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Between Transnational Feminism, Political Parties
and Popular Movements:
Mujeres por la Dignidad y la Vida in Postwar El Salvador

by

Carol A. Ready

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Anthropology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, the City University of New York.

1999

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Aug. 30, 1999
Date

June Nash
June Nash, Chair of Examining Committee

Sept. 3, 1999
Date

Louise Leninhan
Louise Leninhan, Executive Officer

Marc Edelman

Shirley Lindenbaum

Leith Mullings

Lynn Stephen
Supervisory Committee

The City University of New York

Abstract

**Between Transnational Feminism, Political Parties
and Popular Movements:
Mujeres por la Dignidad y la Vida in Postwar El Salvador**

by

Carol A. Ready

Advisor: Distinguished Professor June Nash

Mujeres por la Dignidad y la Vida (Women for Dignity and Life or the Dignas) is a Salvadoran women's organization that grew out of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), the *guerrilla* opposition in the civil war which ended in 1992. Based on research carried out between September 1996 and August 1997, this study documents how the Dignas have developed a discourse and practice based on their interpretation of feminist theory. Their feminism is shaped by their participation in the civil war, and the issue the war failed to resolve, the poverty of the majority of Salvadorans, particularly of rural women. It also responds to the post-war Salvadoran context where the FMLN has become a legal political party, the Salvadoran state is "modernizing" within a neoliberal framework, and gender issues have become the target of increasing international attention. Through interviews, participant observation, and life histories, the impact of these conditions on the character of Salvadoran feminism is illustrated.

This is done by exploring three of the Dignas programs. The first is their Reproductive and Sexual Health program which opened a “Midwives’ House” in Nombre de Jesús, Chalatenango during this period. The second program is the Association of Mothers Seeking Child Support. This project, which was based in San Salvador, organized women who were seeking support from the state in getting the fathers of their children to provide child support. Local Development is the third program discussed. This chapter documents how the Dignas organized rural women in Suchitoto, Cabañas, to develop political platforms and lobby local political parties for the inclusion of those demands. It also describes the women’s campaign to get the FMLN to include one of the women’s representatives on their slate of candidates for the Suchitoto municipal council. In addition to these three programs, a chapter is devoted to a discussion of abortion, an issue which presents particular problems for Salvadoran feminism.

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This dissertation is a testament to the profound commitment of *Mujeres por la Dignidad y la Vida* to a feminist ethic of transparency and debate. Their willingness to allow me open access to their offices, meetings, archives, events, staff, and *usuarias* was an act of courage and trust for which I am greatly appreciative. I especially treasure the conversations, held while riding over dusty dirt roads or walking along mountainous paths or waiting for a meeting to start, in which individual Dignas shared their reflections on, doubts about, and hopes for Salvadoran feminism. These conversations were the source of much of my understanding. I am particularly thankful to Morena Herrera who facilitated my involvement with the organization. I also want to acknowledge the support of women from the other Salvadoran women's organizations who also allowed me to participate in their events, and who shared with me their insight on the work of the Dignas.

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as a whole and identify the contradictions that I could not see; and Shirley Lindenbaum for her generous support at crucial moments. Lynn Stephen, who served as the outside reader, has been an inspiration, a resource, and a *compañera* in the group, "*Mujeres Sin Fronteras*." Many thanks to my committee for their patience and understanding as I attempted to complete the dissertation while working fulltime in Green Bay, Wisconsin. I would also like to thank Michael Blim and Gerald Sider, my unofficial advisors. I am also grateful to Larry Smith, my chair at UWGB, for his willingness to develop a schedule that enabled me to get those last chapters done. Thanks to Lynn Walter, Kim Neilsen, and my dissertation group for their feedback.

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**Between Transnational Feminism, Political Parties
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Chapter 1: Introduction

“We are feminists but ‘we don’t eat children’ . . . ,” declares a flyer by *Mujeres por la Dignidad y la Vida* (Women for Dignity and Life or “the Dignas”), a Salvadoran women’s organization. “Children eaters” is one of the more innocuous charges the Dignas faced after they rebelled against the left-wing political party where they originated in 1990 and became one of the first Salvadoran women’s organizations to publicly endorse feminism. But this protestation only hints at the dialectical nature of the conditions around, and within, which the Dignas have constructed (and continue to construct) a feminist practice in El Salvador.

Based on fieldwork carried out in El Salvador from September 1996 to August 1997, this is a case study of *Mujeres por la Dignidad y la Vida*. It documents how a Salvadoran women’s organization has developed a discourse and practice based on their interpretation of feminist theory. In 1996, they stated their goal as

constructing a force of organized women for feminist political action with the capacity to intercede in the national reality, elaborating proposals that multiply peace, justice, and the democratization of society through an articulation of the struggle for women’s immediate demands without separating them from the strategic need to transform the material and ideological foundations of our gender subordination (*Mujeres por la Dignidad y la Vida* n.d.).

My analysis rejects a characterization of Salvadoran feminism as part of an evolutionary trajectory. In such teleological versions of women’s liberation, “modern” ideas about gender roles are introduced to “developing” countries through contact with more

“developed” nations bringing enlightenment about the nature of women’s oppression in “macho societies” to a few elite women.¹ While the Dignas grew out of a particular history and the conditions it produced, the antithetical demands made by local and global processes on Salvadoran feminism demonstrate that there is no master narrative of female emancipation.

The Dignas adopted feminist theory originating in Europe and North America but they developed a practice that responded to El Salvador’s history of poverty, extreme economic stratification, and rural/urban differentiation. The Dignas’ very existence comes out of the twelve-year civil war that placed El Salvador in the middle of Cold War politics and ended with a United Nations brokered peace process that ended the conflict in 1992. Their maturation as an institution occurred alongside the new wave of international development agencies that accompanied the United Nations’ monitored peace process, and was fostered by the growth of the transnational feminist movement, particularly in Latin American. As the women’s movement in El Salvador gained strength, the Dignas, as well as other women’s groups, were forced to define their relation to and against the political organizations from which most of them had originally emerged. As a result, the Dignas developed new relationships with both the party of their origin, the Farabundo Martí Liberation Front (*Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación* or FMLN) and its supporters. These were the politicized, and often demoralized, participants of the “popular movements” who, in the course of the war, had

¹ This statement summarizes a common reaction I get when I describe the topic of my dissertation to those who ask. See also Mohanty et al. 1991; Ong 1988.

become increasingly dependant on the non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including the Dignas, for resources and direction.

North American feminists who are struggling to convince the U.S. women's movement to take up the struggle against welfare reform have much to learn from the class-conscious struggles of their Central American sisters. As this work will demonstrate, their efforts to work across class lines are not uncomplicated. But the Salvadoran feminist movement's understanding of the relationship between class and gender, as well as its recognition of the ties between local and global issues, challenge any attempt to classify them as a stage through which feminist movements in the North have already evolved

Theoretical Review

This case study of the work of *Mujeres por la Dignidad y la Vida* illustrates how feminism has been appropriated and expanded by Salvadoran women. As the earliest formulations of feminism came from middle-class North American and European white women, these theories often failed to take into consideration the conditions under which "Third World" women live and, as a result, were initially rejected even by the women who founded the Dignas. But over the last three decades, feminism has begun to cross class, color, ethnic, and national boundaries (Anzaldúa and Moraga 1987; Saporta Sternbach et al. 1992; Smith, ed. 1983). Where this has occurred, women's movements have reformulated feminism in response to historic, economic, social and political

conditions (Basu, ed. 1995; Mohanty et al., eds. 1991). In El Salvador, as in many places, these translations have had limited success because the beliefs and behaviors which feminists target are deeply embedded in complex and often unequal social relations, not just between men and women, but between women of different classes and experiences in local feminist movements, something feminist theory and practice have often elided (Spelman 1988).

Despite these weaknesses, this study illustrates that various aspects of feminist theory have not only “traveled” but have achieved “conditions of acceptance” (Said 1983: 227). I explore the contexts in El Salvador both where feminist ideas have been found to be salient and those where the transplants have been rejected or so significantly modified as to offer a critique of Euro-North American feminist approaches. But the reformulation of feminism in response to local conditions has increasingly been challenged by the emergence of what Friedman calls “transnationalism reversed” (1997). Transnationalism is reversed when national feminists movements are shaped by events in, or influences from, the transnational arena. For example, when individuals are identified as movement leaders because of their international contacts rather than their local support, or when the preferences of international funding agencies shape the priorities of local groups, the process through which feminism is shaped by local conditions is undermined.

As the Dignas and other Third World feminists have been elaborating, transforming, and reversing transnational inputs to account for their day-to-day realities,

a distinct dynamic is pulling women's movements in another direction. The increasing inclusion of women's rights in the international human rights agenda (Bunch 1990, Copelon 1994, Schuler 1995) is giving rise to a new arena in which the universalities of women's gender subordination are being reasserted (Jelin 1997). Internationally recognized conventions concerning women's rights such as those negotiated in Vienna (1993), Cairo (1994), Beijing (1995), and Belém do Pará, Brazil (1994)², are an important source of leverage for local feminists to pressure state apparatuses to implement mechanisms to guarantee women's rights. However, unless there is sufficient political force to ensure that these mechanisms respond to local conditions, national compliance can be mere window dressing that fulfills its obligations without seriously addressing women's needs. While my fieldwork suggests that the Salvadoran women's movement may not have developed that strength, the Dignas are increasingly relying on the concept of women's rights as human rights to demand the democratization of the Salvadoran family and to define the mechanisms that are intended to promote it.

The most critical area to view the reversal of transnationalism is in funding projects. The availability of international funding for non-governmental organizations that are working on issues of gender in El Salvador has expanded tremendously since the Dignas were founded. While these funds have provided the Dignas with resources that created new opportunities, they impose models and restrictions that do not necessarily

² World Conference on Human Rights; International Conference on Population and Development; IV World Conference on Women; Interamerican Convention to Prevent, Sanction, and Eradicate Violence Against Women.

recognize local conditions. The possibility of receiving particular grants has favored the development of programs in the Dignas which are more likely to capture these funds whether or not they reflect the Dignas' broader priorities. The differential abilities of distinct categories of Salvadoran women to meet these requirements, because of their literacy skills, language abilities or contacts within these agencies may also be fostering stratification within the organization.³ The requirements of the funders, as well as the kinds of projects for which funds are available, are influencing the priorities of the Dignas and how they do their work.

The Dignas present a unique opportunity to explore these two contradictory processes. In order to draw women into their projects and programs, the Dignas must translate transnational feminisms⁴ into meanings and practices that respond to the current situation of El Salvador. At the same time, the Dignas must attract the support of international funding agencies to secure the resources they need to continue to exist and expand. The increased attention focused on El Salvador because of the war has made this possible.

The war itself significantly challenged Salvadoran gender roles. The conflicts generated by these alternative gender constructions contributed to the development of a Salvadoran women's movement. While many of these transformations have been documented through histories of the Salvadoran women's movement during the civil war

³ Edelman (1996) describes a similar process occurring in the transnational Central American peasant movement.

⁴ There are numerous conflicting trends in feminism, thus the use of the plural.

(AMES 1982, Golden 1991, Mujeres por la Dignidad y la Vida 1993a, Thomson 1986), this study provides a processual analysis of feminism in El Salvador in the postwar period.

An analysis of the Salvadoran women's movement offers insight into issues of social change that go beyond feminist issues, specifically the popular practices of resistance and collective action. The proliferation of feminist groups in the 1970s, along with the expansion of other social movements such as environmentalists, ethnic groups, and human rights activists, generated new questions about how to account for the variety of social and political actors and actions. New social movement (NSM) theory argues that these new types of social movements shattered the traditional social science paradigms which had been used to analyze social conflict (Escobar and Alvarez 1992, Laclau 1985, Melucci 1989, Touraine 1988); the explanations which argued that political actors' behavior was determined by economic structures were inadequate. According to NSM theorists, political parties, labor unions, and classes, the prototypical social movements of earlier theoretical frameworks, could no longer be considered the primary organizations of social change. Rather the new social movements, formed because their members came together on the basis of a social identity that they actively constructed, had assumed the central role in promoting social change.

NSM theorists' emphasis on the formation of identity rather than the assumption of structurally determined social positions is not unique. Nor is their recognition that power is not just class-based but that individuals may experience domination from

multiple sources in society. The birth of the Salvadoran women's movement illustrates this theory perfectly. After a decade of revolutionary struggle led by the FMLN, women in the Salvadoran popular movement began to challenge the lack of gender equality in the analysis, methodology, and structure of their organizations. Most of them, including the Dignas, eventually broke from their organizations and formed independent women's groups.

But the character of this movement also makes it clear that a theory based solely on identity does not go far enough. The experiences of poverty, human rights abuses, and war shaped how the Salvadoran women's movement built a collective identity as "women." The process demonstrates that economic and political relations must also be taken into account to understand the goals of these women and how they are trying to achieve them. The contradictions generated as the Dignas' attempt to construct a collective feminist identity come from inequalities in access to resources that resurfaced following the war. My goal is to highlight what their construction of the identity of "women" obscures as well as what it illuminates.

The Dignas have attempted to confront these tensions using an analysis which, while it asserts women's unity as a subordinated gender, acknowledges their distinct interests. Their model is similar to that proposed by Maxine Molyneux who divided women's interests into practical and strategic gender interests (1985). The practical interests are those generated by the concrete conditions of women's daily life and in the fulfilment of their traditional roles: the lack of running water or electricity, limited

economic opportunities, or the high cost of living. Strategic gender interests, on the other hand, are derived from a theoretical analysis of women's subordination and the elaboration of a strategy to overcome the material conditions and social and cultural structures which sustain them: violence against women, reproductive rights, or political representation as women. Earlier formulations contrasted the female private sphere with the male public domain (Rosaldo 1974), feminine interests with feminist struggles (Kaplan 1982), and women's reproductive roles with men's productive ones (Benería 1979; Edholm et al. 1977). These dichotomies fail to capture the fluidity between the contrasting categories which is imperative in trying to understand the goals of women's struggles in different cultural settings (Leacock and Nash 1977; Radcliffe and Westwood 1993; Safa 1976).

Lynn Stephen (1997) builds an alternative model for analyzing the interaction between gender and social movements in her discussion of the diversity of gender roles occupied by women engaged in collective action in Brazil, El Salvador, Mexico and Chile. By exploring the relations among women's demands related to the areas of production, reproduction, sexuality, and politics she avoids the trap of reducing those demands to the categories of public/private, feminine/feminist, productive/reproductive or strategic/practical.

The convergence of issues addressed by the Dignas defy theoretical frameworks which rely on categorizing women's organizing into dichotomous spheres. Rather the Dignas' movement calls for an analysis of what occurs when women's groups integrate

issues which may both challenge and reinforce gender roles simultaneously. But the continued use of this model by the Dignas also suggests that another interpretation may be forthcoming. As I will demonstrate, the practical/strategic dichotomy can obscure the tensions that differential access to material and ideological resources generate.

The issue of access to resources suggests an alternative approach that utilizes resource mobilization theory (Jenkins 1983; McCarthy and Zald 1977). As my research shows, the availability of funding sources has clearly influenced the directions taken by the Dignas over time. Their work with both the midwives and the *madres demandantes* are two examples. But what remains problematic with this perspective is its failure to account for the influence of identity as well as its failure to recognize that civil society can be a “target as well as the terrain of collective action” (Cohen and Arato 1997: 509). The Dignas’ activities directed at developing women’s self-esteem, their work at raising gender sensitivity with other NGOs, and their political platforms aimed at making the FMLN more gender conscious illustrate that their goals are far more wide-reaching than the electoral politics that is generally the focus of resource mobilization theory.

In a review of the study of Latin American social movements, Paul Haber (1996) points to the political-process model as an alternative to the tendency of theorists to focus on identity as a panacea to “to analyzing the relatively disappointing political power of the movements, as measured by their ability to shape the policy process” (ibid.: 172). Haber’s pessimistic assessment of theory focused on identity as an explanation of

motivation is followed by his claim that:

The extent to which a social movement or social movement organization shapes cultural meanings and identities for those within and without the movement depends directly on the extent to which the movement is able to influence the institutional composition and behavior of the political parties and the state (ibid.: 173).

Such a claim once again prioritizes the state and the electoral process. While the Dignas' are increasing refocussing their aim in the direction of the state, doing so may not always be expedient as my discussion of the issue of abortion illustrates.

In the wake of significant electoral gains by the FMLN in 1997, the Legislative Assembly voted to limit access to abortion in cases of rape, physical deformities in the fetus, or threat to the life of the mother. But as my discussion of these changes illustrates, access to abortion in these cases was already limited by the medical establishment. Despite the fact that abortion was not punishable in these cases, few doctors would perform the procedure in the hospital because of their personal beliefs and/or fear of publicity in the news media, demonstrations by anti-abortion forces, or reproach from the Catholic Church. Nonetheless, abortion clinics operated openly though they were periodically targeted for prosecution by the police, and women continued to arrive at the hospital suffering the consequences of badly performed abortions. Securing or denying Salvadoran women access to abortion cannot be simply be done through legislation.

The difficulty in changing cultural practices around issues such as abortion, or domestic abuse, or, closer to home, racism illustrates that while legal reforms are critical, cultural practices are not transformed simply through influencing political parties to

reform legislation. On the other hand, the success or failure of legislation is not a reliable measure of the impact of a social movement. For example, despite the inability of the lesbian and gay rights movement in the United States to secure legislation prohibiting discrimination, this movement has significantly changed “cultural meanings and identities.” As my discussion of the work of the Dignas will demonstrate, to limit the evaluation of a social movement’s impact to their ability to influence political parties and the state fails to recognize the importance of cultural and ideological arenas that fall outside of that sphere.

Historic Background

The twelve-year civil war between the government of El Salvador and the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front that ended with the signing of peace accords in 1992 is the latest chapter in a struggle whose roots can be traced to the Spanish conquest. Even before the war, but certainly accelerated by the conditions it produced, Salvadoran women's roles were shifting as a result of dramatic social and economic changes within Central America. Salvadoran women's broad participation in the war not only contributed to the changing nature of their roles in society but it has changed the nature of struggle in El Salvador itself.

