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**Gender and peace-building: women's peace activism in El
Salvador**

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Abstract¹

Within the literature on peace and conflict there is still a lack of information about how to integrate gender as a category of analysis into the process of understanding conflict, both its dynamics and its resolution. Nonetheless, research conducted by feminist scholars in the last couple of decades to make women visible and the subsequent growing empirical evidence gathered shows a great variety of experiences and roles of women during and after conflict, not only as victims but also as perpetrators or instigators of violence and also as agents for peace.

In particular, focusing on the experiences of women in peace activism, different studies have shown that throughout history women have organised trans-nationally to oppose war, sexism and inequality, and that they have made a huge contribution to peace building. Some practitioners in the field of peace building even recognise particular and distinctive peacemaking roles played by women in conflict afflicted communities, an argument that eventually has become part of the discourse of the majority of international agencies and non governmental humanitarian organizations, especially after the United Nations Security Council adopted in October 2000 the Resolution 1325 on *Women, Peace and Security*.

This paper deals with some of the problematic questions that arise when analysing the *women and peace* association, taking into account that in the process of engendering conflict and peace there is a danger of institutionalising a discourse too simplistic and close to essentialist standpoints for which women are biologically determined to be “naturally” peace builders and, at the same time, men are determined to be essentially aggressive or violent. Beginning with some theory remarks in relation to women and peace activism, this paper provides the analysis of the gender dimension of war and peace in the case of El Salvador, paying particular attention to the way “peace” is experienced and understood by local women’s organizations in the post-war setting.

¹ This paper has been written in the framework of the Research Group on *Human Security and Local Human Development* of the University of the Basque Country, based in HEGOA-Institute on Development and International Cooperation (<http://www.hegoa.ehu.es>). It is part of an ongoing research on women’s organizations in post-war rehabilitation contexts.

Gender and peace-building: women's peace activism in El Salvador

1. Introduction: women's agency and peace

The starting point for a more gender-sensitive approach to the study of war and peace is the recognition of the traditionally gender-biased accounts of war experiences. As denounced by contemporary feminist theory, armed conflict and political violence have been exclusively studied through the eyes of men, and there is the need to also integrate the experiences and war narratives of women. In this sense, the more empirical evidence in being obtained about the diversity of women's war experiences and roles, the more the *victimhood-agency* dichotomy is under debate.

The fact that the use of violence is mainly masculine has led to the stereotyped image of men as perpetrators and women as passive victims. This way, women have been traditionally denied their agency in armed conflict and their experiences as socially constructed actors. However, most research on the area of women and conflict agree that changes in the type of armed conflict after the Cold War has helped to defy the conventional and essentialist portray of active males/passive females as well as the simplistic notions that view aggressiveness as inherently male, in contrast to women's 'nurturing' and peaceful nature (Ferris, 1996). The vast majority of current armed conflicts are internal, highly complex, involve a wide variety of state and non-state actors, and the civilian population has become the main target of violence. In this context, both men and women are victims, but also actors in supporting or opposing violence and in trying to resist the negative impacts of the conflict.

Consequently, it is central to hold on to the notion of *agency* when analysing women's role and experiences of war and peace. Otherwise, women will always be wrongly portrayed as victims in society, with no participation in the construction of social reality. In words of the gender theorist Lata Mani:

"The discourse of woman as victim has been invaluable to feminism in pointing to the systematic character of gender domination. But if not employed with care, or in conjunction with a dynamic concept of agency, it leaves us with the reductive representations of women as primarily being who are passive and acted upon..." (Mani, cited in Andermahr et al, 2000: 14).

Therefore, based on the notion of agency, this paper focuses in the role of women as agents of peace, dealing with some of the more problematic questions that arise in the study of women's peace activism, as well as some of the features of the peace building efforts lead by women's organizations.

2. Notes on women's peace activism

2.1. Women as agents of peace

Although not recognised, there is a long history of women and organizations of women in different contexts playing an active role in counteracting the negative effects of war and seeking peace (Boulding, 1995). As peacemakers or peace builders, women have used different roles to try to minimise the effects of violent conflict and ultimately to end its manifestation. Even if both men and women have the potential for peace

making, femininity is often associated with qualities such as the preference for non-confrontational methods of conflict resolution and the willingness to work for the good of the collective. However, when it comes to the analysis of the link between women and peace, research findings are not uniform and there are differing interpretations around the issue, which are reflected in the various debates that are contemporary underway in this area of study.

a) Although not new, a first unresolved debate is that of **'essentialism' vs. 'difference'**, in which those who argue that women are biologically determined to be "natural" peace-makers and men naturally violent, oppose to those who reject that neither men nor women have an "essential" nature; for the later, humans are not inherently violent or peaceful but rather it is social and political factors that contribute to war and its gendered nature.

b) In relation to essentialism, a second issue under discussion is whether there is something universal about motherhood that predisposes women's responses to war, given the significant number of mother's groups organizing to protest wars in different parts of the world. The question, then, is the extent to which women's political activism and their commitment to peace is the result of their experience as mothers. Among the many expressions of what is being called **"the politics of motherhood"**, it is common to find organizations that stress women's role as carers and life sustainers, given that motherhood is fundamentally identified with feelings of care, protection and love, which are in principle opposed to hatred and violence.

