. While my research was able to make some initial conclusions on the empowerment potential of this programme particularly at the personal level, it will be important to follow up on programme participants in several years time. In this way, it would be possible to assess more fully the potential for a gendered model of healing to contribute to the reconstruction of a society by helping it to overcome the root causes of the of the civil war - poverty, injustice and inequity.

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