The extreme economic stratification that characterized Salvadoran society can be traced to the increasingly unequal concentration of first land, and later other critical resources, in the hands of an elite minority. El Salvador is differentiated from the other

countries in Central American not only because it is the smallest but because its population density has been the highest in all of the Western Hemisphere (Durham 1979: 6). However, the problems with the distribution of land are not simply a result of population density. They result from patterns of land use and ownership through which “national elites or oligarches have grown wealthier and acquired ever more land while the peasantry has grown more destitute and land poor” (Barry 1987: 5).

This process was accelerated as coffee began to dominate the economy in the mid-nineteenth century. El Salvador’s lack of access to an Atlantic port had been a substantial impediment to trade as the mountainous geography and torrential rains made overland transportation difficult. This disadvantage was overcome after the Gold Rush stimulated the economy in California enough to generate “an unprecedented degree of commercial activity on the Pacific coast” (Lindo-Fuentes 1990: 74) With increased access to shipping, exportation became more profitable. The disruption in the market for indigo, the product that had dominated El Salvador’s earlier exports, as a result of the American civil war, made the cultivation of coffee more attractive.

While the export of coffee drew El Salvador increasingly into the world market, it was accompanied by the so-called “liberal reforms” (ibid.: 125). The elite promoted these reforms to gain access to the best coffee growing lands, much of which was either communally held, or owned by subsistence farmers (Armstrong and Shenk 1982: 5). Communal land holdings were outlawed in 1881 and 1882 (Lindo-Fuentes 1990: 135) and “the ‘reformist’ liberals fell back on diverse forms of compulsory labor” (Torres

Rivas 1993: 24) to fulfill the extensive labor requirements of coffee production. The cultivation of coffee plants required the investment of resources inaccessible to most small landholders. While in some regions, significant numbers of ladino peasants were able to successfully navigate the transition from communal tenancy to private landownership (Lauria-Santiago 1998), the privatization of land “transformed the distribution of this resource” (Alvarenga 1998). This transformation had both economic and social costs. Segundo Montes (1987) summarized them:

In suppressing communal property, the Liberal Agrarian Reform of 1881-1882 steered the country toward a concentration of land ownership, and to the dedication of land to the cultivation of coffee, in a large part throwing peasants off of their small subsistence farms (*sus minifundios de subsistencia*), transforming them into wage laborers (*proletarizándolos*), and depriving the country of sufficient foodstuffs to ameliorate the crisis (179).

Coffee’s rise to predominance in the Salvadoran economy was accompanied by the emergence of a new coffee planter elite. This change in social structure occurred concurrently with the consolidation of the nation-states in Central America. As a result, “the coffee oligarchy’s interests became society’s interests and thus vindicated the emerging state” (Torres Rivas 1993: 27).

New patterns of labor also developed. Whereas in the past, peasants had worked on indigo plantations for part of the year and then spent the rest of the year cultivating their communal plots, by the end of the century this was no longer an option. Dispossessed of their lands and with population growth making labor abundant, it is no surprise that real wages in 1890 were lower than in 1850s (Lindo-Fuentes 1990: 157).

While, by the turn of the century, the urban economy was expanding, it was not possible for it to absorb the peasants displaced from their land (Parkman 1988: 10-14).

Declining living conditions resulted in unrest throughout the 1920s (Dalton 1982: 96-97). As I have documented elsewhere (Ready 1994), these conditions worsened substantially after the Depression of 1929. The drop in coffee prices led to extensive layoffs and wage decreases in both the private sector and the growing public sector of the emerging state apparatus. Prices for coffee were so low that owners left crops rotting in the fields (Dalton 1982: 224). Workers revolted but were repressed by the National Guard which had been created in 1912 to control the rural population and protect the *haciendas* (Pearce 1985: 82).⁵

In San Salvador, incipient worker organizations and market women had organized strikes and demonstrations since the 1920s. By 1930, White claims that “revolutionaries were able to organize an estimated 80,000 agricultural laborers, mainly coffee workers in western El Salvador, into militant unions” (1973: 99). In 1932, when electoral fraud made it clear that the opportunities for nonviolent change no longer existed, revolt broke out throughout the country. The role of the Communist Party, and its affiliated organizations like the *Socorro Rojo Internacional* (International Red Aid), in directing the insurrection is debated (Anderson 1971; Dalton 1982). But party leader Augustín Farabundo Martí along with two students, Mario Zapata, and Alfonso Luna,

⁵ The National Guard was preceded by civil auxiliaries (*auxiliares civiles*), civilian patrols commanded by local mayors to enforce labor contracts and expel peasants from land (Alvarenga 1998).

were arrested days before the uprising, and executed less than two weeks later for crimes of treason and rebellion. Despite Martí's detention, Indian peasants rose up in rebellion in heart of El Salvador's coffee-growing region on January 22, 1932 with the Izalco Volcano erupting in the background. While a coup within the military had also been discovered and suppressed, peasants, armed with little more than machetes, attacked government warehouses and offices, and broke into the homes of the wealthy. Overall, Anderson estimated that the rebels killed no more than one hundred victims (1971: 136).

In response, the military government of Maximiliano Hernández Martínez unleashed what has come to be known as "*La Matanza*," or The Massacre. The military, with the assistance of the civic guard (*guardia civica*) (Montes 1987: 188), brutally repressed the rebellion and massacred between 10,000 and 30,000 (Anderson 1971: 134-137; Montes 1987: 188-191; Torres Rivas 1993: 61) mostly Indian peasants. Because it was viewed as an "Indian" rebellion, individuals were targeted for having Indian features. Using voting lists, urban suspects were picked up for having voted Communist (Anderson 1971: 133). Within three days, the rebellion was over though the killing went on for some weeks. In the ensuing years, most visible signs of indigenous culture, language, clothes, and religious practices, were abandoned in an effort to avoid harassment by the authorities (Armstrong and Shenk 1982: 30).

Martínez remained in power until 1944 when he was overthrown by a nonviolent general strike, "*La Huelga de los Brazos Caídos*." While women had participated in the uprising of 1932, their creative role in *La Huelga de los Brazos Caídos* was critical to its

success. One participant summed it up by saying this "strike was in the hands of women" (*La Huelga de los Brazo Caídos cayó en manos de mujeres*).⁶

The continued military repression of resistance by artisans and workers meant that organizing had to be carried out on numerous fronts. This resulted in the creation of multi-layered organizational networks that linked underground revolutionary parties to movements which were able to operate in the open. Thus despite being forced underground and into exile after the strike, some of the women who participated were able to form the Women's League (*Liga Feminina*) in 1947. The League was a women's organization with political, though not explicitly revolutionary goals. While it focussed primarily on social issues, such as improving conditions for women in prison and establishing orphanages, it also advocated changes in the Family Code and fought for women's right to vote, which was included in the Constitution of 1950.

During this period women's participation in economic activity outside the home was increasing steadily. While the growing displacement of handicrafts by industrial production meant that women's traditional sources of income within the home were shrinking, the expansion of the commercial and service economy changed the demand for women's labor outside the home and in urban areas. The rising price of coffee in the post-World War II market meant there were sufficient government revenues to open up new sources of education. This in turn also expanded opportunities for poor women outside of domestic work. Accompanying these changes was the formation of another

⁶ Interview with Matilda Elena López, San Salvador, September 1991.

women's organization, the Fraternity of Salvadoran Women (*La Fraternidad de Mujeres Salvadoreñas*) in 1957. The organization had strong ties to the Communist Party and the labor movement which had become stronger in the post war period (*Mujeres por la Dignidad y la Vida* 1993a: 87).

The increased production of coffee, and high prices, fueled the growth of this period as “the modernizing oligarches” (Armstrong and Shenk 1982: 37) created a framework that would lead to both internal and external integration. According to Armstrong and Shenk, it was a politics that embraced

developmentalism--the creation of conditions to permit the expansion and modernization of the economy; reformism--the policy of adjusting existing political and social structures to keep the system one step ahead of its own contradictions; and repression--reserved for those who could not be coopted and wanted more than ameliorative change (ibid.: 38).

One of the mechanisms developed to encourage economic growth was the Central American Common Market (CACM). The United Nations Economic Commission on Latin America (ECLA), promoted the CACM as a strategy toward a “planned, balanced development within the region, with specific industries assigned to each country to avoid competition and duplication of capacity” (ibid.: 46). While limited foreign investment was encouraged, the goal was to develop national industries by allowing the unrestricted flow of goods, capital and labor among the five Central American countries. By the time the CACM was established in 1961, however, it bore little resemblance to the plan “for balanced and autonomous development” that ECLA had proposed. Relations between Honduras and El Salvador became particularly strained as the former's industrialized

advantage and lower import duties had allowed it to replace the United States as the primary supplier of manufactured goods “despite their poorer quality and higher production costs” (ibid.: 55).

Because El Salvador, along with Guatemala, was more industrialized than its other neighbors, the CACM provided its manufacturing sector with new markets. However, the CACM offered few benefits to the population that had neither land nor income to purchase domestically manufactured goods. While El Salvador’s manufacturing sector grew 24 percent between 1961 and 1971, it was not accompanied by an equivalent growth in industrial employment (ibid.: 47). Nor did it create enough jobs to absorb the workers who were being displaced from their land by crop diversification and mechanization (ibid.: 48). As a result, in the 1950s and 60s hundreds of thousands of Salvadoran peasants joined earlier waves of immigrants by crossing over the border into Honduras seeking work on banana plantations and in the cities, or squatting on public lands (ibid.: 56).

The 1969 “Soccer War” between El Salvador and Honduras eliminated the escape valve that this migratory pattern provided. The tensions between the two countries that had emerged through their joint participation in the CACM, and the pressure created by the massive Salvadoran migration, exploded after the Salvadoran soccer team defeated Hondurans in the semi-final series for the World Cup. The Honduran response was to expel Salvadoran nationals living in their territory, and to withdraw from the Common Market. The return of these workers deepened the economic crisis that had begun to

afflict the country, fueling public debate about land reform.

In the 1960s, El Salvador also received considerable economic assistance under the Alliance for Progress, the Kennedy administration's attempt, in the aftermath of the Cuban revolution, to divert popular discontent into moderate reforms. While the growth of the industrial sector expanded the working class, the failure of “landed bourgeoisie” to permit the agrarian reforms sought in the Alliance for Progress led to the failure of the American strategy (Dunkerly 1983: 54). With the collapse of agrarian reform, and widespread electoral fraud, and increasing repression, the avenues for change became increasingly narrow.

Because of these narrowing avenues, new kinds of political structures began to play an increasingly important role in building and maintaining organizations advocating for the poor. Many of these groups grew out of the reforms to the Catholic Church after Vatican II and the 1968 Bishops conference in Medellín. The new ideology, liberation theology, advocated that the Church make a commitment to improving the lives of the poor. Priests and nuns began leaving their Churches to live in “Christian-based communities.” They organized impoverished communities, preaching a version of the bible that challenged the fatalism of the peasants, teaching them to read using the engaged pedagogy of Pablo Freire. Such activities made priests, nuns, lay catechists and institutions of the church targets of government and private repression. The new archbishop, Oscar Romero, was rapidly politicized by the assassination of his fellow priest and friend, Rutilio Grande, in 1977. Grande’s murder was the first of many

religious workers to be killed for their assumed political involvement, the most notorious of which were four North Americans and Archbishop Romero in 1980.

Political groups, spawned out of schisms within the Salvadoran Communist Party, rejected the party's advocacy of *foquismo*, the strategy that claimed a small band of revolutionary fighters could spark a peasant rebellion. A split occurred in 1970 although it was only after two years of clandestinity that the Popular Forces of Liberation (*Fuerzas Populares de Liberación-Farabundo Martí* or FPL) emerged and began to advocate "prolonged popular war" (*guerra popular prolongada*) (ibid.: 88-90). However, the majority of the opposition continued to advocate the democratic path to power.

In 1972, a broad-based democratic coalition, the National Opposition Union (*Unión Nacional Opositora* or UNO) ran José Napoleón Duarte, who had been mayor of San Salvador, as its candidate for president. When it became apparent that he was going to win, the incumbent government perpetrated a blatant election fraud and declared the military's candidate the winner. In response, a Constitutionalist faction in the army launched a coup and installed Duarte as president. His term only lasted a few days. Under Colonel Arturo Molina, the armed forces overthrew Duarte and installed Molina as president (Jung 1981: 78-79).

The fraudulence of this 1972 election was a watershed. Confidence in the potential of achieving reform through the political process was further undermined by the subsequent manipulation of voting in municipal and legislative elections in 1974 and 1977 (Lungo Uclés 1996: 14). As a result, the opposition began organizing extensively

and with increasing success. What eventually became the second major guerrilla organization, the People's Revolutionary Army (*Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* or ERP), emerged after the election fraud, made up of “radicalized Christian Democrats” (Dunkerley 1982: 92).

The government responded to the increasing resistance with repression characterized by several features:

State terrorism in El Salvador is distinguished by its extraordinary brutality, its public character, and its systematic implementation. Its *extraordinary brutality* is underscored by the fact that rarely is one of its victims found dead from a simple gun shot wound. The bodies of most victims bear the marks of violence and torture . . . The *public* nature of state terrorism in El Salvador is exhibited by the openness with which torture and assassinations occur, the bodies of victims left among the population as a constant reminder of the terror which could befall the observer. Instances in which men have been castrated with their genital left in their mouths, and in which the fetuses of pregnant women have been removed and thrown to be eaten by dogs . . . Finally, the systematic nature of state terrorism has now been exhibited by both the method of indiscriminate killing and the targeting of terror against any persons or organizations that pose even a remote challenge to the military juntas' continued rule (Camino 1982: 69).

The escalating repression was met by a mobilization of activists from various sectors: middle-class students with illiterate peasants, Christian Democrats with Marxist-Leninists, market women and trade unionists, poor shanty town dwellers with housewives from the bourgeoisie. They formed what is known as the popular movement, a network of open and clandestine organizations that worked with (and sometimes against) one another: Christian base communities, neighborhood groups, peasant associations, trade unions and the political-military organizations, which included both

armed forces and mass organizations.

In the wake of the Sandinista triumph in Nicaragua, the situation in El Salvador became so untenable that even elements in the armed forces could no longer accept it. In October of 1979, a group of young military officers overthrew President Carlos Humberto Romero and installed the Revolutionary Junta which included civilians including Guillermo Ungo, a social democrat. Various parties, including the Communist Party, contributed members to the cabinet (Anderson and Shenk 1982: 122). Despite the pluralism, within a few months the Junta's inability to restrain the brutality of the armed forces became apparent. While ORDEN, a paramilitary organization established by the National Guard that had been responsible for many of the atrocities in the countryside, was officially outlawed, death squads continued to operate, often consisting of military personnel in civilian clothing. Ungo and the other progressives in the junta increasingly despaired that the reforms that had been promised were not forthcoming. Despite the continued human rights abuses, the United States resumed military aid and sent troops to "professionalize" the Salvadoran Army (Armstrong and Shenk 1982: 127). Even with the backing of the American Embassy, by January 1980, the first junta had collapsed, when Ungo, along with Román Mayorga, resigned.

The left responded to the crisis by consolidating its forces. On the same day a second junta was formed, the FPL, the Communist Party, and another revolutionary organization, the National Resistance (*Fuerzas Armadas de Resistencia Nacional* or RN), announced their unification. A demonstration to celebrate that achievement was called

for January 22nd, the forty-eighth anniversary of *La Matanza*. The crowd that marched numbered 200,000 (CISPES 1981: 62). When they arrived at the Metropolitan Cathedral, they were met by shots from the roof of the National Palace and other government offices. While the government denied the presence of any troops in the area, and armed marchers returned fire, most of the 21 deaths came from arms of the same caliber of that used by the military (Dunkerley 1982: 146).

By 1980 three other organizations, the Communist Party, the RN, and the Party of Revolutionary Workers, had come to share the FPL's and the ERP's view that armed struggle was the only legitimate response to the government's brutal repression of political opposition. They recognized that, despite their sometimes violent political differences, they needed to cooperate and bring together the distinct social sectors and territories in which each organization was based. The similarity of the platforms and methods of struggle that were adopted in 1975 and 1979 established "an indispensable foundation" (Lungo Uclés 1996: 146) for unification. In November of 1980, the five parties formed a united front, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, the FMLN. Each group maintained its own name, political perspective, and strategic approach. They operated in distinct though often overlapping parts of the country, where each group had cultivated a following through their particular historic trajectory. While they maintained independent command structures, they coordinated overall strategy and acted cooperatively. The guerrilla organizations had numerous relationships, which by necessity were clandestine, with the popular organizations that advocated and used non-

violent tactics. Thus, for example, different branches or “tendencies” of the FMLN had their own organizations of families of the disappeared, refugee groups, and, eventually, women’s organizations.

The war expanded as the FMLN demonstrated its ability to survive despite the rapid growth of the military through American support, and the introduction of “low-intensity warfare.” With the election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency, El Salvador became the bulwark against communist infiltration into the region. A social movement in North America made up of churches, labor unions, radical political parties, women’s groups and concerned activists, known as the “Solidarity Movement,” challenged Reagan’s policies. The Solidarity Movement won legislative victories that limited the number of American advisors that could be stationed in El Salvador and required the State Department to certify that the Salvadoran government was making progress on curbing human rights abuses. It also built bridges between American groups, both religious and secular, and groups in the popular movement in El Salvador as well as other Central American countries, particularly Nicaragua and Guatemala. Like popular organizations in El Salvador, groups in the United States were often associated exclusively with one of the branches of the FMLN. It was through this movement that my own involvement in Central America began.

The Salvadoran Right also reconstructed itself in response to changing conditions brought on by the outbreak of civil war. Duarte, who was elected President in 1984, and the Christian Democrats increasingly lost credibility as the “democratic center.” The

party was unable to curb human rights abuses, and their military strategies which sought to undermine support for the guerrillas by “draining the fish from the sea” tactics, led to massive exoduses of villages (known as *guindas*) as peasants fled before search and destroy missions as well as aerial bombing campaigns. In 1981, Roberto D’Aubisson, widely believed to be the intellectual author of the assassination of Monseñor Romero, founded the National Republican Alliance (*Alianza Republicana Nacionalista* or ARENA). Lungo Uclés notes that ARENA’s potential was underestimated at first. But, Schmit points out, quoting Lungo Uclés, that “for the first time in half a century, ARENA offered the Salvadoran bourgeoisie the possibility of ‘a party that could collect the ideas, intentions, and expectations of the broadest range of the Right’ ” (1996: 21). After the 1984 elections, ARENA was able to coopt the reformed electoral process that was supposed to be the democratic alternative to the FMLN revolution, “fundamentally altering the character of Salvadoran politics” (ibid.)