The most important criticism to this interpretation of women's participation in peace movements is that it is too close to patriarchal definitions of what should be the role of women in society, given that they remain exclusively associated to the biological roles assigned to them. Besides, this interpretation could not explain the fact that many other women who are also mothers take an active part in violent conflict, be it joining the armed groups or supporting or encouraging violence, and that they do it precisely in the name of their identity as mothers and their alleged responsibility to guarantee a better future for their children².

c) A third important debate currently underway refers to **the role women should have in the military**. Feminists supporting equality between women and men in all spheres of society defend women's full participation in every organization, including the military. On the contrary, it is also argued that women should not participate in the social institution that is most fundamentally sexist, that is, more linked to structural and cultural forms of male privilege and female subordination.

This debate acquires special relevance in those contexts of post-war reconstruction in which programmes for the restructuring of military and security forces are designed. Actually, when a more gender sensitive approach to these programmes is applied, the result is that a quota for the participation of women is established, but it is very unlikely

² Inger Skjelsbaek highlights the example of women in the guerrilla movement in El Salvador and Vietnam, for whom motherhood and the rationality of care and the defence of their families as well as their country were their main motivations to participate in direct combat. SKJESLBAEK, Inger: "Is Femininity Inherently Peaceful? The Construction of Femininity in the War", in SKJESLBAEK, Inger and SMITH, Dan (eds.): *Gender, Peace and Conflict*, SAGE, London, 1999, p. 64.

that the principles and attitudes within the military are challenged or that a process of demilitarisation of society is initiated.

d) Finally, another issue on which research and theorizing is increasingly concentrating concerns **women and collective organizing**. Even if both men and women participate in the peace building activities, women make up majority of peace activists in zones of conflict and often they tend to form separate organizations. In all cases, women's collective action for peace is determined by the way social and cultural factors (such as class, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality and so on) affect their war experiences. However, taking into account this diversity shaped by contextual, social, historical and identity factors, the issue still on stake is the extend to which women from different cultures and social groups share the same gender preoccupations in peace building; in other words, whether the politics inspiring women's activism for peace and justice is gender specific or not.

Underlying this debate is a critical question, then: do women's organization play a distinctive role in peace building, compared to other organizations, mixed or lead by men? Is it relevant to remark a gender based difference in this case? The search for the answer to this question requires focusing on the characteristics of women's collective action in peace building.

2.2. The characteristics of women's peace activism

In general terms, when analysing women's collective action, research about their participation in protest and social transformation movements shows four different types of objects or themes around which women have historically organized: a) Economic survival (food, job, wellbeing) b) Nationalist or ethnic/racial issues (both from the right wing and the left wing in political-ideological terms); c) Human issues and collective wellbeing, such as peace, environment, public health and public education; and d) Women's rights.

However, when looking at the actions of women in these different spheres, another problematic thing is how the term "political" is usually defined. The majority of the activities carried out by women in local or community based groups are often labelled as "voluntary", "charity" or "social" action, even if their work has a clear political focus and impact. This has a direct effect when the role of women's organizations in the promotion of peace is looked at in the field of conflict analysis and conflict resolution. Negotiations to reach peace accords (peacemaking) and also peacekeeping operations are generally considered to be the proper political space, the "hard" space of conflict management and resolution. And this is precisely the space in which women's participation is widely limited: women are rarely present in peace negotiating tables or participate in transition governments.

On the contrary, peace building, which implies a longer term perspective, a more profound transformation of unequal power structures underlying conflict, grassroots reconciliation initiatives, and so on, is usually considered as a "softer" space of conflict resolution in which, consequently, women's participation is seen as much less suspicious and, in fact, it is progressively being valued as positive in the general discourse. In this sense, in the debates about the implication of women in peace building, it is common to make a reference to their biological and caring role, so that

these activities are understood as a kind of a “natural” extension of their intra-familial roles as wives and mothers. In other words, women’s participation in peace politics is justified as an extension of their role as carers.

This type of interpretation has much to do with essentialist viewpoints in relation to the “women and peace” association, for which women are biologically determined to be “naturally” peace builders and, at the same time, men are determined to be essentially violent. As mentioned above, this argument is strongly criticised by feminist standpoints for whom human beings are not inherently violent nor pacifist, but social and political factors contribute to violent conflict and its gendered nature. From this perspective, women are not peace builders by nature, but as long as they escape the masculine socialization, they will be able to formulate more freely a transformative, alternative and non violent vision of society.