While the military benefitted from the fruits of U.S. assistance (at least the upper echelons), the government, the economy, and the population suffered. Starting in 1981, the FMLN through its political commission, the Democratic Revolutionary Front (*Frente Democrático Revolutionario* or FDR), sought to initiate a dialogue with the government, a position that was strengthened by the Franco-Mexican declaration that recognized the FMLN-FDR as the political representative of the Salvadoran people. But the Salvadoran government rejected the overtures until 1984 when President Duarte invited the FMLN-FDR to La Palma, Chalatenango to dialogue. But by 1987, there was still no agreement.

Pressure to continue negotiations came from the Contadora peace process initiated by Oscar Arias, then president of Costa Rica. His efforts led to the signing by all five Central American presidents of Esquipulas II, a document that established a regional peace process. While supported by coalitions of Latin American countries, the European Parliament, and four of the five permanent members of the Security Council of the United Nations, opposition by the Reagan administration proved to be a major obstacle to implementation (Torres Rivas 1993: 128).

The fall of the Berlin wall, the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas, Reagan's departure from office, and the 1989 FMLN offensive all created the conditions which led to the eventual signing of the New York Accords in 1991. The offensive, launched by the FMLN in November of 1989, made it clear that while the FMLN could not win, neither could they be defeated. They would continue to make El Salvador impossible to rule, and to do business in, a factor of critical importance to the business-minded faction of AKENA. This faction had gained significant power in the party and their leader, Alfredo Cristiani, won the presidency in 1989.

The electoral defeat of Sandinistas in Nicaragua in 1990 and the dissolution of the Socialist Bloc diminished the perceived communist threat in Central America. Cold War warriors quickly lost interest in continuing to support an unwinnable war as they did not need the Iran-Contra scandal following them into the Bush administration. The assassinations of the Jesuits and their housekeepers also demonstrated the futility of reforming the Salvadoran military. Finally, those in the Bush administration who

advocated a political solution to the war prevailed, and U.S. policy shifted to promoting a negotiated settlement (*ibid.*: 180).

Negotiations began in 1989. An accord on human rights, which was to be verified by the United Nations, was signed in 1990 opening the “political space for civilians to protest human rights violations” (Binford 1996: 113). Under direct mediation of the Secretary General of the United Nations, agreements on the most controversial topics were reached in December of 1991: “the reduction and purging of the armed forces, the creation of a new civilian police, and the demobilization of the FMLN” (Lungo Uclés 1996: 201).

Morena Herrera, one of the founders of the Dignas, pointed out to me that the Peace Accords set the stage for the building of a democratic society in El Salvador. Lungo Uclés seconds her observation, asserting that “the questions for El Salvador in the 1990s [do] not involve trying to recover or reconstruct a lost democracy, since democracy never existed” (*ibid.*: 207). The demobilization and reconstitution of the military forces, the creation of the Truth Commission, the implementation of agrarian reform, and the legalization of the FMLN as a political party were critical components of this process. In addition, the incorporation of the new forms of organization and political participation that emerged from the war is crucial to the success of the democratic project. I turn now to one of the new forms of subjectivity that developed in the course of the war, the Salvadoran women’s movements.

The Emergence of the Women's Movements

The first women's group to grow out of the popular movement⁷ was the Association of Progressive Women of El Salvador (AMPES). AMPES claimed direct continuity with a group founded in 1975, the Federation of Salvadoran Women, and like the earlier group, AMPES was closely tied to the Communist Party. The organization's initial focus was women in the trade union movements. The Association of Salvadoran Women (AMES) was formed a few years later by women associated with the FPL. AMES defined itself as "a channel for the incorporation of those sectors of women, who on account of their specific conditions (housewives, professionals, some teachers, slum-dwellers and students) have not yet incorporated into the popular struggle" (Thomson 1986: 95).

In a document published by AMES in 1980, it is clear that its members defined their collective identity as women by merging their gender identity with class:

Women have joined the struggle because their fundamental and immediate interests are the same as those of men. They are of the same class and therefore their enemies are the same: imperialism and the oligarchy along with their governments and the armed forces (Golden 1991: 110).

But a paper presented by a representative of AMES at the First Research Seminar on Women in San José, Costa Rica in 1981, suggests that the elements which composed

⁷ While women had been active in previous mobilizations such as the uprising in 1932 and *La Huelga de los Brazos Caidos* in 1944, no women's organizations existed prior to 1947. While women subsequently formed groups, such as the *Liga Feminina* and the *Fraternidad de Mujeres* which are discussed above, the Dignas identify the 1970s as the period during which a Salvadoran women's movement emerged (*Mujeres por la Dignidad y la Vida* 1993a: 87).

their collective identity began to shift. While this AMES statement uses an analysis of women's oppression that unquestionably prioritizes class, it more clearly acknowledges gendered sources of oppression:

To be a member of the working class is not the same as being a member of the upper class; to be a North American or a European is not the same as being Chilean or a Salvadoran. We are all, to some degree, exploited and we all carry the burden of patriarchal heritage, but unquestionably our class interests transcend those of gender . . . Our struggle as Latin American women is different from that of women in developed countries. Like us, the latter play a fundamental role as reproducers of labor power and ideology, but OUR problematic arises fundamentally from the economic, political, and cultural exploitation of our people" (The Association of Salvadoran Women 1982: 12).

The paper continues by describing the differences in the positions occupied by Latin American women from those of women in developed countries.

While in the developed countries there is a struggle for contraception and abortion, in Latin America we must also fight against forced sterilization and certain birth-control projects which some governments have agreed to under pressure from the United States. For us women, it is not a question of demanding collective services such as daycare centers or laundries, but rather of demanding general community services such as water, light, housing, and health care. For Latin American women the 'double day' has another dimension which converts 'wages for housework' into a remote goal; our short-term goals are related to employment and job opportunities, to the exploitation of the principal wage-earner, and the impossibility of survival with starvation wages. It makes no sense to struggle against the consumerism of one part of society if we are faced with poverty and the impossibility of consuming by the other part, which constitutes the majority of the people (ibid.:13).

The AMES statement points to the popular mobilization of women in shanty towns and of working class housewives as well as middle and upper class women. While it acknowledges that these kinds of women's mobilizations have been "conceived within a

liberal context and subject to penetration by bourgeois ideology," the statement identifies them as an essential first step.

[T]he defense of women's traditional role is the precondition of women's mobilization: it is not easy for the state to repress those who, as mothers, wives, daughters, confront it in the very roles which constitute the pillar and foundation of domination (ibid.: 17).

When both the AMES and AMPES were forced underground by repression in the early eighties,⁸ the importance of what AMES was saying here became more obvious. After the Sandinistas overthrew the Somoza regime in Nicaragua 1979, El Salvador became one of the bulwarks in the United States' Cold War against the spread of communism. U.S. foreign aid, including both military and economic assistance, began to flow into El Salvador at a rate which by the mid 1980s exceeded \$1.5 million per day. When the civilian/military junta that took control of the government in 1979 proved incapable of controlling the human rights abuse of the security forces, much less implementing any meaningful economic or social change, full scale civil war broke out. For the next few years open opposition to the regime was extremely difficult. One of the few avenues of resistance was through women's traditional roles as mothers.

The Committee of Mothers of Political Prisoners, the Assassinated, and Disappeared of El Salvador (CoMadres) was formed in 1977 with the support of the

⁸ Golden claims that AMES "'disappeared' due to repression in 1983" (1991: 113). However, in an interview with New Americas Press, Linda Fuentes, the representative of Union of Salvadoran Women for Liberation "Mélida Anaya Montes," claimed that her organization was formed in 1987 by AMES, AMPES, and three organizations affiliated with the other political parties in the FMLN (the Association of Salvadoran Women, ASMUSA; the Association of Salvadoran Women, AMS "Lil Milagro Ramírez, and the Unified Committee of Salvadoran Women, CUMS) (New Americas Press 1989: 107).

Catholic Archbishop of El Salvador, who was himself later assassinated. Evoking the powerful image of the motherhood idealized in the Catholic religion by the suffering Virgin Mother of Christ, these women insisted they were simply carrying out their maternal duties by confronting the government and armed forces who had taken their children. But while doing so they also appealed to the ideology of universal human rights by occupying the offices of international agencies like the Red Cross and holding hunger strikes in foreign embassies. While the brutality of the repression during the early 1980's forced the popular movement underground, it was the "mothers" who first broke the silence.

The first people who broke through the barriers to freedom of expression--because you couldn't say anything in those days because of the total control of the press--the mothers. They were the first, independently, by themselves, with paid advertisements saying 'Señor President, return my child who disappeared such and such a day.' No other group had the power of the mothers who didn't let anything stop them.⁹

In organizing to challenge the Salvadoran security forces, the CoMadres justified their demands for the return of their disappeared family members using a number of different discourses. Motherhood, the Church, and international human rights standards were all powerful ideologies through which they challenged state repression.

But while these Salvadoran women were using traditional images of their gender role, the conditions that had led to the war, and the war itself, were rapidly changing the roles those images were based on. The "traditional" family where the mother stayed home and took care of the children while the father went off to work never accurately

⁹ Interview with Matilda Elena López, San Salvador, September 1991.

portrayed Salvadoran reality. The percentage of women heads of household had been estimated at 26 percent in 1978 but by 1989 that figure had almost doubled to 51 percent (Castro de Pinzón 1989: 10). As was discussed earlier, women were also steadily moving into what is officially regarded as the work force, and this growth in female economic activity continued throughout the war. But as the country's economic growth rate declined with civil unrest, Salvadoran women also shared a greater portion of the unemployment with men than ever before.

The economic and political conditions led to a steady increase in external migration during this period. Because men made up a higher percentage of the first waves of Salvadorans to flee their country, migration also contributed to the growing burden being placed upon women. The increase in the military forces was another factor that put pressure on women. Large numbers of men joined or were recruited, sometimes forcibly, into the armed forces of both the government and the FMLN. While it has been estimated that as many as 30 percent of the FMLN combatants were women, (Montgomery 1982: 151; Luciak 1999: paragraph 15) the Salvadoran armed forces did not accept women. In addition, the majority of the 80,000 killed and 8,000 disappeared were male. Thus, while the arena of their economic activity was expanding, so were women's traditional and not so traditional responsibilities within their homes as a result of the increased absence of men due to migration, war and abandonment.

But it was not just in their homes and workplaces that there was an increased pressure for women's participation. Women had begun to make up a larger and more

active part of collectivities that formed the popular organizations. Their support for the popular movement was more critical than ever before. Thus as women's involvement increased in workplaces, neighborhoods, and rural communities, the popular organizations were forced to redefine their organizing strategies. The formation of women's committees (*comités femininos*¹⁰) across the spectrum of the popular movement in the early 1980s generated increasing questions about the validity of male privilege and gender hierarchies.

Several years ago a member of COFASTISS, the women's committee of the public hospital workers union, described to me the development of their committee.¹¹ According to her, the committee was formed after a major strike failed in 1981. Union officials blamed the loss on the fact that the union had failed to attract the support of the growing number of women workers in the hospital. The union recognized that it needed to change its tactics to increase the membership of women workers. As a result, rather than using traditional recruitment techniques, the union formed a women's committee and sought to attract women by offering classes in traditional female subjects like sewing. As part of the classes, trade unionists would talk to the women about workplace issues. However what was more important was that the union learned about the specific way these women defined their own issues as women workers. This enabled STISS, the trade

¹⁰ Where the English translations do not convey the complete sense of the original phrasing, I have included the Spanish in parenthesis.

¹¹ A presentation by a member of COFASTISS to a "Friends of CoMadres" delegation, San Salvador, November 1987.

union, to incorporate those issues into its demands when the unions stuck again in 1985. Women workers' broad support of this strike was seen as the key to the union's victory.

As this process was repeated in other organizations, women's committees were formed across sectors and these committees began to affiliate with one another within the political coalitions that defined the popular movement.¹² For instance, The National Coordinating Committee of Salvadoran Women, CONAMUS, formed in 1986. It was made up of representatives of COFASTISS; the women's committee of the teachers union, ANDES; members of an artists and cultural workers union, ASTAC; the Eastern Confederation of Workers; the Confederation of Community Health Institutions; the women's committee of CRIPDES, a committee for the displaced; and other women's committees. CONAMUS was one of five women's organizations that sponsored the First Salvadoran Women's Conference in September of 1988. By 1989, there were nine different organizations of women, most of them federations like CONAMUS. In addition, there were groups which represented specific sectors such as the Association of Indigenous Women, AMIS or University of El Salvador Women United, MUES.

With the ferment of activities, by the beginning of 1988 women's organizations had also become the consistent targets of attacks by the security forces and the death squads, despite the fact that death squad activity had declined overall by this time. The army opened fire on a women's demonstration against forced recruitment. A few weeks later two members of the MUES, the University women's organizations, had their homes

¹² Information in this section is based on author's interviews with representatives of women's organizations, San Salvador, March 1988.

dynamited (ADEMUSA 1989). Cristina Gómez, teacher, union activist and the coordinator of CONAMUS' weekly radio program, was dragged out of her classroom by heavily armed men (see Golden 1991: 145-155). As reported in the April 21, 1988 *Christian Science Monitor*, her body was found an hour later showing signs of torture. ADEMUSA had been broken into and ransacked twice during this period. Two of their members were arrested and, along with women from CRIPDES, they were tortured and imprisoned in the women's prison, Ilopango (ADEMUSA 1989b). The newly named coordinator of the women's program of UNADES, the Union of Earthquake Victims of El Salvador, Marta Lidia "Tita" Guzmán, was disappeared in June of that year presumably by agents of the National Police.¹³

Meanwhile the nature of the work women's organization were carrying on was changing. The shift in the discourse was subtle but evident in this excerpt from a pamphlet that was produced in August of 1989 by the nine women's groups as a "Guide to Salvadoran Women's Organizations":

Since 1986, a series of new Salvadoran women's organizations have emerged within the popular mass movement for social justice, filling a space left empty by repression of earlier attempts at organizing women. Each of these groups share the common primary goal of incorporating women into the struggle to create structural change in the Salvadoran society, which will permit social justice and the dignification of women and the Salvadoran family. At the same time, our women's groups work to achieve rights specific to women.

¹³ I was in El Salvador at the time, "accompanying" the CoMadres, a practice whereby North Americans resided in the offices and homes of human rights activists in an attempt to deter repression against them. I had worked with Tita Guzmán on bringing a caravan of humanitarian supplies from the United States to UNADES communities. I also attended Cristina Gómez' wake and funeral with the CoMadres.

The identification of "rights specific to women" marked the emergence of a feminist discourse in the Salvadoran women's movement. While it would be another year before the Dignas would emerge defining itself as a feminist organization, individual Salvadoran women had begun to use a feminist analysis of gender in their work. The best example was CONAMUS, which had set up a clinic for women who had been battered, raped or tortured. It provided not only medical treatment but psychological care and legal assistance. The inclusion of treatment for torture suffered at the hands of the armed forces and death squads illustrates how the particular conditions of Salvadoran women would shape their feminist analysis.

However the CONAMUS clinic was destroyed and the popular movement driven underground in the aftermath of the FMLN offensive of 1989. Despite the impressive showing of the FMLN in taking and holding sections of San Salvador, the government's willingness to bomb poor neighborhoods forced the guerrillas to retreat after a few days. Among the losses to the women's movement was Norma Guirola de Herrera. Norma had been the director of the Institute for the Investigation, Training, and Development of Women (IMU), a women's research institute she had founded in 1986. But Norma also had a long history with Salvadoran women's organizations starting with AMPES. She was assassinated with her niece, Tania Valentina Parada, while they were distributing medicine in one of the neighborhoods the air force had bombed. Her death followed on the heels of the assassination of another important female leader in the popular movement. Febe Elizabeth Velásquez was among the ten trade unionists killed when a

bomb went off in their lunchroom. As the General Secretary of the trade union federation, FENASTRAS, Febe was the first Salvadoran women to hold such a post.¹⁴

Despite these blows, the Salvadoran women's movement re-emerged more powerful after the offensive. CONAMUS not only reopened the clinic but began a campaign against domestic violence that resulted in the opening of a shelter for battered women in 1990. In the middle of that year, the Dignas were born.

The Dignas' emergence was, in part, a response to the diminishing opportunities that the FMLN faced after the offensive. The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua profoundly affected the party, but these same developments also contributed to a rapid decline in the United States government's interest in supplying the Salvadoran military. The 1989 offensive had demonstrated that while the FMLN could not defeat the government militarily, its ability to penetrate into the downtown of the capital city, San Salvador, indicated that it was far from defeated as the Salvadoran military had been claiming. The obvious stalemate and pressure from all sides led to the signing of the Peace Accords in 1992.

The peace agreement meant an end to the fighting, but it did not erase the scars that the war had left. A document written by the Dignas summed up those effects:

¹⁴ In El Salvador a trade union federation like FENASTRAS may include unions from different sectors (textile workers, construction workers, teachers). According to Mark Anner, an advisor to the Fenastras international department (1988-89; 1991-1993) who was also seriously injured in the bombing that killed Velásquez, she was definitely the first woman to head a national, multi-sectorial trade union federation in El Salvador. Some people claimed that she was the first to do so in Latin America, but Anner could not confirm this (Personal communication, April 1999).

An armed conflict of twelve years has barely reached its end; a history of 60 years of militarism and repression, an acute economic crisis that has resulted in the majority of the population living in extreme poverty; a systematic violation of human rights; and a permanent ignorance of the rights of women, these are the elements that characterize the history of our country. They have left their mark in the development of the proposals for transformation and the conceptions of struggle with which we have raised our voices and protested this unjust situation (1993b: 3).

In the postwar context, as Dignas and other women's groups continued to mobilize women to advocate in their own interests, their "conceptions of struggle" began to change. With increasing support and influence from transnational feminism, they directly challenged sexism in the FMLN and asserted their right to define their struggle as women.

Struggling for Autonomy

Women's groups had come to play an increasing role in the grassroots opposition to El Salvador's government since the mid 1980's, but the signing of the Peace Accords created distinctly different conditions. The peace process accompanied rather than created what the Dignas characterized as the third wave of Salvadoran feminism, following the first wave with AMES and AMPES, and the second the women's groups that emerged between 1986 and 1989 (1993a: 86-93). After the failure of the 1989 military offensive to spark an insurrection, the various tendencies of the FMLN promoted their women's committees with a renewed effort. Numerous political organizations created new *comités femininos*, and existing women's organizations within the FMLN began to occupy a higher profile. These initiatives came in response to the need for the

political parties to expand their bases of popular support but with an eye toward the increased opportunities for international financing of women's projects (ibid.: 116).

The Dignas were part of this process. The women who started the group in 1990 were all associated with the National Resistance (*Resistencia Nacional* or RN), one of the five tendencies the FMLN. While their efforts were initially supported by the RN leadership, it soon became apparent that the relationship between the women's group and the party was going to be conflictive. When the Dignas did not organize their first national assembly according to the suggestions of their "superiors" in the RN, the party withdrew its financial support for the event (*Mujeres por la Dignidad y la Vida* 1993a: 116-117). The Dignas continued to resist direction from the top and found their work increasingly sabotaged by party leaders. Women in the communities where the RN had historically operated were pressured not to work with the women in the Dignas. The RN leaders accused the Dignas of using these women to raise funds to be spent for their own purposes, which, ironically, was exactly what the RN had done in past. According to Morena Herrera, one of the founding members, accusations of sexual promiscuity and lesbianism were also used against them. In attempting to deal with the situation, the Dignas turned to other Latin American feminists such as Marta Harnecker,¹⁵ Julieta Kirkwood, and Virginia Vargas. Strongly impacted by Morena's participation in the Fifth Feminist *Encuentro* in Argentina in 1990, the Dignas declared their independence from the party.

¹⁵ Marta Harnecker is the best selling author of all time in Latin America.

Not all Salvadoran women's groups have followed the same trajectory as the Dignas. Some have chosen to expel the more militant feminists from their ranks while remaining associated with, though often publicly proclaiming their independence from, the party organizations. These groups generally refer to themselves as women's organizations rather than using the label feminist. Irrespective of how they identify themselves, the overwhelming majority of Salvadoran women's organizations have gone through a struggle for their autonomy from one of the parties that made up the FMLN or one of the organizations closely associated with them. Most of the women's organizations remain connected to the FMLN, financially, organizationally, or, at least, ideologically. Even the Dignas, who are recognized as one of the most politically independent, were deeply engaged with the FMLN, although often in an antagonistic stance. In the years immediately following the signing of the peace accords, the question of whether a women's organization was "organically" autonomous or not, meaning completely independent of the party out of which it grew, was a major source of contention between different women's organizations.

By 1991, there were more than 100 different women's organizations in El Salvador (Stephen 1994). While there are still a plethora of women's organizations, four other groups besides the Dignas are most visible nationally: the Institute for Research, Training, and Development of Women (*Instituto para la Investigación, Capacitación y Desarrollo de la Mujer* or IMU); the National Coordinating Committee of Salvadoran Women (*Coordinadora Nacional de Mujeres Salvadoreñas* or CONAMUS); the

Women's Movement "Mélida Anaya Montes" (*Movimiento de Mujeres "Mélida Anaya Montes"* or either MAM or las Mélicas); the Women Studies Center "Norma Virginia Guirola de Herrera" (*Centro de Estudios de la Mujer "Norma Virginia Guirola de Herrera"* or CEMUJER).

Founded by women from the FPL in 1992, the Mélicas' approach differs from that of the Dignas in several ways. They operate more as a mass organization than the Dignas by actively building a base of women supporters, making Las Mélicas, most probably (as there is no documentation), the largest Salvadoran women's organization. While they define themselves as autonomous of the FMLN, unlike the Dignas, they remain committed to working within the party. The president of las Mélicas, Lorena Peña (known as Rebecca Palacio while a *comandante*), is an FMLN legislator in the National Assembly. Several other key members of the organization ran as FMLN candidates in the 1997 election. Another difference is that the Mélicas promote economic projects and micro-enterprises while the Dignas have rejected this approach (see chapter 3). In addition, the Mélicas organize women as workers, particularly in the free trade zones (*zonas francas*). MAM's "Legislative Initiative" (*Iniciativa Legislativa*) is a committee of lawyers and legislators which has been instrumental in passing several pieces of legislation (see chapter 3) including a law regulating the free trade zones. The Mélicas have also instituted a "hot line" where women who work in the factories in the free trade zones (*maquilas*) can call to get information on their labor rights. Like the Dignas, MAM has a literacy program, promote non-sexist and feminist education, and

provide legal and emotional counseling, particularly for survivors of domestic violence.

On the other end of the spectrum is CEMUJER. While las Mélidas take their name from a woman leader from the FPL who was killed by one of her own comrades, CEMUJER is named after Norma Virginia Guirola de Herrera, a former militant of the CP who was killed during the 1989 offensive. Coming from a family with a long history of political involvement on the left,¹⁶ Norma's survivors founded CEMUJER after conflicts developed with IMU (which Norma also founded along with ADEMUSA, another women's organization, and MUES). Alba América Guirola, one of CEMUJER's founders, is adamant that the organization has been autonomous of any political party since its inception, and is explicitly feminist.

CEMUJER is recognized for its work in "*capacitación*" or training. They have done *capacitaciones* with a wide variety of groups including many government institutions, even several branches of the military.¹⁷ Several sites where the Dignas were organizing, specifically at a health center in San Jacinto and at the Attorney General's office, had opted to invite CEMUJER to do gender workshops rather than the Dignas. While some of the Dignas attributed this to the fact that CEMUJER took a less radical approach, the Attorney General indicated to me that CEMUJER had a reputation for

¹⁶ In 1992 I interviewed Norma Guirola's mother about her participation in the 1944 strike that led to the departure of Maximiliano Hernández Martínez.

¹⁷ I attended a CEMUJER workshop on self esteem presented by Urania Morales to the Military Health Battalion. The participants included people from all levels of the battalion, from the maintenance crew and mechanics to doctors and nurses. They were all wearing military uniforms which I found very disconcerting but there was active and enthusiastic participation.

doing workshops while he was unaware that the Dignas did them.

CEMUJER's work is grounded in the perspective that argues for women's rights as human rights and as a result, they have strong transnational ties. They also emphasize the importance of using media as vehicle for change. They have equipment and studios where they produce radio programs and videos, and were establishing a printing press in 1996. Their television commercials about domestic violence gave the issue high visibility. In order to gain more airplay for the commercials, they were considering seeking corporate sponsorship. Like the Dignas, they have an active research program and a library; provide legal, medical, and emotional services; and train women in non-traditional trades.

What differentiates IMU from the Dignas, according to Deysi Cheyne, the director of that organization, is their strong focus on rural women.¹⁸ IMU combines an approach which is both educational and organizational, emphasizing the relationship between gender and the environment. They do this in part by teaching children to appreciate nature and providing them with nutritious foods as, according to Deyse, they see nutrition as an environmental issue. IMU worked very closely with the Dignas in expanding women's political participation in Suchitoto, a subject that is explored in depth in chapter 5. Deyse, along with Morena Herrera of the Dignas, was elected to represent civil society on the board of Salvadoran Institute for Women's Development (ISDEMU), a government agency whose purpose was to develop and implement a

¹⁸ Interview held on August 25, 1997 in the IMU offices in San Salvador.

national policy on women.

To a large degree, the visibility of CONAMUS is attributable to the fact that they opened the first and only battered women's shelter in El Salvador. A large billboard which stood at a busy intersection, promoted their services. CEMUJER's ads on television also made their *Casa Morada*, the purple house where their first offices were located, widely known.

While these groups were the most visible, numerous other women's organizations educate, organize, and provide services to women throughout El Salvador: ORMUSA (*Organización de Mujeres Salvadoreñas por la Paz*), MSM (*Movimiento Salvadoreño de Mujeres*), AMS (*Asociación de Mujeres Salvadoreñas*) and ADEMUSA (also *Asociación de Mujeres Salvadoreñas*). In addition there are various coalitions such as COM (*Coordinadora de Organizaciones de Mujeres* or the Coordinating Council of Women's Organizations) which was formed during the war to bring together the women's organizations from the various tendencies of the FMLN, and *Red de Mujeres por la Unidad y Desarrollo* (the Women's Network for Unity and Development). I will end with a mention of one of the members of the *Red, Flor de Piedra* (Flower of Rock), a prostitutes' group which gain considerable visibility during my fieldwork.¹⁹ Started in 1990, the project was taken on a year later by the Lutheran University. At first the program attempted to rehabilitate the prostitutes by training them in alternative professions such as cosmetology or sewing. But most of the women remained in

¹⁹ Based on a group interview at the offices of *Flor de Piedra* in San Salvador on July 22, 1997.

prostitution as it provided a better income. In 1994 a new coordinator was hired who took a different approach; she advocated self-determination (*dignificación de las mujeres*) and began to hire prostitutes to do outreach. The group began to connect with other women's groups and was eventually abandoned by the Lutheran University. When I met them, they were scrambling for funding for their clinic which provided the women with birth control, condoms, and testing for HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases.

While many of the women's groups have been influenced by the presence and involvement of international feminists, it would be an oversight to fail to mention the influence of two of internationalists on the development of the Dignas. Clara Murguialday, from the Basque country of Spain, and Norma Vázquez, of Mexico, came to El Salvador in 1992 and eventually began working fulltime with the Dignas. While Norma came from a feminist organization in Mexico, Clara had been working with the women's movement in Nicaragua. But their involvement with the Dignas predated their arrival in El Salvador. According to Morena Herrera, they gave their first workshop to the Dignas, on methods for working with women, in 1991. Their familiarity with feminism allowed them to articulate the process the Dignas were going through in feminist terms. Their knowledge and experience with international development helped shape the Dignas efforts to secure funds from international agencies.

Methodology

My recognition of the profound differences in the meanings of feminism across

national, ethnic, class, and racial boundaries meant that the criteria I used for identifying Salvadoran feminists had to be defined in the context of local interpretations. In an attempt to avoid imposing models as to what constitutes feminism or who is a feminist within El Salvador, I chose to study the Dignas, one of the few Salvadoran women's groups to identify itself from its founding as a feminist organization. Having worked with Salvadoran women's organizations since 1986, I have seen the critical role that the Dignas played in defining and disseminating Salvadoran feminism among women from different socio-economic backgrounds in both rural and urban areas. While they are not the largest women's organization, they stand out for their leadership in promoting feminism in El Salvador.

When I arrived in September of 1996, I had already arranged to work with the Dignas. I discovered that the organization had grown dramatically since I had last visited them in 1993. They were no longer a small women's group struggling to assert autonomy from the political party from which they emerged. The Dignas had become an institution with a projected budget for 1997 of more than \$1.5 million from thirty-three different international agencies. They employed more than sixty women full-time, had eleven different programs, and represented "civil society" in the Salvadoran Institute for Women's Development (*Instituto Salvadoreño para el Desarrollo de la Mujer* or ISDEMU), a body created by the Legislative Assembly to develop a national policy on women. Seven of the programs provided services, and organized women to press for their demands: Sexual and Reproductive Health, Education, Local Development, Anti-

Violence, Child Support, Mental Health, and Non-traditional Work. The other four programs were administrative. Each of the programs addressed a specific set of concerns in a limited number of sites. Most of the sites were in areas where the Dignas' founders operated in their previous incarnation as guerrillas fighting with the National Resistance, the party of the FMLN with which all of the founders of the organization were associated. The projects were developed based upon a combination of experience, theorizing, and the availability of resources.

A combination of participant observation and interviews, both formal and informal, collecting life histories, and reviewing documents provided me with the data. Because of the variety and breadth of this work, I focussed on particular programs in specific sites. The Dignas work in seven different municipalities. Their main office is in the capital, San Salvador and they have satellite houses (*casas*) in the smaller cities of Suchitoto, Sensuntepeque, and Berlin; and in the small towns of Nombre de Jesús and Tierra Blanca. Only a few of the programs operate in each location, so I selected one or two programs in each office. I interviewed the coordinators of each program and the promoters (the local paid organizers) in addition to attending meetings, workshops, and other events organized by the staff (*equipo*) of the program.

Participant observation was my primary method of investigation, because it permits the researcher access to the perspective of her informants and the opportunity to compare what they do with what they say they do. Because I share the Dignas' commitment to understanding women's subordination and challenging it, I conducted my

research in dialogue with them. While I provided them with regular updates of my progress and they gave me feedback, I had unlimited access to all of their sites, activities, and participants.

To reimburse the organization for any extra expenses that they would incur because of my participation, such as the cost of meals I was provided while accompanying the promoters, and to compensate the organization for providing me with the opportunity to carry out my research, I made a monthly donation. To get to the various sites I usually traveled with the coordinators and the drivers²⁰ in the organization's two vehicles. If I needed to go alone, I took a bus, or on the few occasions when one of the vehicles were available, I would use it. If it was for my own research, I reimbursed the organization for the costs. A couple of times I filled in for the coordinator of the Reproductive and Sexual Health *equipo* (RSH) when she could not attend meetings in Nombre de Jesús. I also worked with the RSH to do an assessment of women's health needs in Berlin. When I made these trips, the Dignas assumed the costs.

These exchanges were a conscious effort to overcome some of the issues that feminists have raised about power differentials in fieldwork (Wolf, ed. 1996). Despite my efforts, the experience of doing research through fieldwork in a political context where I had a history as an activist was often extremely uncomfortable. As many of the women I worked with are living examples of Gramsci's "organic intellectuals," I felt

²⁰ All the NGOs that I knew of employed full-time drivers as many people do not have drivers licenses and maneuvering over some of the dirt roads can required specialized skills. The Dignas were the only organization that I observed who employed female drivers. I offered to drive whenever it was necessary but the offer was taken up on only a few occasions.

extremely conscious of the contradiction that I had the opportunity to reflect on what they were doing in ways that they did not. This contradiction was not ever directly raised by me or any of the Dignas, but I was constantly aware of it. I sometimes wondered if the failure of particular people to inform me of activities, which obviously would have been of interest to me, was the result of this dynamic.

I believe that my discomfort with this inequality was also, in part, responsible for my decision not to focus on the inner workings of the organization. While I agree with Haber's (1996) suggestion that there is important work to be done on the pressures on movements to abandon the practice of radical democracy which many have adopted, I could not tolerate the interpersonal dynamics in the meetings of the primary managing body of the organization, *La Coordinadora*. After attending two of these meetings, I was deeply frustrated with certain individuals and angered by the process that I observed. Having spent eight years working in a political collective, I had little tolerance for what I saw as manipulative dynamics. I may have overlooked an important source of information by choosing to prioritize other activities over attending those meetings. But I believe that my observations of the consequences of the decisions made in the meetings and my conversations with the participants, in the end, provided me with a more accurate, and less stressful, understanding of the process.

After four months of familiarizing myself with the different programs in the different locations, I identified ten different sites on which I wanted to focus. I chose to observe the "Local Development" program in Suchitoto. As it was an election year, the

Dignas were working with women in the surrounding communities to develop and lobby for implementation of a political platform for women. In addition, with the support of the organization, the local promoter of this program ran for municipal council and won. For the “Reproductive and Sexual Health” program, I chose to focus on their work in Nombre de Jesús where the Dignas were in the process of opening El Salvador’s first *Casa de Parteras* (Midwives’ House). To compare the differences in programs in urban and in rural areas, I followed the trainings of the *albañilas* (masons) by the “New Labor Practices” program in San Salvador and Jiquilisco, and the “Child Support” program in Sensuntepeque and the AMD in San Salvador. The “Anti-Violence” program was integrated with “Mental Health” in both Sensuntepeque and San Salvador and so I looked at them together. That left Berlín for studying the “Literacy” program. The local literacy promoter had joined the Dignas only recently and was eager to share her very fresh insights on the tensions between the workers in the countryside and those in the city. My observations were recorded and indexed in more than two hundred pages of fieldnotes.

In order to look at the broader impact of the Dignas, I interviewed state functionaries and representatives of international non-governmental organizations that were, at times, mediating between the state and the Dignas. These include interviews with: the *Procurador General de la República* (the Attorney General); representatives of international agencies that were funding programs within the government; functionaries in the ministries of education and health: the directors of the National Maternity Hospital and the National Police program on domestic violence; members of the legislative

assembly; and local politicians, teachers, and doctors. I interviewed the acting director of the Institute for the Development of Women: over which the First Lady presides and where the Dignas have been elected to represent civil society. In addition to these interviews, I attended numerous public forums, debates, presentations, and conferences sponsored or cosponsored by the Dignas in which state functionaries participated.

While I did not focus on the internal structure or decision making at the Dignas, I did periodically attend the coordinators' meetings, the ultimate decision making body of the organization. I had extensive interviews with the coordinators of each program concerning how they became involved with the organization and what their program did. This was particularly important with the administrative branches such as bookkeeping and grant writing as their work was difficult to understand simply through observation. I maintained a very close relationship with the Reproductive and Sexual Health program and working on an assessment with them enabled me to get a first hand taste of what it was like to work for the organization. I also interviewed the executive directors of several other women's organizations in order to compare what they do with the Dignas and to see how they view the Dignas.

In addition to the interviews with women who played key roles within the organization and the officials from institutions and agencies, I collected the life histories of seven women who are involved with the Dignas. Because gender identity is constructed on an individual as well as a social level, I examined the process by which these particular women came to share some part of the alternative gender roles

advocated by the Dignas. In my selection of interviewees, I strove to represent the range of women who have been affected by the Dignas' work. I selected my sample on the basis of age, area of residence (rural or urban), level of involvement, and socio-economic status. These life histories help to illuminate how these women's involvement with the Dignas has changed how they view gender roles and how these changes have translated into different behaviors. They also show the contexts, crisis, and conflicts which compelled these women to seek out alternative frameworks of meaning that made sense of their experience. Each life history was transcribed while I was in El Salvador. I provided each woman with a copy of what she had told me in order that they could review it and indicate if there were any parts that they did not want to be published. With one of the women who speaks English, I sent her a copy how I used the interview.