Differing interpretations when it comes to explain women’s participation in peace building show that, just as women do not constitute a homogenous social category, neither the organizations they create to promote peace are uniform. On the contrary, throughout history, women’s organizations for peace have been created by virtue of diverse objectives and strategies. Therefore, beyond differences in approach amongst women’s organizations for peace, what could be considered to be common to and distinctive of their collective action?

In the literature about gender and peace, it is frequent to identify three persistent features of women’s peace activism that might help determine in what sense women’s activism against violence and war might be distinctive compared to other groups and movements.

- a) It is connected to a preoccupation for human life, which implies that is based on a theorisation on the logic of care and the sustainability of life, as opposed to the logic of economic accumulation and the militarization of society.
- b) It is based on the use of a variety of non violent strategies, acts and techniques, with a special significance given to the symbolic ones.
- c) It is trans-political, very often trans-national (with a strong capacity for networking) and it intends to reach women in the opposite side.

In 2002, UNIFEM report on *Women, War and Peace* compared women’s peace actions in 14 conflict zones around the world (Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leon, Middle East, Latin America, the Balcans, Camboya, East Timor and the Great Lakes region), concluding that peace initiatives produced by women in such diverse contexts have in common the following elements (UNIFEM, 2002):

- a) The capacity to look beyond the national frontiers, even if their governments maintain isolationist or pro-war positions.
- b) A vision of peace based on the respect for the dignity of the individual, irrespective of the nationality, ethnicity or economic situation.

c) The understanding that peace is inherently linked to equity between women and men, which means that, for women, peace will only be possible not in the absence of war but in conditions of gender equity.

The redefinition of the concept of peace is one of the strategic elements of the political action of women's organizations in peace building. The classic feminist criticism to the conventional distinction between the notions of "public" and "private" has allowed that, in the field of conflict analysis and resolution, the notions of "war" and "peace" are also challenged. Still today, even Johan Galtung's theoretical distinction between negative and positive peace is widely recognised, there is a persistent tendency to associate peace with the absence of war, and therefore to deal uniquely with the direct and visible manifestations of conflict. Thus, in relation to gender issues, conflict analysis systematically ignores the fact that, even when there is no open fighting, women frequently confront high levels of direct violence that is ignored because it takes place in the private sphere, besides suffering a structural disadvantage in economic, political and social terms.

As a consequence, for women's organizations is preferably to use the categories of *violence-peace*, rather than conflict-peace or even war-peace, in order to have a more inclusive understanding of peace. This would be a positive peace characterised not by the absence of direct violence against women but also by the absence of indirect violence and the absence of inequalities in the micro and macro structures.

Based on the fact that violence as a sociological concept is fundamentally concerned with power, some scholars have developed theoretical and operational frameworks that identify types of 'gender violence' at different levels. El-Bushra, for instance, focused on the gendered nature of conflict by exploring the links between the personal, household, national/state and international levels. Above all, she highlighted the necessity to integrate on equal terms of relevance the issues of "*economic survival and organization; the personal, affective (feelings and emotions) domain; and social and political relations*" (El-Bushra, cited in Jacobs, 2000: 78-79). For her part, Caroline Moser identified a gendered *continuum* of conflict and violence categorized in political, economic and social terms, defining each category in relation to the type of power that consciously or unconsciously uses violence to gain or maintain power (Moser, 2001). These different types of violence -political, economic, and social-, coexist and overlap, and can be identified at four different levels -the individual, inter-personal, institutional, and structural-.

The usefulness of this framework is proven when it is applied to the analysis of wartime and post-war time violence against women. It is the case of El Salvador, where not only increased rates of street rape and intra-familial violence target women -and girls- specifically after war, but also poverty and social exclusion have a special incidence amongst women. In the following pages, this paper deepens in the gender dimension of war in El Salvador: the background to the conflict, the gender dimension of war and the aftermath of war and the interpretations of peace by local women's organizations which daily confront the consequences of the *continuum* of violence affecting women in the post-war period.

3. Case study: women's activism for peace in El Salvador

3.1. Background: the armed conflict

The war in El Salvador broke out in 1980 and has been one of the longest, most complex civil wars in Latin America. Since the country's independence in 1838 there has been a succession of insurgent uprisings, the main causes of which had been: an unjust distribution of the land; high levels of poverty as a result of huge social inequalities; and lack of spaces of free speech for the population and repression as the only answer to demands of change (Herrera, 2001). One of the most important of these uprisings was the 1932 popular insurrection led by Agustín Farabundo Martí aimed at changing existing feudal structures and restoring peasant's rights to the land, but these demands were brutally silenced by the dictatorial regime of the time at the cost of 30,000 lives. This massacre was followed by decades of successive cycles of repression by fraudulently elected military juntas.