What these life histories do not necessarily do is tell "the Truth." The publication of David Stoll's (1999) refutation of Rigoberta Menchú's testimony, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, has unleashed a wave of controversy concerning testimonial literature. This debate is generated by a misunderstanding of the nature of testimonial literature and fueled by the worst elements in anthropology's colonial legacy. Stoll's attempt to disprove the veracity of Menchú's claims suggests that one should expect a life history to be free from "interests" and based upon "objective" facts. Yet anthropologists and students of testimonials, particularly in Latin America, have recognized that "the search for the truth value of testimonials is complex" (Stephen 1994: 229). That complexity emerges in nuanced analyses collective memory like that of

Alessandro Portelli's essay on the death of an Italian steel worker (1991). According to the March 12, 1999 *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the conservative think tank, the Center for the Study of Popular Culture, paid approximately \$5000, to put ads in student newspapers attacking professors who have defended Menchú's autobiography. Such actions clearly illustrates the type of interests involved in discrediting Menchú.

For years before I became involved in the process of writing Maria Teresa Tula's life history (ibid.), I listened to the various versions of that history that she told while traveling around the country trying to generate opposition to U.S foreign policy in her country (much like what I imagine Menchú was doing when she met Burgos-Debray). While all of her renditions were "true," each was directed at maximizing the receptivity of the audience. They would also reflect the nature of her relationship with that audience. When Maria began to tell her story, the Peace Accords were not yet signed and, as Menchú has admitted doing, Tula altered some facts. To do otherwise may have had severe repercussions for people about whom she was speaking.

But to use this to attack the credibility of her story treats it as thing in itself rather than recognizing that a testimonial is, as Ruth Behar points out (quoting Sherry Ortner), "not simply something that happens to people but something that they make" (1990: 225). Behar continues:

Rather than looking at social and cultural systems solely as they impinge on a life, shape it, and turn it into an object, a life history should allow one to see how an actor makes culturally meaningful history, how history is produced in action and in the actor's retrospective reflections on that action. A life history narrative should allow one to see the subjective mapping of experience, the working out of a culture and a social system

that is often obscured in a typified account (ibid.: 225).

Stoll's critique reifies Menchú's account, abstracting it from the context in which she lived when she gave it, and the political struggle she has engaged in before and after its publication. In doing, he works in the tradition of colonial anthropology, where the anthropologist is the expert who uncovers the truth that the native so cleverly hides. Establishing himself as the authority on Menchú's life, Stoll's approach reasserts the subject/object relationship between anthropologist and informant that many cultural anthropologists have rejected as an accoutrement of Eurocentrism.

One might ask why he felt compelled to devote his time and effort to uncovering the lies of Rigoberta Menchú when the truth commission in Guatemala, known as the Historical Clarification Commission, still cannot account for the dead and disappeared of the war. As Stephen writes, testimonials represent the collective voices of "those who have been historically silenced through centuries-long processes of class domination, and racial, ethnic and gender oppression" (1994: 228). One of the effects of Stoll's attack on Menchú may well be the reinforcement of that silence as those of us who would collect new stories hesitate before the threat of having those narratives scrutinized for documentable errors. Stoll claims in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* of January 15, 1999, that "[b]ooks like *I, Rigoberta Menchú* will be exalted because they tell many academics what they want to hear." This assertion ignores the fact that despite the inaccuracies that Menchú has acknowledged, her portrait of "an Indian Women in Guatemala" was a far more accurate picture of the situation in her country at the time

than one could have gotten from either the mainstream media or the State Department.

Thus my own use of life histories comes at a time when the legitimacy of an already critically scrutinized form has been further challenged. My position is that the empirical truth of these stories is only one criterion with which to evaluate what can be learned from them. Whether the facts are “true” or not these narratives provide insight into the mechanisms through which individual actors and social movements develop or counter hegemonic discourses. They show us the categories that people find meaningful to explain their lives, and how they contextualize their experience in their own understandings of history.

Behar (1990) eloquently describes the paradoxes faced by anthropologists who attempt to synthesize the various voices that life histories evoke:

On the one hand, there is the desire and temptation to leave the account wholly in the native voice, in imitation of the literary autobiography that it is not: on the other hand, there is the anthropological imperative to place the account in a theoretical/cultural context, to provide some sort of background, analysis, commentary, or interpretation, so as to mediate between the reality of a life lived and inscribed elsewhere but wedged between the book covers and read here . . . Torn between these voices, the life historian/author usually settles for a segregated, often jarring combination of the three, the native voice, the personal “I was there” voice, and the authoritative voice of the ethnographer. The difficulties inherent in making music out of these three “voices” or “discordant allegorical registers” also pose the key challenge (224).

In translating and editing the life histories that I have intertwined with my observations and analysis, I certainly faced the difficulties outlined above. But, unlike Behar, this was not the most difficult challenge I faced. Rather, identifying those whom I wanted to interview, securing their consent and coordinating the logistics of the meeting or

meetings in which we carried out the interview required far more complex mediations and negotiations. Contrary to what Behar describes, those whose life stories I used were picked by me. My efforts to have my choices reflect the diversity of women involved with the Dignas and the limitations I imposed of recruiting women from particular programs made that process more multifarious. The lack of infrastructures in rural areas also made it difficult to communicate and coordinate with women living in the countryside. However, the most insurmountable obstacles I faced were far more intangible than the lack of telephones or roads. This is evidenced by the fact that the only potential subject whom I did finally give up on lived in the outskirts of San Salvador as did another whose repeated cancellations almost forced me to abandon my attempts to finish the interview.

I collected nine life histories, three of which accompany my discussions of how the work of the Dignas programs has been shaped by the “scattered hegemonies” (Grewal and Kaplan 1994) of transnational feminism, neoliberal policies, and partisan politics in postwar El Salvador. In the next chapter, Mama Tina’s life history is interwoven with the descriptions of one of the Dignas’ earliest program, Reproductive and Sexual Health. The third chapter explores the work of the Association of Mothers Seeking Child Support, the Dignas’ newest initiative. In this chapter I related the history of one of their promoters, Rosa Imelda. This discussion of the Local Development program in the fourth chapter includes the life history of Ofelia, the local promoter and a candidate for political office. Finally, the fifth chapter features a discussion on abortion that, while not a

program of the Dignas, is an issue around which Salvadoran feminists have not been able to translate their theoretical commitment to reproductive rights into effective discourse or practices. While the illegality of abortion prevented me from pursuing a relevant life history, the discussion in this chapter illustrates why changing the state is necessary but insufficient approach to addressing gender inequalities.

A few months before I deposited my dissertation, I returned to El Salvador and set up meetings with, what had now become, the two organizations I worked with, the Dignas and the AMD. I attempted to present my conclusions and engage them in discussion in order to solicit their feedback on my conclusions. But synthesizing over three hundred and fifty pages is a formidable task and while I felt my efforts were appreciated, the women made it clear that they would rather have had the document in Spanish to read. While this is obviously not the case in all fieldwork settings, it seems imperative in situation where the “informants” are literate and where one of the goals of the research is to contribute to the process in which they are involved, that provisions be made for the translation of the final product. My goal is to see that it is translated.

Chapter 2: Reconceiving Reproductive Health

One of the most radical discourses that accompanied the Dignas' adoption of feminism is their assertion of women's right to control their reproduction, and to have and enjoy a sexual life. The Dignas' demand that sexuality be seen as separate from reproduction challenges the biological determinism epitomized by the saying, common in the countryside, "to be a woman is to be a mother." Only twenty years ago the primary reason that women cited for not using birth control was the attitude of their spouse (FESAL-78). But women say that men's objections to their use of contraception do not necessarily come from a desire to have more children. Rather it is men's suspicion that their wives want to use contraceptives to hide the consequences of illicit affairs that requires many women to choose methods of birth control that cannot be detected.

Biological determinism has also influenced how reproductive and sexual issues have been dealt with by anthropologists, demographers and feminists. In this chapter I begin by looking at the shift from biological determinist explanations of women's subordination to those which recognize that human sexuality and reproduction are culturally constructed processes shaped by particular historic and social contexts. I then go on to describe the conditions in which the Dignas are attempting to build a movement to expand these rights through their Reproductive and Sexual Health program (RSH). I start with the life history of Mama Tina, one of the Dignas' founders and a midwife in Nombre de Jesús. Mama Tina's story illustrates not only the history of the Dignas' work in this area, and its impact, but points to the tensions which are created by the

institutionalization of the Dignas, and the demands of the international agencies which are funding their work. Mama Tina embodies these tensions: she was a mother of five children who participated in the guerrilla movement; as a leader in the Dignas she promoted women's health. Her decision to get married at the age of fifty-nine made her wedding a social event through which women in Nombre de Jesús vicariously celebrated their sexuality after childbearing years. As the program in maternal care was replaced by more institutional practices, the importance of her role diminished. These tensions also surface in the discussion of the Midwives House, the primary project of the RSH in Nombre de Jesús.

Finally I describe the Dignas' attempts to empower the midwives and assist them in pressuring the State to recognize and reward their contribution to health care in rural El Salvador. What becomes apparent is that there is a myriad of distinct interests, which do not necessarily correspond, motivating the actions of the midwives, the Dignas and the local and state governments. Evidence suggests that the State's interest in promoting the "traditional" use of midwives may come more from the neoliberal concern with limiting state expenditures than with a commitment to preserving cultural patterns.

The chapter analyzes how the Dignas reconceptualize feminist approaches to the issues of reproductive health within the Salvadoran context. The legacy of the civil war, the disparities between rural and urban women, the state's modernization project, and the need to secure funding from international sources are critical factors which frame this context. But the strategies and goals of the Dignas are also shaped by the local practices

and understandings of the meanings of reproduction and sexuality. Their grassroots supporters, or *base*, respond to, interpret, accept, and challenge the feminist discourse that Dignas bring them. It is in this multilevel negotiation that Salvadoran forms of feminism are emerging.

Anthropologically Conceiving of Reproduction

Anthropologists have always been interested in (if not fascinated by) human reproduction and sexuality. But in the years following World War II, efforts aimed at situating local practices of reproduction and sexuality into a global context were more likely to be those of demographers than anthropologists. Demographers developed methods which enabled them to identify broad patterns of reproductive and family behaviors. In attempting to explain these patterns, particularly the trajectory of how fertility changes, classic demographic transition theorists (Davis 1945; Notestein 1945) classified societies according to whether or not they had gone through a “fertility transition.” This signified the process of moving from a state of high fertility and high mortality to a stage of lower mortality that eventually led to lowered fertility rates and slow or no population growth. According to this schema, societies were ranked in evolutionary categories ranging from “primitive” societies whose “natural fertility regimes” were guided by “traditional” beliefs to “modern” industrialized nations where decisions were based on rational “choices” concerning the economics of reproduction, a state to which they believe all nations would eventually evolve.

Transition theory was largely undermined by the European Fertility Project which discovered that none of the variables which this theory claimed would predict the transition to low fertility correlated with the timing of fertility declines (Coale and Watkins 1986). As a result, demographers began to explore explanations that emphasized cultural diffusion and value change. Some pointed to the influence of the idea that birth control is acceptable (Knodel and van de Walle 1979). Others explained the cause of fertility declines through wealth-flow theory which looked at the transfer of goods between generations to explain changes in family organization (Caldwell 1976). Institutional approaches examined how different combinations of institutional structures impede or facilitate a transition to lower fertility (McNicholl 1975). But demographers' increasing use of "cultural" explanations of fertility behavior has been strongly criticized as "mired in structural-functionalist concepts that are about 40 years old, hardening rapidly, and showing every sign of fossilization" (Hammel 1990: 456).

As the incorporation of anthropological approaches to demography became increasingly popular, anthropological interest in reproduction and sexuality was resurfacing. Within the subfield of the anthropology of women, the relationships between women's reproductive capacity and women's status were central questions (Quinn 1977). Some saw women's ability to bear children as key to their gender subordination (Rosaldo 1974; Ortner 1974). Cross-cultural and historic evidence challenged the Cartesian dichotomies on which these formulations were based (Leacock and Nash 1977). While the claim that gender hierarchies were universal because women were

associated with the domestic sphere rather than the public domain was ultimately rejected by its original proponent (Rosaldo 1980), its "reproductive determinism" (Mukopadhyay 1988) which attributes women's subordination to a fixed role in childbirth and childrearing often resurfaces (See also chapters 3 and 4).

The view that women's entry into the productive sphere would decrease their subordination (Benería 1979; Edholm et al. 1977) has also been challenged as ethnocentric (Yanagisako and Collier 1987). Outside of areas where capitalist relations predominate, the distinctions between what is reproductive and what is productive may be much more difficult to identify (Babb 1985). In addition, the experience of women who have joined the waged productive sphere suggests that this process not only does not increase their status but that because the responsibility for reproduction remains theirs, they are left with a much heavier burden. Despite these criticisms, the insight this theoretical approach offers into the often overlooked importance of reproduction for production is considerable. The goal of discovering a "master narrative" that would identify reproduction as the source of women's subordinate status was gradually replaced by approaches which moved beyond biological, economic or demographic determinism. They recognized that reproductive and sexual practices are social patterns, shaped by the dynamics of class, race, ethnicity, sex, religious background, reproductive history, family, community, state, as well as by global forces and individual actors (Ginsburg and Rapp 1991, 1995; Greenhalgh 1995; Ross and Rapp 1983; Vance 1991).

Davis and Whitten (1987) characterize anthropology's approach to sexuality as a

“love-hate relationship” (69), noting the correspondence between Western views on sexuality and the concurrent anthropological concerns. The forefathers of anthropology identified particular sexual behaviors as markers that could be used to evaluate the degree to which a culture had evolved (Bachofen 1861, Morgan 1877). Later ethnographers challenged these claims and the evidence that was used to support it (Malinowski 1927, Westmarck 1891). Davis and Whitten also point to a “long standing tradition of anthropological pornography” where the sexual practices of non-Western cultures have been documented to “titillate” Western audiences (1987: 70).

The first anthropology textbook specifically dealing exclusively with human females cross-culturally, *Females of the Species* (Martin and Voorhies 1975), discussed sexuality only as it is related to reproduction (Jacobs and Roberts 1989). But Gayle Rubin's classic essay (1975) calling for a political economy of sex/gender systems opened new avenues of inquiry into the status of women and meaning of reproduction. With the publication of Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1978), the recognition of the historic and cultural construction of desire gained wide acceptance and deeply influenced scholarship on sexuality. Evidence that sexuality is historically constructed and that availability and selection of sex partners are shaped by social, economic and political forces also challenged the biological assumptions about reproduction. In subsequent years, the anthropology of women was transformed into feminist anthropology. The recognition that gender roles impact men as well as women have led some academic programs to redefine themselves as gender studies, including classes on the construction

of masculinity, though some worry that such a move depoliticizes the subject by demphasizing women's oppression. The field of queer studies has also expanded the terrain through which gender is explored by examining the meanings and practices non-reproductive sexualities.

While anthropology's approach to reproduction has not always been so broad, the cross-culture data from ethnographies of local reproductive and sexual practices (as well as the work of social historians and demographers), challenges any assertion that a "natural fertility" exists (MacCormack 1994). The "biological facts of reproduction" (Collier 1987:15) were called into question by the empirical evidence generated by anthropological studies incorporating a gendered perspective (Moore 1988). The range of ways that reproduction has been organized cross-culturally and through history has demonstrated that it is constructed socially and that women's status cannot be adequately explained by their biological ability to reproduce (Bledsoe 1990; Ginsburg and Rapp 1991, 1995).

Biology does not determine how reproduction and sexuality are practiced but neither does tradition. As Ginsberg and Rapp point out, while "reproduction, in its biological and social senses, is inextricably bound up with the production of culture" (1995: 2), the essays in their collection vividly demonstrate, traditional practices are transformed with changing circumstances. Both biology and tradition represent constraints upon the agency of human actors within a particular set of social relations, but these relationships themselves are forms of social organization that must be socially

constructed. This is a process which will be viewed in this dissertation as one which is inherently political in that “relations of power within society both shape reproductive practices and in turn are shaped by them” (Greenhalgh 1995: 15).

This chapter attempts to theorize reproduction using the framework of political economic anthropology, demography, social constructionism and feminist theory advocated by Susan Greenhalgh (1995). In addition it shares the goal of seeing “what happens when reproduction--in both its biological and its social interpretations--is placed at the center of social theory” as Ginsberg and Rapp advocate (1995:1). These theorists have pointed to two dynamics that I will explore in relation to the work of the Dignas. The first is to describe the historic conjunction of local, national, and global processes that shape the fields of power in which the Dignas are struggling. Their goal is to both to provide women with a new discourse on sexuality and reproduction and to establish the legitimacy of that discourse by organizing to force the state to recognize and protect their reproductive rights. I will explore how the Reproductive and Sexual Health Program links the needs of *campesinas* to what has been called “the newest kid on the block in international debates about the meanings and practices of human rights, especially women’s human rights,” (Petchesky forthcoming) i.e. sexual rights. The Dignas’ efforts to develop a new consensus within civil society about women’s right to know and control their reproductive and sexual rights, as well as other issues deeply affected by gender relations such as work, family, and politics, illustrate the advantages and limitations of international feminist discourses in local feminists’ struggles to reshape the gender

politics of national states. The experience of the organization also demonstrates how the nature of the requirements of the international funders that support groups like the Dignas can be an obstacle undermining the empowerment of the women who serve as their base.

The second dynamic which I will foreground is the dialectic between human agency and culture. Greenhalgh (1995) acknowledges a tension between these two poles in analyzing reproductive behaviors from a political economy perspective. Rather than resorting to a “rational utility maximizing approach,” she points to the Schneiders’ article (1995) in her collection to illustrate how both agency and culture can be incorporated into an explanation. In analyzing Sicilian peasants’ reproductive behavior, they show how “rational” choices were limited by relations of power. Rapp (1995) also points to concepts emerging in social theory that challenge the understandings of the relations between oppositional agency and dominant cultures.

In order to take into account the complexity that is created when resistance is circumscribed by “hegemonic impositions,” she suggests Mullings’ concept of transformational work/transformational struggles. Mullings points to the various historic circumstances that have constrained the ability of African American men and women to control the conditions in which they have borne children: slavery, segregation, and deindustrialization. Recognizing that political conditions favoring collective movements often did not, and still may not, exist in these circumstances, she describes the alternative strategies that African American women have pursued. These include creating women-

centered networks which link households in “efforts that have spanned the domains of work, household, and community” (1995: 133). Mullings outlines how women have historically utilized these kinds of networks to maintain continuity and support survival, and notes that presently in Harlem, “these networks continue, often supported by community-based organizations” (ibid.: 134). Mullings’ theoretical approach can be used to analyze the struggles of poor women in Latin America while avoiding the dichotomous thinking that classifies such activities into those which are motivated by practical interests versus those which are generated by strategic interests (see Chapter 3).