During the 1970s a growing popular movement developed, formed by rural and urban discontent workers, teachers and students, some of who were selectively assassinated or disappeared. In view of the impossibility of political opposition, some left-wing groups started promoting and practicing armed struggle as a means to bring about social and political change. Simultaneously, right-wing death squads, with the connivance of the government, perpetrated high-profile acts of violence, such as the assassination of San Salvador Archbishop Monsignor Romero in 1980 and a number of opposition leaders, as well as the extermination of popular militants. In rural areas, repression forced the first displacement of people to refugee camps in Honduras.

Both the popular movement and the newly formed revolutionary armed groups coincided in the demands of social justice. Consequently, once opposition parties joined to form in 1980 the Farabundo Martí National Liberation and Democratic Revolutionary Front (FMLN), many of the repressed workers and students of the popular movement were ready to join the guerrillas. The first years of the 80s were characterised by unprecedented levels of violence, in as much as the regime, -supported military and economically by the United States-, intended to undermine the social base of the guerrillas applying a policy of burnt fields and death squads. More than one million people –one fifth of the population- had to flee the country and thousands were internally displaced.

The war continued throughout the decade, accompanied in its later stages by the first peace negotiations. In 1987 the Esquipulas II National Peace Accord was signed, which made possible the voluntary and massive repatriation of refugees from the Mesa Grande refugee camp in Honduras. In 1989 tensions arose again, and the FMLN launched an important urban offensive by which it took and held the northern belt of the capital. In 1990 a series of peace conversations began, mediated by the United Nations. Finally, on 16 January 1992 Chapultepec Peace Accords were signed between the FMLN and the Salvadoran government, ruled at the time by the right-wing Alianza Republicana Nacional (ARENA). This was the end of a twelve-year civil war that had claimed over 75,000 lives, displaced 500,000 people, and pushed almost one million more Salvadorans to flee the country. In general elections held in March 1994, a coalition of the FMLN gained 21 seats in Parliament opposed to 40 obtained by the ARENA.

El Salvador is one of the best examples of internationally brokered peace settlements, and the process of negotiations and the signing of the Peace Accords have been even presented to the rest of the world as one of the most successful exercises in the practice of international conflict resolution. However, after more than 15 years of the signing of the Peace Accord, there are important interpretation differences in the Salvadoran society about its fulfilment.

The principal advances in the immediate aftermath of the war were directed to the political and institutional reform of the country. The majority of the efforts and resources were put into institutional capacity building and 'democratization' in as much as for decades the institutional apparatus of the state was responsible for the worst violations of civil and political human rights in the country. However, the social and economic elements of the reconstruction process in the aftermath of war were never seriously dealt with, as there were no sound provisions coming out of the peace negotiations that would allow to carrying out the urgently needed socioeconomic transformations in the country.

Today, the population confronts similar adverse economic and social conditions to those that were in the origin of the armed conflict: the country has seen an increase in poverty, social exclusion, crime, insecurity and generalised fear. The progressive lack of hope to improve life conditions and to see socioeconomic and political changes in their country has led to a continuous emigration flow -above all towards the USA-, that affects by now one fourth of the country's inhabitants. Apart from the huge loss of working force, the reconstruction period has also inherited the absence of thousands of people who were disappeared during the war as well as those who had been exiled.

In terms of emotional and social recovery from the impact of war, high levels of impunity remain as a major obstacle hindering the path towards democracy and reconciliation. A 'forgive and forget' attitude was imposed by the negotiations and the Amnesty Law approved in 1994 meant that victims of war were never given any material no moral reparation. As a result of the lack of political will to address the sensitive issue of transitional justice and the development of some sort of reparation mechanisms, El Salvador remains today a highly polarised society with recurrent episodes of politically motivated violence, including selected assassinations especially during election periods. On the top of this, the widespread impunity due to the corruption and the inefficiency of the judicial system is affecting governance and the prospects for democracy.

3.2. The gender dimension of war

When the war broke out the number of women directly involved fighting in or supporting the revolutionary army was notably high. Even if this has been also the case of other Central American countries in which national liberation wars have taken place, the proportions in El Salvador were outstanding. In an armed group of about 8,000 people as it was the FMLN, women accounted for the 30% of the combatants and 60% of the total support social base (Herrera, 2001). A first possible explanation of why so many women joined or supported the guerrillas is that the majority of women in El Salvador were found in the poorest social class, and thus they felt motivated to participate in a war to change the situation of poverty and social inequality.

Again, the variable rural/urban seems to be an important one shaping Salvadoran women's war experiences. In the cities, routes to joining the political-military organizations led through university militancy, professional associations or a commitment to the Church of the Poor. In rural areas, people joined the armed organizations in response to the peasant associations promoted by the Church, the consciousness-raising efforts of university students and the experience of indiscriminate repression (Ibáñez, 2001: 120). During the 1960s and 1970s, new political and religious beliefs such as the Liberation Theology and its progressive teachings had a profound effect amongst impoverished rural communities, leading many women to compromise with the revolutionary struggle.

Based on women's oral testimonies, research findings showed that most of them emphasised the positive rather than the negative outcomes of the war, which include: satisfaction for having contributed to the changes occurred in their country; feelings of self-reassurance as women; the acquisition of a wider political vision as a result of their participation; awareness of their capacity to deal with difficult challenges; and having reached important levels of self-sufficiency and independence (Vázquez et al, 1997: 226). In fact, during the conflict women participating in the revolutionary struggle took on many different roles at different levels: they participated in marches and mobilizations, they led the defence of human rights when repression spread throughout the country, and they were crucial to the survival of the guerrilla camps, whether as combatants or being the ones responsible of communications and the supply of food, clothing, medicine and munitions. However, it is sometimes pointed out that many of the new roles fulfilled by women –mostly in rural areas- during war were in fact an extended version of the traditional ones, in the sense that women were assigned functions related to their identity as mothers and carers and their participation became a kind of “social maternity”.

Anyhow, the war experience for many other women meant the break with tradition, the values and norms that were imposed to them by the conservative Salvadoran society. In particular, participation of women during the conflict resulted in changes in their conceptions and practices around sexuality and maternity, especially amongst those who were directly involved as combatants. Many myths and taboos, conventionalisms, traditional formalisms and prejudices were viewed from a much more critical perspective and put into question both symbolically and in practice. Family and the household as the central space for women's self-fulfilment broke down as a consequence of the conflict and, while men became combatants and were away from their homes, women took over the productive role as well as positions of responsibility within their communities. For the first time, gendered division of labour lost its rigidity and the public sphere was open in rural areas to many women, who learned how to organize and work together.

Likewise, those women who had to flee and search refuge across the border agree that, hard as it was to be away from their homeland and in most of the cases taking care of the children and the elder, they obtained some personal gains out of their experience. The refugee camps in Honduras, for example, which were established for thousands of women and children, became known for their high levels of organization. Through international solidarity groups and NGOs, many women had the opportunity to extend their education and develop new skills in the areas of health, popular education, productive experiences, and to fulfil non-traditional positions and roles in the economy.

3.3. The gender dimension in the aftermath of war

When it comes to assessing the gender dimension in the aftermath of the war, ‘absence’ is the word used by some researchers as the concept that best expresses the way women participated in the formal processes of post-conflict reconstruction in El Salvador, and in general in Central America: physical absence of women in the negotiating table and in the spaces where decisions were taken on how and when to finish the war; absence – literal and symbolic- of women’s specific demands in the peace accords; absence of acknowledgement of their contribution to the struggle in favour of the disappeared, human rights and peace; absence of their denounces, vexations and pains in the reports of the Truth Commissions; absence of their organizations in the design of policies of reconstruction; invisibility of their daily efforts made towards familiar and social reconciliation; and absence of a gender analysis in the evaluation of the social impacts of war and the processes of reconstruction (Murguialday and Vázquez, 2001; 38-39).

In El Salvador, lack of analysis of the way armed conflict altered the pre-existent gender order had some negative consequences once the conflict came to an end. First and foremost, peace accords ignored both the participation and needs of women, and consequently women’s experiences were not taken into account when designing and planning the process of post-war reconstruction.

The peace accord consisted of three basic concepts of equal importance –reform, reconciliation and reconstruction-, and the priority given to the preservation of peace made reinsertion of ex-combatants to civil society a central issue in post-war reconstruction programmes. However, intervention in this area showed a general lack of understanding of gender-related issues amongst international actors. In a conflict where such a high proportion of women had fought or actively supported the guerrilla movement, this lack of a gender sensitive analysis of the conflict had especially negative consequences for women in the aftermath of war.

In El Salvador, women ex-fighters held 40% of leadership and 30% of combat roles, yet were neglected during the Demobilisation, Disarmament and Reintegration (DDR) process with 70 to 80% of female combatants estimated to have received no benefits under the government’s land transfer programme; women were also absent from the UN-supervised formation of both a new National Civil Police and the Armed Forces Reserve System (United Nations, 2005). Thus, programmes for the reintegration of combatants to civil life were mostly directed to men (both from the army and the guerrilla), who were given priority in land-distribution, scholarships or housing.

More over, a social diagnosis disaggregated by sexes would have shown that in 1992 out of a total of 3,285 women demobilised, 80% had children under twelve and 29% were head of households at the time (Murguialday, 2001). The specific needs and interests of these women were neglected when designing reinsertion programmes, in which neither job training nor economic compensation measures were foreseen for them. As a result, the great majority of ex-guerrilla women had been ‘reinserted’ to civil society fulfilling traditional housekeeping roles. Likewise, there were scarce resources oriented towards the social integration of women displaced, returned or collaborators of the guerrilla, despite the fact that the majority of conflict survivors in El Salvador were women with childcare responsibilities.