The transformational struggles of the Dignas are evident on many levels: individual, regional, national and transnational. In this chapter I will use a part of Mama Tina’s story to suggest how the Dignas’ promotion of a new discourse on reproductive and sexual health plays out on an individual and a local level. Mama Tina was one of the founders of the Dignas, she is a midwife, and plays a key role in the Reproductive and Sexual Health program in Nombre de Jesús. But as the enduring qualities of kinship structures suggest, reproductive and sexual innovation does not come easily.

I will then discuss the work of the Reproductive and Sexual Health program in Nombre de Jesús as part of my broader discussion of the nature of the Dignas’ interpretation of feminism within the Salvadoran context. Finally, I will look at how the intersections between transnational, national, and local forces are resulting in the increased marginalization of women like Mama Tina.

Mama Tina's Getting Married?!

After she told me that she was getting married, I had to ask someone else to make sure I understood her correctly. In El Salvador, or the United States for that matter, Mama Tina was an extremely unlikely candidate for matrimony. She was said to be somewhere between 62 and 72 years old²¹ and it is extremely rare that rural women of her age marry, much less formally. In a country where the source of most social support is kin-based, she was also an “orphan,” as she called herself before she married; her parents were dead and the last of her five children was killed in the war. But most importantly, she was a Digna and the attitudes promoted by the Dignas were supposed to undermine the relations between men and women, not encourage women to engage in them under extraordinary circumstances.

Neither her lack of “family,” the fact that she was not a native of the town, nor her modest circumstances stopped Mama Tina from being one of the most prominent women in Nombre de Jesús, Chalatenango. Her work as a midwife had been instrumental in the Dignas' project to establish the *Casa de las Parteras*, the Midwives' House, in Nombre de Jesús. Since at least 1992, when I first met Mama Tina, the Dignas had been organizing the midwives in this *municipio*, or county. Mama Tina's dream was that the midwives would open a center in the town where they could assist women giving birth

²¹ Initially it wasn't clear to me whether the uncertainty was because she did not know or would not tell. When I asked her directly she told me that, based on her memory of historic events, she actually could not be more than fifty-nine. But a false i.d. she had gotten during the war had provided her with some additional years, and she added that back then, the older the soldiers who staffed the check points believed you were, the fewer problems you were likely to have.

under improved conditions and where the midwives would receive better compensation for their work. But her work did not stop with the midwives. Mama Tina is also part of the Dignas' *Coordinación de Mujeres* (see chapter 5), a committee that developed a women's political platform, lobbied the mayoral candidates to address women's issues, and began working with the newly elected FMLN mayor to implement their demands. Nor are her activities limited to the Dignas. Mama Tina is a catechist for the Catholic Church and an active member of a group that promotes environmentally sustainable development projects and education in Chalatenango.

Mama Tina is originally from Santa Marta, Cabañas, a community not far from Nombre de Jesús but separated by the jagged mountains and steep ravines that make traveling through northern El Salvador a challenge. This rugged terrain also made it difficult for the Salvadoran army to maneuver against the forces of the FMLN when they retreated to the countryside after the first unsuccessful offensive of 1981 (Vásquez, et al. 1996: 40). In the ensuing decade, communities like Santa Marta and the villages outside Nombre de Jesús were placed more directly in the middle of the conflict. The FMLN needed the support of the local residents to maintain their guerrilla armies; material support in terms of supplies, logistics, and recruits as well as support for the ideals which justified their struggle. They found many willing recruits, like Mama Tina's son who was recruited (*se organizó*), when he went to work as a day laborer on a nearby farm in the late 1970s. But the local elites and the army made it costly for anyone to support the FMLN. They often used peasants from the very same communities as "civil defense

groups”²² to combat the threat that the FMLN represented. Before Mama Tina had joined up herself, she already suffered severe consequences:

I lived this war because my three sons died. The three of them were killed by the civil defense. I enjoyed them while I had them. The first was 18, no, 19, the other died at 17, and the oldest was around 19 or 20. I had worked with them and raised them, taught them to work on a little cornfield that a *compadre* had given me to teach them on and they, well, they were raised as well as if they had been raised with a father. My sons were well educated. I put them in school where they learned. But after this war broke out, I was left an orphan, totally orphaned.²³

By the early 1980s the army made it clear to the residents of areas suspecting of supporting the guerrillas that the only options were to leave or be massacred²⁴. During the military operations carried out by the Salvadoran security forces, Mama Tina, like others in Santa Marta, fled over the Honduran border in the early eighties and was eventually settled into the Mesa Grande refugee camp. Women predominated in the camps, a situation that enabled many of them to develop leadership skills (Beard 1997, Cagan and

²² These were originally organized by the National Guard in 1966 (Baloya 1982: 64) as official paramilitary groups known as ORDEN (*Organización Democrática Nacionalista*) but were later banned. However, they continued to operate as death squads.

²³ All quotes are from interviews which took place in June 1997 at Mama Tina’s house in Nombre de Jesús. Unfortunately, the crowing of several of her roosters obscured some of her comments on the tape. In several places words could not be made out and are indicated by (. . .).

²⁴ Even in Nombre de Jesús, however, some people remained uncommitted to either side. Mama Tina’s husband, according to her, “didn’t know . He knew there were conflictive places around here, because it was a conflictive zone. But he didn’t really know anything and in 94, he voted for ARENA. He put a vote in for ARENA. He said that he didn’t want to vote but as he didn’t know anything . . .” This shows that even in heavily conflictive zones, it was possible to stay uninvolved.

Cagan 1991) that subsequently contributed to the women's movement. Mama Tina was recruited from the camps by the FMLN to work first in Honduras as a housekeeper for the family of a doctor who treated the guerrilla army's wounded.²⁵ She went back to El Salvador in 1986 with the first group to repatriate from Mesa Grande, "the reception committee." As the movement for repatriation brought increasing numbers of refugees back into northern El Salvador Mama Tina assumed a new role; "a *comandante* . . . worked things out with the priest, . . . so I worked with him, running around in all this, under the bombings, and under the bullets." Back and forth across the front lines, she carried her spiritual counsel to the repatriated communities while generating support for the FMLN, "so that the people would not be afraid of them, so that they would know that they were fighting for a real peace, and so that the people would have at least something to eat." She never picked up a gun, she insisted. Her tool was her Bible, "I worked with the people to build trust . . . looking in the Bible for what the people of Israel suffered. This was the pastoral work that I did."

Mama Tina resettled in Nombre de Jesús, where she began to practice midwifery "out of necessity."

I had already attended some births but when I came here it was in height of the war and they [the FMLN] brought women from Arcatao, where there were barracks where they ended up being pregnant. So without earning a dime, it was for the cause. They came to me . . . because there was no one to assist them, the poor things, . . . so when they saw that I could attend births . . .

²⁵ In 1992 recruited again but this time by *Medicos Sin Fronteras* and the United Nations Committee on Refugees to go to Costa Rica to care for some FMLN combatants, including a nephew, while they were recuperating.

It also became part of her revolutionary work. It was contributions, such as this from women like Mama Tina, that led the authors of the book, *Mujeres-Montañas* (Women-Mountains), to argue that “women and traditional feminine qualities were the ‘mountains’ of the [Salvadoran civil] war” (Vásquez, et al. 1996: 78). The lack of the type of mountains in El Salvador that would support a Guevarist guerrilla strategy and the country’s dense population forced the FMLN to rely upon the civilian population to maintain themselves if they were to move their project forward. Without mountains to which they could retreat, the guerrilla forces relied upon their civilian supporters, who were primarily female, for their basic needs. For many *guerrilleras* who became pregnant in Chalatenango, this meant relying on Mama Tina to deliver their children and help them recover.²⁶ Gradually, as Mama Tina’s reputation as a midwife grew, she began to attend births for the wider community as well.

Mama Tina was one of “a small group of women” from the National Resistance (RN) who formed the Dignas in 1990. She recalled going to the first meeting at FENASTRAS,²⁷ National Union Federation of Salvadoran Workers (*Federación Nacional Sindical de Trabajadores Salvadoreños*) in San Salvador and “having the support” of a North American. The women were gathered from the RN combatants and

²⁶ For an outstanding discussion of the impact of the war on the attitudes and practices of sexuality and motherhood of women who became involved in the FMLN see Vásquez, et al. 1996.

²⁷ The FENASTRAS building was bombed by a death squad in 1989 killing several people, including the country’s most important female labor leader, Febe Velásquez. A Norwegian labor federation gave them the funds to reconstruct the building so that was virtually bomb-proof and it became a common meeting place for many organizations.

urban commandos, collaborators from various communities which supported the RN, from the unions in FENASTRAS, and the CoMadres. They began meeting “to look at all this question of us, the women, that we didn’t value what we had to say, that we ourselves had to express what we could not say. We were afraid of men and this little group helped us deal with that. We got support.”

Mama Tina became one of the primary conduits through whom new ideas about women’s roles were transmitted to Nombre de Jesús. While women in San Salvador with more education, skills, and access to this discourse adapted feminist theory from South America, Europe, and North America to the Salvadoran reality, women like Mama Tina were key to finding and implementing the mechanisms which made it possible to disseminate this new perspective on gender. The introduction of unconventional topics for discussion, particularly the workshops on sexuality, shattered taboos and challenged established social relations. Feminist discourse provided women with justifications for demanding more egalitarian behaviors from their partners, and encouraged them to assume active roles within their communities. The Dignas were naively surprised at the response that they got:

We had problems when we formed the women’s directive because they said that we wanted to get the women to leave their men, their husbands. That was the problem we had and so we told them that it wasn’t true. But the men didn’t want to let the women come [to the meetings or workshops of the Dignas] because, you know, they said these Dignas women are tearing couples apart. This was the problem we faced. All this is true, but today after all that, it all has ended because today it’s recognized that all of this was a lie, and not only that but that all women have a right to decide for ourselves and that we have the right that they respect us too and all that. We have the right to leave because there are men that said that the

woman should be in the house. I talked to them about how women aren't slaves. So when we knew this truth, we began to have these courses and workshops . . . When we received [the workshops on] sexuality some of the folks talked with a lot of fear and embarrassment (*gran pena*) (. . .) and we did a demonstration there [of how to do a self exam with a speculum], but all the women covered their faces. It was understandable because it was the first time (. . .) for this, to know their bodies, and doing this made them afraid.

The relationships and skills that she had developed during the war provided Mama Tina with the expertise to confront the problems that the Dignas faced in introducing feminist ideas and practices to Nombre de Jesús. As a result, she played a critical role in establishing Nombre de Jesús as one of the half dozen communities from which the Dignas drew their support from their founding.

Her work as a midwife and with the church, her role in the war, and her participation in the Dignas had made Mama Tina an institution in Nombre de Jesús, and beyond (see Appendix A). As a result, her wedding was the social event of the year, maybe the decade, and, perhaps, the century, in the town. The wedding was set for November 30th and the day before, the *Coordinación de Mujeres de Nombre de Jesús* held a meeting (*intercambio*) with the mayoral candidates from the FMLN and the ARENA party. Over a hundred women walked as many as four hours from their villages to witness the presentation of the women's platform to the two men and to listen to their reactions (See chapter 5). Like Marta Bernabe de Cracamo, a member of the Local Development *equipo* with whom I had come from San Salvador, many of these women stayed for the wedding.

The next day Marta and I futilely attempted to assist in the wedding preparations

at the house of Mama Tina's maid of honor (*madrina*). While Mama Tina rounded up chickens in the courtyard (*patio*) and adroitly broke their necks with a twist of her wrists, Marta and I chatted casually about the Dignas' work with a man who I later learned was the parish priest. As the afternoon progressed, several truckloads of Dignas arrived for the wedding. By the time the wedding began, the church was packed with the aisles filled with people crowding to see. The priest began the mass with an exhortation that those who had come out of curiosity to behave themselves or he would point them out like little children. Mama Tina looked lovely though nervous in a white dress that Morena Herrera, of the Dignas' *coordinadora*, had given her. Morena had also convinced a videographer from the Jesuit University of Central America, who is documenting the Dignas' work, to film the wedding. Besides a nun who lived on and off in the community, I was the only North American or European, but there were many women from San Salvador as well as guests from over the nearby border of Honduras.

The priest gave a homily that could have been a paid commercial for the Dignas. He praised their work and chastised the men for their *machismo*. Women are doubly oppressed, he pointed out. They are oppressed by the economic system and by the men in their lives. He recalled a recent conversation with a woman who told him that she felt as if her husband had stopped believing she had the capacity to feel anything. How horrible it is that someone could believe that their spouse no longer had the capacity to feel, he exclaimed. He talked about wife abuse, about rape, and about the sexual abuse of young girls, incest. Recalling his own childhood and his father's mistreatment of his mother, he

told the congregation that he knew firsthand how they lived. He insisted that men had to stop and, in the context of this wedding of a woman who was active in the struggle for women's rights, he called on them to do so. It was not just that the Dignas were there, he told them. He was not saying all this to impress them or because he had something to gain from them. But he knew what was going on in the pueblo and it had to change. In celebrating the marriage of Mama Tina before approximately five hundred of the residents of Nombre de Jesús, the parish priest, one of the most important figures in the community, publicly validated the Dignas' work in reconstructing gender relations and empowering women in the community. The congregation, made up of women and men of all ages, listened intently. About a quarter of the attendees were men but many more young males were gathered together in the plaza outside the church.

After the ceremony drew to a close, Mama Tina steered her new husband through the crowd of well-wishers out of the church and across the plaza to the newly renovated *Casa de las Parteras* where a sound system had been set up and food would be served. But as the celebration progressed and the number of women in attendance steadily declined, it seemed that the priest's message had fallen on deaf ears. Soon it was men who dominated the street outside the Dignas and the only women dancing were the Dignas who had come from San Salvador, and Mama Tina. She sent her new husband home at around 10 (even though he is younger than she, he is very shy and was quite uncomfortable being the center of attention) and stayed dancing with the other Dignas, teenage boys, and persistent men. With the exception of Mama Tina, only one woman

from Nombre de Jesús danced at all the entire evening. But the Dignas from San Salvador danced freely, even the provocative *Lambada*, with each other and with men from the town.

Dancing in public to rock and roll music may not seem to be a particularly transgressive act. But the fact that the local women hung back in the crowd that ringed the space where people were dancing watching intently suggests that such behavior was seen as something that they could not or should not do. While not all men were dancing either, I was asked to dance several times by local men whose insistence that I accept abated only when I resorted to the pretense that I was accompanied by the husband of one of the Dignas. What surprised me was how little the Dignas seemed to be restrained by local practices; they danced despite the fact that so few of the local women did. But I was also surprised by how little the Dignas' transgressions seemed to undermine the attitude that dancing was a sexual provocation; while they danced freely, the women of Nombre de Jesús were still restrained by social expectations and the men pursued dance partners with an attitude of conquest.

When we talked the night before, I had asked Martita if she thought Mama Tina's getting married was a result of her involvement with the Dignas. She responded that she was sure that it was. An older woman like Mama Tina would never remarry if she had not been influenced by feminism, she asserted. But for Mama Tina it was not simply a result of being liberated. First of all, she confessed, she had never been married before, although she knew that most people believed she was a widow. She herself had not

thought that she would ever marry but in the years after the war ended, she had begun to feel some concern about what would happen to her and to feel a little lonely.

I had told Marina Yolanda who I worked with a lot at the church, when I die maybe somebody around here will be charitable and throw my remains in the Lempa River. "How can you think such a thing Niña Tina!" she said to me. "I will take care of you!" So I thought, good, they know what I want. So I thought with this man, alright, he's honest and a worker. It's good that he wants to marry me so I won't be alone with these aches and pains, far away. I started thinking about it like that and began to consider him and it is like a blessing from God how he says the same thing that I say and I say the same as him.

Mama Tina's self-identification as an orphan represented her recognition that despite her prominent position in the social and political life of Nombre de Jesús, the primary social support in rural El Salvador for those who were physically challenged by age is through kinship relations. During the war, there was a general sense that after the triumph, participants would be taken care of. In the five years since the war ended, that faith was replaced by a growing recognition that the immediate gains achieved by the FMLN would benefit a limited few, those who were in positions of power and those connected to them. Mama Tina's participation with the Dignas was probably part of an unconscious survival strategy. When it became clear that the strategy was failing, marriage may have become a more appealing option.

Mama Tina knew her husband, Chayito, for some time before they decided to marry. He was a neighbor who had often helped her with repairs to the house. He also had never been married, nor had he even had a steady relationship (*ni acompañado*), so he had no children. His family, with whom he lived, included an invalid father, a couple

of sisters one of whom was also invalid, and a brother who took advantage of Chayito's character as a worker, according to Mama Tina. When he proposed, Mama Tina told me, "I asked myself, 'Why not? I'm getting old and have no family. He's a nice man, has no vices, and is a good worker.'" She made sure he accepted the fact that she was an activist who needed to go to San Salvador regularly and that they would be sharing the cooking and the washing.

In the weeks leading up to the church wedding, Mama Tina also made certain that we all knew that, despite the fact that they had already had a civil marriage and were living together, there would be no consummation of the relationship until she had a church wedding. Chayito accepted that too, she assured us. Mama Tina's insistence on not just a civil, but a religious wedding ceremony, before having sexual relations with her *novio* contrasts dramatically with her earlier conjugal relations. She had never been married to any of the fathers of the five children she had born (two had died in childhood before the war). Her statements about this assertion of control over her sexuality were quite open but devoid of conceit. They reflected an awareness of her right, as women within a heterosexual relationship, to self-determination, sexual and otherwise.

Many people have said to me that since I'm with him why didn't I just get married and live with him. No, I said to them. In spite of how much he cares for me, I don't want it and it is my body. No, I told him. And I still go to El Salvador, leaving him all by himself here. I go for the whole damn (*la chingada*) four days and God help me, he is happy with me.