When it comes to analysing the impacts of armed conflict in gender relations, some studies carried out to determine the extent to which active involvement of women in the conflict had empowering effects in the aftermath of war tend to show a certain degree of pessimism. Commenting on the balance of their participation in the revolutionary struggle, for example, some women acknowledge the limited scope of the changes occurred in gender relations:

“You ask if war contributed to our liberation as women, I would say ‘no’: if we had had a gender consciousness before the war maybe it would have been different, but without having all that, what happened was that the roles we played during the war were just related to the moment (Alma, cited in Vázquez et al, 1997: 203-231).

This type of reflection reinforces the idea that positive outcomes for women in terms of a redefinition of gender roles and gender identities during the conflict were just part of an interval of exceptionality that could not have continuity in post-war reconstruction. This interval ended and the emphasis was put in a return back to “normality”, which is most frequently understood as the re-establishment of the previous gender relations. Consequently, as it happened in other contexts, while women’s roles in El Salvador changed during the conflict, tradition expected them to return to their previous status soon after the war ended.

However, the process back to normality inevitably generates gender tensions, which are normally resolved to the detriment of women’s interests. Amongst others, there are two sources of tension worth mentioning in the case of El Salvador. On the one hand, the complexity of the process of reintegration of combatants was aggravated by the fact that, not only there were a high proportion of ex-combatant women with specific needs and interests, but also women were holding jobs in the public sphere that prior to the war had been men’s domain. As a result, in a male-dominated society that was experiencing high unemployment rates after the war, this new reality became an important source of gender tension.

On the other hand, gender conflict in the aftermath of war was perceived in the alarming increase of intra-familial violence and sexual violence against women, a behaviour that was to some extent reduced during the conflict. To give an example, the rate of sexual offences against women was 59.2% in 1998, increased to 67.6% by 1999 and reached 85.9% in 2000 (Las Dignas, 2003).

Therefore, the aftermath of the conflict in El Salvador has not served to rebuild the society on the basis of greater gender equity but instead gender division of labour and gender inequalities have been even more accentuated. Consequently, women perceive that changes occurred during the conflict, including the sexual and maternal practices of the many combatants, were just the product of a specific moment and inevitable because of the war, and they had not been allowed the space to place their war experiences as an opportunity to challenge traditional schemes of femininity imposed by society.

3.4. Women’s organizations approach to peace

From the beginning, the active participation of Salvadoran women in the conflict was motivated by the search of social justice and high expectations of freedom and equality. Thus, many of them joined the guerrilla in the hope of being part of the building of a

new society based on a true equity. Although the transformation of unequal gender relations was never part of the political project of the FMLN, the creation of women's organizations was promoted within the popular agrarian and urban movement during the 1970s.

These organizations were formed by women conscious of being part of the exploited social class, but they lacked any analysis of gender identities and particularly of the meaning of femininity in Salvadoran society. Once the conflict broke out, almost all these organizations lost their entity and became integrated in the broader popular movement, in which tackling gender inequalities was not a priority. Among other issues postponed by the conflict, reflection on gender was again relegated: the "liberation of women" had to wait until the greater objective of national liberation was achieved.

It was after the conflict that a feminist movement developed and several women's organizations were established to offer support for those facing discrimination and to reflect on gender relations. Women who had in some way participated or collaborated with the guerrilla, especially those coming from urban areas, formed many of these groups. For some, this post-war experience was more liberating than any other possible change in their status during the war:

"Changes that I have lived are product of my experience after the war, everything I have learnt has been through work with women in workshops... My personal change was not caused by war but for the opportunities that I had to learn things in its aftermath, in women's groups" (Silvia, cited in Vázquez et al, 1997: 233).

For the first democratic elections in 1994 more than forty women's organizations joined in a common political platform, Women 94, and presented a campaign based on issues such as human rights, right to the land, legal discrimination, intra-familial violence and sexual education. The platform's position in relation to these issues included for the first time demands that are traditionally considered as feminist, such as the eradication of gender violence and the defence of women's sexual and reproductive rights.

However, feminist demands led by women's organizations not only faced the virulent opposition of the most conservative institutions and structures of Salvadoran society, but also the incomprehension of the left wing political and social coalition of the FMLN that so many women had supported during the war. As a consequence, many women's organizations started a process of gaining autonomy from the political party structure, along with an increasingly elaborated feminist reflection and perspective about reality. This process of gaining political autonomy and deepening their feminist reflections has allowed them to play a fundamental role in the reconstruction and democratization of the country. Their work is oriented to the transformation of gender relations. For these organizations, gender equity in all spheres of life is a necessary condition for democracy and social and economic justice. In particular, full participation of women in the peace consolidation process is viewed and supported as one of the pillars for the reinforcement of democracy.