She attributed this not just to changes in her own consciousness but to Chayito's character as well as changes in the community. Things had changed, she told me, "not

like before when [men] grabbed you like some object that they saw. We do have some good men and some that are also going to the university, they are seeing the possible questions of gender.”

That a woman of her age from a *campesino* background would openly discuss sexual relations and the negotiations between fiances (*novios*) reflects the impact of the Dignas. *Campesinas* are generally extremely shy about their bodies and hesitant to talk about sexuality. While bathing publicly in available sources of water like rivers or communal faucets is a necessity, women maintain their modesty by bathing fully dressed or in their slips and bras. The Dignas workshops on sexuality were the object of complaints about the Dignas’ approach. One promoter told me that women in her community did not agree with the perspective promoted in the workshop. When I asked her what they objected to specifically, she indicated that the Dignas’ attitude that women should initiate sexual relations was not acceptable to community women. When the workshop leaders had told the women that they should tell their husbands “to take off their clothes,” the women felt that they were wrong. They felt it was “the men who should decide,” she told me. Mama Tina, on the other hand, appeared to have adopted the Dignas’ approach, in public if not in private.

The level of support Mama Tina received from the community indicated that she was correct in her assessment that attitudes and behaviors were changing. Her peers were jubilant. “If Mama Tina can do it, so can I!” was the response of one midwife when she learned about the wedding. The crowds of people who filled the church and the plaza

outside had come to witness the ceremony with a mixture of affection and curiosity. That her best man (*padrino*) was the FMLN candidate for mayor (who eventually won the election) demonstrated that despite her transgressions of the norms, or perhaps because of them, her marriage had been sanctioned by at least some of the most powerful civil authorities in the town.

The priest's inversion of the marriage ceremony indicated that despite differences between the Dignas on issues like abortion (see chapter 4), he recognized the positive impact of their work. Rather than calling on the wife to obey her husband, he called on the community to address the issues that the Dignas have raised: to end to the psychological and physical abuse of women by men, for men to accept responsibility for their actions and their children, and for a new definition of what it means to be male and female. But his inversion was superseded by the obvious inversions in Mama Tina's relationship: besides the fact that her husband was younger than she, that she was publicly discussing their sexual relationship, and that she was the focus of the wedding, Mama Tina was also clearly directing the event and Chayito's participation in it. Much of this can be attributed to their individual personalities, but her role in the Dignas and the Dignas' overwhelming support for her marriage made Mama Tina's wedding symbolic of the new kind of relations possible with the gender roles advocated by the Dignas.

However the Dignas' success in promoting women's rights in Nombre de Jesús may not have been the only way that the organization contributed to Mama Tina's decision to marry. After working for several years to organize the women that the Dignas

had considered their base of support, Mama Tina was laid off by the Dignas as a paid member of the organization. As a result, she was forced by them to move out of the house which she had considered her own. Her work organizing the midwives, the decision to lay her off, and the history of the building which has come to be the *Casa de las Parteras* reflect how the Dignas' work must respond to a myriad of conflicting necessities; it is not just the demands of women like Mama Tina that shape their struggle but the national and international context in which a Salvador feminist organization must survive.

La Casa de las Parteras

No one in the Dignas could pinpoint exactly when they began to consider the idea of creating a midwives' house in Nombre de Jesús. While the earliest reference I found to the Dignas working with midwives appears their March-April 1993 newsletter, I recall chatting with Mama Tina in 1992 during the celebration of the Dignas' second anniversary about her dream of converting the building into a Midwives' house. There was also some question about who originally bought the building that came to be the *Casa*. Mama Tina claimed that it was the party, the RN, and that her name and the name of another woman who was a party member were on the deed. This was contradicted by Morena. According to her, the Dignas made the down payment on the house before they had separated from the party with money donated by a North American group. When the Dignas began to assert their autonomy from the party, the building was one resource that

was a source of contention. The party tried to claim the building as its own. But, according to Morena, because the women whose names were on the deed (or believed to be on it) supported the Dignas, they gained possession of it.

Mama Tina had worked with the Dignas since they began to meet in 1990. After the Peace Accords were signed, the Dignas could organize women more openly in Nombre de Jesús and other communities. At this stage of the organization, Mama Tina's contacts in the community and knowledge about how to draw in women from the outlying villages was an invaluable asset. However, she expressed some ambivalence about how they regarded her work, even then:

. . . so the salary the Dignas gave me really helped me a lot. Despite the fact that I was the one who earned the least of all the women and I was the one, they say, who worked the most . . . It's true. Everyone here knows it. It's not just that I say it but every single person in this county knows it because they ask me why they give me so little support when I am the one who works the most. They didn't go out to the communities because if they didn't go in one of the institution's cars, those that are here didn't go out.

But as the organization developed and the conditions in which they were organizing changed, the kinds of skills that were required, and what women like Mama Tina could offer the organization were no longer sufficient to respond to the demands being made of them.

The salary that Mama Tina received from the Dignas enabled her to buy a small house in Nombre de Jesús. She expressed tremendous gratitude to me for the opportunity that the Dignas had given her to be paid for her work but was visibly devastated by their decision to fire her. This very strong and courageous woman had not cried once as she

told me her life history and what she had endured during the war but tears streamed down her face as she talked about her inability to understand why the Dignas had let her go. When I asked if I could talk to the Dignas about why they had done it, she suggested that I talk to Gloria Guzmán, the coordinator of the Education *equipo* and the former coordinator of the rural projects.

I approached Gloria and asked her if we could set up a time to discuss the topic as well as another issue. It took several weeks of postponed and rearranged meetings before we managed to talk.²⁸ It was an uncomfortable conversation. I felt awkward prying into what seemed like dirty family history. Gloria characterized the situation in Nombre de Jesús as one which lacked local leadership. There has been constant in-fighting and in many ways the women attempted to invalidate each others work (*anular el trabajo con otras*), she told me. The house and controlling it have been the symbol of power within the local committee, a struggle in which Mama Tina had been at the center. She had lived in the house and considered it her own. Once it was decided to develop the *Casa de las Parteras*, getting her out was a difficult and painful ordeal.

Both Gloria and Morena were adamant that Mama Tina did not have a right to the house; it belonged to the Dignas. Gloria also noted that Mama Tina had ended up with several other pieces of property at the end of the war. Yet the process by which the decision about her role in the house was determined was taken out of Mama Tina's

²⁸ While this was not exceptional as I let it be known that I did not want meetings with me to interfere with anyone getting their work done, scheduling this meeting seemed unusually difficult.

hands. One could understand why Mama Tina would seek security in marriage after she was thrown out of what she considered her house and fired from the organization that she helped to found and build.

Midwifery: An Intersection between Cultural Tradition and Neoliberalism

The proposal that eventually funded the *Casa de las Parteras* was written by Norma Vázquez, the Mexican feminist who had begun working with the Dignas in 1992. Funding for renovations to the house had been obtained from Spanish and Australian donors and the improvements were being completed when I arrived in 1996. The Reproductive and Sexual Health Program (RSH) was striving to achieve three distinct goals through the *Casa de las Parteras*: to get midwives paid for their work, to improve women's health care in and around Nombre de Jesús, and to put into practice a model of health care so compelling that the state would be forced to assume the social and financial costs of maintaining it. These goals reflect the emerging strategy of the Dignas which was increasingly oriented toward improving women's rights by reshaping the Salvadoran State, the Ministry of Health in this case, so that it better responded to women's needs. That strategy, in turn, reflected not only the tensions and strengths of the Dignas' organizing in Nombre de Jesús, but the contradictions in the international discourse of women's reproductive and sexual rights as human rights (Copelon and Petchesky 1990; Petchesky forthcoming).

The Dignas' strategy depended upon the sixteen midwives, including Mama Tina,

who worked with them. Marielos Romualdo, a former medical student and feminist activist, had been hired to coordinate the RSH *equipo* a year prior to my arrival. She had implemented regular meetings with the midwives scheduled to take place on the 14th of every month. They intended the fixed date, she told me, to overcome a simple problem that obstructed previous organizing efforts. Many of the midwives forgot meeting dates if not reminded (she attributed this to the fact that many of them were “older”). Since they lived scattered in the mountain hamlets that surround Nombre de Jesús, some of which required more than four hours to reach by foot (the only means to get there) and had no telephone service, the effort of contacting each of them could occupy a *promotora* (a grassroots organizer, outreach worker, or peer counselor) full-time. The fixed date had eliminated that need, and perhaps, compensated for the loss of Mama Tina’s labor and willingness to travel to the communities.

Nombre de Jesús is both a county (*municipio*) of the mountainous state (*departamento*) of Chalatenango which borders on Honduras, and the town that is the county seat. A census in 1996 counted 9,870 inhabitants, divided among those who live in the town and those who are scattered among the 21 hamlets that are in its jurisdiction. The town is at the end of a dirt road that travels 48 kilometers from the commercial center of Ilobasco. A paved road begins just before the town limit. It loops around the plaza and behind the church, extends a block in each direction, and then the roads again turn into dirt. The town has three general stores, a post office, a telephone office (there are no private phones), the police station (installed as a result of the Peace Accords), an

elementary school, a high school (just started in 1996), bus service to Ilobasco, a justice of the peace, and a health clinic. In addition to the Dignas, five other non-governmental organizations have offices in Nombre de Jesús.

The primary economic activity in the county is agriculture; farmers produce basic crops like corn, rice, beans, and sesame seeds. There is some animal husbandry. Schools go up to only fourth grade in most of the smaller communities so that more advanced students must come into Nombre de Jesús if they want to continue. The typical housing is made with mud brick and tile roofs. While the main square is paved, all of the roads within a couple of blocks of the center of town are dirt. Few houses outside the town have electricity and even fewer have running water. The health clinic just offers basic treatment: it is designated as being at the third level of care (*la tercera nivel*), the most basic, by the Ministry of Health but it is the only medical care available in Nombre de Jesús. There are no private doctors. The clinic does not attend births; women must travel to the hospital in Ilobasco if they want a doctor to deliver their baby. However, according to a variety of sources (the director of the clinic, the mayor, the midwives, and the Dignas), women in Nombre de Jesús prefer to give birth with a midwife.

There were several reasons offered to explain why they prefer midwives to going to the hospital. The midwives will deliver babies in the mothers' homes so they do not have to leave their other children or find someone to care for them. The women do not want to be treated by a male because they find it embarrassing and/or their husbands object. They worry about getting a caesarian if they go to the hospital. Many have no

means to pay, and unlike the hospital, midwives will accept in-kind payments or will not charge at all.

Only one of the midwives who worked with the Dignas started her career with formal training. At thirty-seven, Esperanza was the youngest of the group. The rest were “*parteras empíricas*” (Velásquez 1996), women who began delivering babies with no formal training, as Mama Tina told me, “out of necessity” (*por necesidad*). All but three of the midwives in the Dignas have gone through the training provided by the State to become accredited (*titulada*), a status which, until the present, has meant little. But whether they are trained or not, the midwives are required to report to the health clinic on the number of births they have attended at the end of each month.

Velásquez points to the dichotomy inherent in the Salvadoran health system of which the midwives form a part (ibid.: 20). The Salvadoran Institute of Social Security, the public/private health agency, provides care to state and industrial workers. But such benefits are not available to those in the informal sectors nor to *campesinos* and *campesinas*. The name of the state agency responsible for health in El Salvador, the Ministry of Public Health and Social Assistance (*Ministerio de Salud Pública y Asistencia Social* or MSPAS) highlights a difference in primary orientation from the comparable institution in the United States. MSPAS’ main activity is the provision of basic health care for the majority of Salvadorans who do not have access to private care. MSPAS services and facilities vary in quality and are concentrated in San Salvador. In hospitals and health centers, particularly in rural areas, the directors’ positions may be

filled by political appointees whose qualifications have more to do with what party they belong to than their skills or commitment to providing health care. Clinics, like the one in Nombre de Jesús, are usually *directed* by medical students from the National University who are in their first year of practical experience. Often hours away from more experienced doctors and basic equipment, these young interns learn to practice medicine on the job with virtually no supervision.

In addition to the medical facilities, the MSPAS trains and employs health promoters as do many NGOs. The MSPAS promoters go through an initial training program and then represent the MSPAS in the communities. They provide basic health care and first aid treatment, promote health campaigns around issues like cholera or vaccinations, and monitor health in the communities. They must participate in monthly workshops on various public health topics and, like the midwives, they are required by the MSPAS to report to the local health facility monthly. Unlike the midwives, they are paid by the MSPAS and are, generally, male, younger, and more literate than their midwife counterparts. A few of the MSPAS promoters and many of the promoters working with NGOs were trained as health care workers in rebel-controlled areas or refugee camps during the war. One of the goals of the Dignas' RSH program is to train both MSPAS and NGO health promoters how to incorporate a gendered approach to health care. They carried out seminars on the issue with promoters in Berlín and Suchitoto but were unable to successfully coordinate a workshop with the health center

in Nombre de Jesús.²⁹

MSPAS' attempts to bring the work of midwives under the supervision of the State date back to the 1942 when concern about elevated levels of infant and maternal mortality generated the first course for rural midwives. But it was not until 1965 that courses began to be offered more systematically and midwives were first awarded the blue dresses, briefcases, caps, and supplies that now accompany their diplomas and identification cards. By 1975, the Government was cooperating with the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (FENUAP) to train over 1,000 midwives. In his monograph on Salvadoran midwives, Velásquez analyzes a program carried out between 1981 and 1984 to train 1050 midwives. He compares the financial costs of the program with the benefits that the state acquired by training and "equipping" midwives to attend births at home rather than incurring the costs of having babies delivered by doctors in hospitals. Velásquez concludes that the midwife training programs will have saved the State approximately a million dollars between 1984 and 2001 (*ibid.*: 93).

The MSPAS is increasing its control over the midwives by requiring that all midwives attend its training sessions and be registered by early 1998. However, the director of the Department of Reproductive Health of the MSPAS, Dr. Genoveva Morales, assured me that it did not plan to pay midwives. What the midwives get from MSPAS is basic equipment, the material for their uniforms (the blue dresses which

²⁹ Quite unintentionally while trying to arrange an interview with the center's director, I stumbled upon a workshop on gender being held for student health promoters by a MSPAS team at the Nombre de Jesús health center. The Dignas are not the only ones concerned with incorporating such perspectives.

several of the Nombre de Jesús midwives religiously wore to their meetings at the Dignas), and training. In Berlín, the head nurse at the clinic told me that the midwives also received free health care but that seemed to be an independent decision of each facility. Thus by preserving and regulating the practice of midwifery, the Salvadoran government is not only maintaining a “traditional cultural” practice but is managing to minimize the costs of health services provided to marginal communities. It was doing so by exploiting the distinct gendered and class position of the midwives.

Because the focus of the Dignas’ work with the midwives of Nombre de Jesús did not explicitly challenge that situation, concern about this discrepancy was the subject of a meeting a few months after I arrived at the Dignas. The entire RSH *equipo* was asked to attend one of the weekly meetings where the coordinators of the programs came together to make management decisions. Marielos Romualdo, the coordinator of the *equipo*; Ofelia López, the half-time promoter in Suchitoto; Carmen Argueta, the promoter in Berlín; and Dolores Avelar, the administrator of the *Casa* in Nombre de Jesús, joined the other ten coordinators in the conference room of the office in San Salvador. After the coordinators discussed issues like the need for a telephone in the office of the Mental Health *equipo*, what to do with a van that had been donated to the organization but needed extensive repairs, how to take advantages of some funds available from a Scandinavian church group, and the refusal of a newly appointed coordinator to authorize payment on a bill her predecessor contracted but that she saw as excessive, the meeting turned to a review of the RSH *equipo*.

What I did not realize until much later was that this was not a routine evaluation; the *coordinadora* was scrutinizing the *equipo* because of dissatisfactions with the direction it was taking. Marielos handed out a sheet that summarized the RSH program's objectives, goals and courses of actions and began by reviewing it. The overall objective was defined as promoting women's reproductive and sexual rights as part of the national political agenda. This was to be accomplished through three specific goals: to promote a feminist perspective on reproductive and sexual health in the health institutions in Suchitoto, Berlín, and Nombre de Jesús; to support the efforts of women leaders and midwives to reflect upon and organize around reproductive and sexual rights in Suchitoto, Berlín, and Nombre de Jesús; and to pressure political and social sectors to retake up reproductive and sexual rights. These objectives were to be achieved through three courses of action: offering sexual and reproductive health services; providing education about sexual and reproductive health to women leaders and those who used the services, midwives, promoters, and medical personnel; and, finally, putting political pressure on health facilities and political and social sectors.

Marielos finished presenting the overview and turned the floor over to Carmen to describe her activities in Berlín. Before Carmen had progressed very far, one of the other coordinators, Morena Herrera, interrupted her. Morena expressed concern that the *equipo* was focussing on providing services as a goal rather than a strategy. The work with the *parteras* lacked a level of "*reivindicación*," she insisted, a term which in the political parlance of Latin America refers to making political demands. The objectives

needed to be grounded (*aterrizados*), added Anika Anderson, the coordinator who was responsible for fundraising. Gloria Guzmán, the coordinator of the Education program, pointed to a lack of planning within the communities and the problem of “*activismo*,” doing things for the sake of just doing them. In terms of the *equipo*’s objectives on the national level (which had not been discussed but were listed on another handout that Marielos had distributed), she felt that the goal of working with the Ministry of Education on sex education was overambitious. “What about reproductive rights?” asked Ana Murcia, the coordinator of the child support program. “Doesn’t the name of the *equipo* include something about rights?” Despite the negative response to her question, she suggested that a focus on rights might help orient the work politically.

A consensus emerged that there was a need to focus on making concrete political demands for reproductive and sexual rights rather than providing services or *activismo*. But framing the question as one of reproductive and sexual rights raised the extremely problematic issue of how far the Dignas’ were willing to go in publicly advocating and implementing those rights. Marielos asked whether the organization was willing to publicly take up the more controversial issues of abortion rights and the rights of sexual minorities. Others protested that this was not possible because there was no consensus among the women in organization about these issues. I will return to the question of abortion in chapter 4 .