On this basis, some of the principal fields of action of women's organization in El Salvador working for a project of *peace with gender justice* are the following:

a) Confronting gender based violence: denounce and advocacy

If sexual violence is the main source of victimization of women during armed conflict, violence against women in its different forms (rape, intra-familial violence, forced prostitution, trafficking, and so on) prevails and even increases in post-war settings. As mentioned earlier, from a feminist perspective the explanation is that there is *continuum* of violence -political, economic and social- that is socially invisible during “peace”, mainly due to the cultural acceptance of a gender hierarchy based on men’s privilege and women’s subordination. El Salvador is not an exception, as intra-familial violence or any other type of abuse against women is frequently considered as a “minor”, “women’s problem”. Society’s response reflects a cultural acceptance of violence against women that puts them at specific risk during and after conflict.

Nowadays, the proliferation of small and light weapons is a mayor source of insecurity in El Salvador. It is a society heavily armed which, as it has been mentioned, holds one of the highest crime rates in Latin America and also in the world. It is estimated that around 450.000 weapons circulate in the country, 30.000 members of pandilla groups (maras) are armed, 30.000 members of private security companies, 18.000 members of the National Civil Police and between 18 and 20.000 members of the army. Therefore, in the overall, approximately 100.000 people are armed in the country with 70-80% of the weapons being illegal (Sánchez Trejo, 2006, personal interview). Again, the high number and availability of weapons in El Salvador exposes women to higher risk of suffering gender based violence.

Recent studies in Central America about the incidence of femicide, that is, the gender based assassination of women, show that El Salvador holds the highest rate in the region (11.15/100.000), followed by Guatemala (7.97/100.000) (ORMUSA, 2006). Femicide constitutes the mayor violation of women’s human rights and an extreme form of power exercise by men against women, compounded to the fact that the vast majority of these crimes go unpunished because of the weakness of the justice system as well as the lack of political will to address the phenomena. Femicide suggests, also, a link between the gendered violence at the micro and macro levels and calls for an inquiry into the gendered dynamics of power from the household to the national and the international arena.

Therefore, violence is a security issue very different for men and women. Acts or threats of violence in the household, community or state level -be it perpetrated or tolerated by official institutions-, result in fear and a constant sense of insecurity in women’s lives and thus hinder the objective of equity. The threat of violence is a major obstacle for mobility of women and it limits their access to basic resources (education, health, incomes) and activities (political participation, decisions on the use of time).

As a result, a strategic objective for women’s organizations in El Salvador is to counteract violence against women, as well as the strong defence of women rights, with a special emphasis on women’s sexual and reproductive rights.

b) Confronting economic vulnerability: the restoration of women’s livelihoods

Another major issue in terms of the violence *continuum* during and after war is that, comparatively, women encounter more difficulties to restore their livelihoods after the

war. In the post-war period, the access of women to the resources of society was limited by a variety of factors, such as their exclusion from the reintegration programmes and the fact that they were among the most impoverished people in the country. In fact, the high levels of poverty and social exclusion affect women and men differently in El Salvador. Femininity of poverty shows higher levels in almost all age groups (18-59 and over 60) and departments of the country (UNDP, 2004).

Part of the explanation is that the majority of women are concentrated in the shadow or informal economy of the country where there are no labour guarantees. This implies that there are more women exposed to labour exploitation and precarious conditions, such as longer working days, lower salaries and incomes, lack of social security and labour laws guarantees. When it comes to the formal economy, another feature from a gender perspective is the massive incorporation of women to the exporting manufacturing industry, that is, the maquila. However, this increased presence of women in the formal labour structure has not reflected in higher social security guarantee for them. In fact, taking into account data from 2003, only 26,8% of the women working in the formal labour structure had a system of social security (www.mtps.gov.sv). Besides, the under-representation of women in the labour union structure (only 9%) is another sign of the difficulties confronting women in the economy, as it means that they do not have any significant incidence in the improvement of their working conditions.

Therefore, women's organizations concentrate their efforts in counteracting this structural economic disadvantage by helping women restore their livelihoods, both for their own survival and also for the maintenance of their families, achieve economic autonomy and improve their working conditions.

c) Confronting political vulnerability: support for the participation of women in the political process

The active participation of Salvadoran women in the FMLN during the conflict was motivated by the search of social justice and high expectations of freedom and equality. Thus, many of them joined the guerrilla in the hope of being part of the building of a new society based on a true equity. When the Peace Accords were signed, many women viewed their full participation of women in the reconstruction process as one of the pillars for the reinforcement of democracy. However, the fact that women and their interests were absent in the design and planning of post-war reconstruction and that their claims did not have any significant response after the 1994 elections, prevented many women from further active involvement in politics, as there was a growing sense of disappointment and resignation amongst women.

Added to this, it appears that women's economic vulnerability does also have an influence on political vulnerability, in as much as inequality in the access and control of economic resources influences negatively in the capacity of women to take decisions from the household level to public institutional sphere. Finally, other obstacles to women participation in politics are structural and cultural barriers impeding their full and equal participation in decision making spheres; again, gender stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes and practices are major obstacles for women's political participation. As a result, today women in El Salvador are clearly under-represented in the political decision making spaces, both at local national levels.

Therefore, women's organizations place a strong emphasis in the promotion of the participation of women in the political process, having achieved their main successes in local politics, where women so far seem to be more willing to participate rather than in national politics.

d) Confronting social vulnerability: the restoration of familiar and social networks

Another crucial aspect in the work of women's organizations in the aftermath of war and in the process of peace consolidation in El Salvador is the creation of spaces where family and social relations and networks can be rebuilt. For women, this means the possibility of having a space where their stories and experiences during the war can be told and processed, and thus better deal with the unsettled pain. In relation to this, women's organizations have criticized the insufficient importance given by development and humanitarian aid to psycho-emotional support programmes that could help conflict-affected women in El Salvador in their post-war healing process (Herrera, 2001).

Related to the emotional costs of the war, none of the recommendations of the Truth Commission for the reparation of the moral damage has been followed so far, and the lack of a collective revision of war traumas results for many women in feelings of bitterness, frustration, resentment and the believe that they do not have a place in the reconstruction of their country.

Related to the restoration of the familiar and social networks after a civil war is the question of reconciliation. In El Salvador, another main working area of women's organizations is the reduction of social and political polarization. For organised women in this country, the search for reconciliation or polarization reduction means the firm and persistent claim of historical memory and the fight against the huge impunity that prevails.

4. Concluding remarks

Studies on war and the nature of conflict have only recently been extended to include research on the impact of conflict on women. Even then, literature on women and war has been characterized by the predominance of images of women mainly as victims, dependant and vulnerable sectors, rather than social actors with a particular agency and identity in every social situation. Acknowledging women's agency has an enormous relevance for understanding the diversity of experiences and roles played by women during and after violent conflicts. However, going beyond the necessary description of what do women do in war time, it is also crucial to analyse the interpretations given to those activities. When it comes to analyse women's contributions as agents of peace, there is a general tendency to associate *women and peace* in a simplistic and essentialist manner, without problematising what is really distinctive about women's peace activism and why.

In El Salvador, the civil war affected social norms that had traditionally shaped women's and men's expected behaviour. To a certain extent, transformations in gender relations allowed a greater participation of women in the public sphere, fulfilling new roles, learning new skills and taking on new social and political responsibilities. This applied both for women who experienced war as combatants, guerrilla supporters or

community leaders and for women displaced and refugees who managed to develop new skills and organizational capacities during the war.

However, changes in gender relations that could affect women positively were not consolidated in the aftermath of war. After years of war and extreme violence, men and also some women were willing to above all restore a “normal” life. And yet, definitions of “normality” in terms of gender relations are different -very often conflictive- for women and men, so that during the post-war phase gender tensions have tended to increase. Men pushed to return to a situation in which they still retain a privileged position in the gender order and have actively resisted any change in this respect.

In El Salvador, much of the reconstruction effort was directed to the demobilization of the guerrilla and the restoration of the economic infrastructure. However, a post-war settlement was also needed in the relations between women and men. Gender tension manifested in increased levels of direct violence against women, in particular intra-familiar violence and different forms of sexual violence (including rape, enforced prostitution, and trafficking in women). Besides, during “peacetime” much of the everyday violence against women in different dimensions of society -political, economic and social- passes as socially invisible, in part due to the prevalence of a cultural acceptance of a gender order in which men dominate and women are subordinated. The conclusion is that, for women, peace can be even more difficult and complex than war.

Many women’s organizations at the grassroots level in El Salvador were created during the war but they lacked an analytical framework to deal with gender issues in a challenging and transformative way. Faced with the reality of a continued and increased violence against women during and after conflict, a greater consciousness of the particularity of women’s problems and interests arose in many of these organizations. A more feminist perspective was adopted to help interpret and change reality, focusing particularly on issues of gender based violence and power inequalities. For women’s organizations in El Salvador, peace not only means the absence of war, but also a positive response to the challenges of democracy, development and justice at all levels, including gender relations.

The case of El Salvador is an example of how gender equity in all spheres of life is a priority and a necessary condition for peace, and thus for the socioeconomic and political security of individuals. Human security and human development for women are not possible in the absence of positive peace. The construction and defence of women’s citizenship, the support for the development of a strong women’s movement, the importance of their participation in the political process and research on the structural causes of gender inequalities are some areas prioritised by women’s organizations in their peace building effort.

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