The issue of what the midwives wanted was not part of the discussion. Considering the goals of the *equipo*, the lack of participation of the midwives in this

discussion seemed notable. The problem was, at least at the level of the midwives in Nombre de Jesús, that the women who made up the “base” of the program, the midwives, had interests and abilities that were quite distinct from those of the women who were coordinating the programs of the Dignas. The midwives, like Mama Tina, were older rural women, most of whom could not read or write, who had begun practicing midwifery in response to a need in their community. They charged very little, if anything, for delivering a child and served a population that had an extremely limited capacity to pay. In addition, they had become a group not because of their own initiative but were organized through the efforts of the Dignas. Without their external influence, this group probably would not have existed.³⁰

The renovation of the *Casa de Las Parteras* (the *Casa*) was envisioned by and financed through the work of Dignas in San Salvador. By the time it was accomplished, it was clear that the design of the newly renovated building had not incorporated the needs or practices of the midwives. They had built four small examining rooms in the front room of the building which were more suited to a clinic than a birthing center. In the back, there was one slightly larger “birthing room” and two large dormitory type rooms for women and their newborns to recuperate.

But even more surprising to me was how little the Dignas and the midwives had discussed how they were going to fund, staff, and manage the *Casa* once it was opened.

³⁰ This was not true of all midwife organizations in El Salvador. In Suchitoto, for example, there was a strong midwife’s association which had legal status. However, it was described to me as a much younger, more literate group which, for the most part, had been trained by the MSPAS.

The first time I visited the project during my fieldwork was for one of the midwives' monthly meetings in November 1996 when the renovations were almost done. I met Marielos and Guadalupe Flores, one of the Dignas' two drivers, at 5:30 in the morning at the office in San Salvador. Traffic in the city usually ground to a gridlocked stop around 6:00 so the goal was to get across town before we stopped for breakfast at Angela's Pupusería in Cojutepec (the best *pupusas* in El Salvador in my opinion!). Less than an hour later we passed through Ilobasco, where Marielos picked up food which would be prepared for the midwives' lunch, and we headed out for the last hour and a half on the dirt road that led over the "5 de Noviembre" dam to Nombre de Jesús.

On each side of the dam, there were bunkers that had housed the soldiers who guarded the dam against FMLN sabotage. As if to bear testimony to both sides, the bunkers still carried the FMLN graffiti that the guerrillas had somehow managed to paint on them. A few kilometers later, in what then appeared to be a totally arbitrary location, Lupe pulled the truck over. In some nearby shade, I noticed three older women in blue dresses scrambling to get up from the ground where they were sitting. They agilely climbed into the back of the pickup, refusing my offer to change places with them. We had just entered Nombre de Jesús and these were the midwives from *caserío* El Dique, the first village as we crossed into the *municipio*. We continue to pick up other midwives as we approached the town Nombre de Jesús where we finally arrived around 10 a.m..

We pulled up to the house where other women were waiting on the porch and carried in the foodstuffs to three women whom they paid to cook the midwives' lunch in

the kitchen of the Casa (they were former Dignas' promoters and relatives of the current administrator of the house, Dolores). Eventually we gathered all of the women into "the training room" (*el cuarto de capacitación*), a medium size room off the side of the house filled with rustic wooden benches and chairs with desks attached. Marielos updated the midwives on the status of the construction and informed them of some of the new problems that had arisen over the need for a septic tank; these were problems that the Dignas were handling, neither she nor the midwives made any attempt to involve them. She then began a brainstorming session about what it was that they wanted for the house, emphasizing that it was their house and that they needed to figure out how they wanted it to operate.

Several of the women expressed their commitment to the house and a desire to see it staffed with a doctor, a nurse, and the materials they needed to attend births. With considerable coaxing from Marielos, a plan for how they would run the house began to take shape. Each of them would take a turn, in pairs, staffing the house but it was unclear whether they wanted all the expectant women they attended to come to the house to give birth or if it was just for women "at risk." Marielos attempted to focus the discussion by getting them to list all that they needed to do if the house were to open by 1997. But they got sidetracked into a debate over how much to charge for a delivery. First one of them suggested a figure of one hundred colones (less than \$12) but several of the women felt that this was too much as women could go to the hospital in Ilobasco for the same price.

Marielos tried to ground the debate by throwing in some figures. Only 30 out of

every hundred women in El Salvador get medical attention, she pointed out. How many women did they think would come to give births at the house, she asked. They calculated that altogether there would be about 15 per month. On a large sheet of paper, Marielos began to sketch out how much they would generate if they charged 100 colones. If there were 15 births per month and they divided the income among the fourteen of the midwives and they incurred no other expenses, this generated about 100 colones a month which would not be much to divide among them. The midwives were clear, however, about the fact that they needed to be paid. "My husband will want to know what it is that I am doing that's keeping me away from the house," one of them explained. Another agreed that she would have "to justify why I am not washing the clothes or making my husband's dinner." The women suggested asking the Dignas for help, asking the MSPAS, and organizing raffles as ways of raising money for their salaries. They proposed the celebration of the inauguration of the house as an opportunity to raise funds and gaining support from the community. The meeting ended without a concrete plan. The women, and the children or grandchildren that had accompanied them, ate the chicken, salad, rice and tortillas prepared for them and headed home.

The midwives and the women in San Salvador were operating with very distinct expectations. The Dignas wanted the midwives to make demands of the state and the *Casa* was part of a strategy to create pressure by establishing both an alternative model as well as demonstrating the need for increased services which existed. The midwives saw the Dignas as a source of support and potential income. But most of the funds that the

Dignas had raised were for specific projects. While they had gotten money to renovate the building, they had not succeeded in securing any grants to staff the midwives' house. At that point, their only option was to try to make the project self-sustaining. But this was a goal that was unlikely to be realized given the economic conditions in rural El Salvador and the socio-cultural characteristics of the population they would be serving, people who have neither the money nor the habit of paying someone they do not know to deliver a child in a place other than their home.

In addition, the idea that the midwives would require all their clients to come to Nombre de Jesús to give birth overlooked the advantages that home births provided. For the midwives who live several hours walk from the town, such a practice would be impractical for them and their clients. The midwives' expressed goal of having a doctor and nurse also seemed to potentially undermine their own role. The idea of subsidizing such a project on proceeds from raffles seemed very optimistic to me. However I soon came to understand why the midwives continued to expect the Dignas to fund their project despite the protests from the representatives of the organization that there were no funds.

Preparing reports required by funders, evaluating the programs, and developing plans for the next year occupied much of the Dignas coordinators' time for December, January and February. As a result, my role as observer became more participatory. Marielos had to be in meetings in San Salvador on the regular date of the midwives' January meeting, so I went up to the meeting in Nombre de Jesús without her. At the

meeting the midwives began planning the inauguration of the *Casa*, a public event that would allow the midwives to present the house to their communities as well as to public officials. The inauguration had originally been set for late January but at this meeting, Dolores, the local promoter, explained that delays in the construction and furnishing of the house (all the beds were being made by women in the Dignas' carpentry course) necessitated postponing the opening until late February.

The midwives planned a celebration consisting of a mass and blessing of the house followed by a meal, and a dance to be held later that evening to raise funds. They scheduled it for a Thursday so that the staff of the Health Center and other NGOs, who usually returned to their homes in San Salvador early Friday afternoon, would still be in town. One of the midwives proposed the Virgin of Dolores as the patron of the celebration. Mama Tina, whose t-shirt that day identified her as "Gay-Lesbian, Proud to be a Recovering Human Being" (I never found out where she got it though I did confirm that she knew what it said), volunteered to ask the priest to make a special trip to Nombre de Jesús for the event as he usually only came every other Saturday. I asked if they might be able to get a contribution from the two political parties as both mayoral candidates had indicated their support for the *Casa* at the *Intercambio* the day before Mama Tina's wedding. The women liked the idea so when we broke for lunch, a contingent went to the office of the ARENA mayor. They got his commitment to provide them with music for the dance. The FMLN candidate was not home but they planned to approach him later that week with a request for a contribution to the cost of lunch.

In the following month, the invitations and posters announcing the event was made up in San Salvador. Meanwhile Mama Tina learned that the priest was not available to bless the house and wanted to reschedule the date of the inauguration. Nevertheless, the other midwives were eager to move forward, Dolores reported in an *equipo* meeting in San Salvador, even though they had yet to develop a plan for how the *Casa* was going to operate. Marielos asked me to go to Nombre de Jesús to facilitate the February meeting as the entire RSH *equipo* had to meet in San Salvador that day. They gave me the invitations to deliver and instructions to find out if the women wanted to go ahead with the opening without the priest. As an alternative, Marielos proposed that they delay the inauguration and instead spend three days in a workshop planning how the house would be operated and financed.

At the meeting Mama Tina announced that the priest could not come and told the other midwives that they needed to reschedule the meeting. I then outlined Marielos' proposal. When the other women failed voluntarily to offer an opinion that differed from Mama Tina's, I suggested that we go around the room so that they could each say what they wanted to do. Twelve of the midwives had come to the meeting that day, and all of them, except Mama Tina, indicated that they wanted to have the inauguration on the scheduled date. She accepted the consensus. We spent the rest of the meeting planning how the food was going to be purchased and prepared. This became a daunting task after one of the women estimated she would invite at least fifty people; with seventeen midwives that came to more than 800 people.

When I got back to the office and reported the results of the meeting to the *equipo*, the local promoter, Dolores, was visibly dismayed by the plans the midwives had made about the refreshments. She insisted that someone had to be hired to do the cooking and Marielos agreed. This contradicted the earlier claims that there were no funds available for the inauguration. In addition, I objected that changing the plans that the midwives had developed collectively undermined their efforts to get the midwives to take control of the project and make it self-sustaining. Carmen, the program's promoter in Berlin, agreed. Marielos acknowledged the inconsistency, but she pointed out that the midwives would be happy to be relieved of the responsibility of doing the cooking and that the event would go much more smoothly if they were not responsible for the meal.

The money for the event came out of the general account of unallocated monies (*los fondos globales*). The women who had prepared the midwives' lunch at the first meeting I had attended, who also happened to be a sister and sister-in-law of Dolores, were hired to cook and serve the food. Twelve of the sixteen *parteras* attended the event along with about 150 of their friends and family. Mama Tina and another of the midwives acted as mistresses of ceremony in the *cuarto de capacitaciones* which was gaily festooned with purple balloons, streamers, and posters. Women and children, packed into schoolroom chairs and benches, listened to the speeches by Mama Tina and the other midwives.

Ofelia López, the Dignas promoter from Suchitoto (see chapter 5), had been asked to give a keynote speech because of her long term involvement with the house.

Contacts that she had made while in exile in Australia had been a primary source of financial support for the project. The talk she gave was stern, almost scolding. She stood at the microphone pointing at the spectators. The Dignas had renovated the house, she told the audience, but if it were to succeed, it will need the support of the community. It is your *Casa de las Parteras*, she emphasized, and if the house fails, it will be your fault!

The only “official” type who attended was Mechu, the FMLN candidate for mayor who made an impromptu speech that was extremely supportive of the project, and which seconded Ofelia’s challenge to the community. After the speeches, we gave out lunch along with the drinks that the FMLN had contributed, and soon afterwards almost everyone, including most of the midwives, dispersed. No one from the incumbent mayor’s office had made an appearance nor had anyone from the clinic attended.

The absence of the staff from the clinic was notable so when I interviewed the director of the clinic a few months later, I was surprised at how enthusiastically she expressed her support for the project. Celina Margarita Álvarez, was a medical doctor who had come to Nombre de Jesús the previous year for her “*año social*,” the year of practical experience that all students at the medical school of the National University are required to perform in the rural clinics of MSPAS. As is common, Álvarez came to Nombre de Jesús as a student to direct the clinic. She requested, and was hired, to stay on the following year.

While Álvarez had not been overtly hostile to the *Casa*, she had made little attempt to cooperate with the Dignas. I interviewed her at the clinic about her views on

the *Casa*. She told me that the clinic does not attend births because women prefer midwives to doctors. According to her, this was the result of cultural patterns³¹ (*patrones culturales*). “It doesn’t matter if it is a female or a male doctor,” she insisted. “They would rather give birth with someone they know.” This is a common reason given for why women prefer midwives (MSPAS 1995: 25). If women had complications, they sent them to the nearest hospital in Ilobasco but as there was no ambulance service, this situation left women who were at risk in Nombre de Jesús in a vulnerable position and had been a primary justification for the *Casa de las Parteras*.

When I asked Álvarez if she favored the opening of a Midwives’s House, she expressed enthusiastic support. But she also indicated a concern that no one usurps her role, specifically by failing to give her the data about the numbers of births or not referring the infants and their mothers to the clinic for check-up. “So that I can cover what I need to cover and they can too,” she explained. When I asked if they had ever considered doing a similar project, she adamantly shook her head and said no. Nevertheless, she claimed, the long term plan of the MSPAS was to support the midwives and institutionalize their work. They have been assigning the women ID numbers (*codigos*) because they are going to become “permanent resources” (*recursos permanentes*) of the MSPAS, she told me. This would mean that they would earn a regular salary and not just what people want to pay them. When I asked her if the midwives knew about this, she admitted that they had not fully explained it to them

³¹ Actually no health facilities of this level attend births.

because the midwives would then begin to pressure them. Nonetheless, she insisted that this was the plan. While the plan sounded ideal, the Minister of Reproductive Health later assured me that MSPAS had no funds available to pay the midwives and no plans to do so.

While the inauguration of the *Casa de las Parteras* took place in late February of 1996, they did not offer services until July. During this time, the internal structure of the RSH *equipo* changed dramatically. The Dignas had received funding, including a large grant from the United Nations Population Fund and European Union (EU), which required them to move forward on an ambitious project in the village of Talpatates in Berlín. The objective of the proposal was to promote gender equality through promoting reproductive and sexual rights and by countering violence against women. Written in conjunction with one of the other Salvadoran feminist organizations, CEMUJER, the Dignas were responsible for the reproductive rights component of the project while CEMUJER was in charge of addressing the issue of violence.

Central to the Dignas' part of the project was the construction of a *Casa Materna* (a Maternal House or CM) in Berlín. The CM was to use an alternative model of health care which emphasized a holistic approach to women's health (*la atención integral*). This was in contrast to public health care services that were not only failing to treat women holistically, according to the Dignas, but did not offer adequate information concerning women's reproductive and sexual health or their rights as citizens. According to the grant, over the following two years the CM would provide "reproductive and

sexual health services” to women in the municipality, offering attention to 200 women during birth and after, one thousand gynecological examinations including prenatal exams and pap smears, and 50 ambulance rides for women with high risk pregnancies (the ambulance service was not funded). They would offer workshops for local women, midwives, and health promoters on topics of reproductive and sexual health at the CM targeting more than 1100 women in two years. They would address similar topics in workshops for the medical personnel at the MSPAS clinic in the county seat. Radio ads and printed material would be used for educational campaigns about uterine cancer and to promote the CM. Finally, the proposal included the production of three studies: an analysis the problem of reproductive health in Berlín, an evaluation of the reproductive services, and a study of maternal mortality in the state of Usulután where Berlín is located.

This receipt of this grant created enormous pressure on the organization and the *equipo*. As with many grants written by the Dignas (or NGOs in general), the organization had gone through innumerable changes since they had submitted the original proposal. It was far more work than Carmen, the promoter working in Berlín, could realistically accomplish. Despite this, Carmen objected to a proposed revision which would limit the amount of work. In the grant, the promoter was supposed to give educational talks to women in the community but this was a full-time job by itself. The alternative strategy was for her to give the talks to health promoters, midwives, and nurses rather than targeting the women directly who were using the services. Carmen

protested that the promoters themselves were often the obstacles to getting information out or presenting alternative perspectives. However, the stakes were higher than debates over the Dignas' strategies. The grant was funded as part of a consortium that linked projects in three different countries in Central America. If a project failed in one country, according to Marielos, it jeopardized the funding for the other two countries.

The criticisms of the *equipo* which had been raised in the *coordinadora* earlier in the year surfaced again. The program was seen as too scattered, "having too many elements," "not defined clearly enough," and "not managed strategically for the few resources available." Other coordinators charged that the "*equipo* was not consolidated." The organization had hired two consultants to help them do a thorough evaluation of their work in February and develop a plan for the next three years. In their final report they concluded that the expectations of the SSR *equipo* needed to be lowered. As a result, the responsibility of the *Casa de las Parteras* in Nombre de Jesús, and the work of the *equipo* in Suchitoto, were shifted to the Local Development *equipo* (see chapter 5).

In addition, a doctor, Eda Guzmán, was hired temporarily to get the *Casa* in Nombre de Jesús operating, and to offer medical treatment one day per week. In the short run, the involvement of a doctor contradicted, on one hand, the goal of empowering the midwives. They were not involved in interviewing nor hiring her.³² After she was hired, Eda was told to identify and purchase the supplies that they would need to open the clinic. When she brought them to the *Casa*, she had to explain their use to the midwives.

³² Finding a doctor who was compatible with the Dignas philosophies was difficult. Eda was quite ambivalent about the Dignas' feminism.

On the other hand, within a month of her hiring, Eda saw her first patients in the *Casa* in July. To the community this meant that the *Casa de las Parteras* was now open and the midwives began to staff it daily from that point on. In early August, the midwives delivered their first infant in the now functioning *Casa de las Parteras*.

The shift of responsibility for the *Casa* to the Local Development *equipo* reflected a policy that the coordinators constantly reiterated in my interviews with them and in our discussion about the work of various *equipos*: the Dignas should not be providing services but rather they should organize civil society to pressure the state to respond to their needs. This was why they had ceased to develop projects that were primarily for economic development (*Mujeres por la Dignidad y la Vida* 1993). It was the rationale behind a decision to stop providing literacy classes and to focus on organizing women to pressure the state to provide more educational opportunities for them.

This approach shaped the first meeting Pati Otero, the Local Development coordinator, had with the midwives after taking over the program. She emphasized the “necessity for the community to assume more responsibility for the *Casa*.” The newly elected mayor, Mechu, who had been enthusiastically supportive of the *Casa* throughout his candidacy, was also invited to this meeting. He was extremely receptive to a proposal that the idea municipality form a Health Committee consisting of representatives from the Dignas, the Health Center, and the city council. But as we discussed the proposal his receptivity to the idea clearly had little to do with supporting reproductive rights. One reason he liked the idea was that he was profoundly dissatisfied with the present

administration of the Health Center. In addition, he was deeply concerned about the impact of a new law on revenues available to the municipality.

According to him, a recent law passed by the Legislative Assembly required births to be registered (*sentado*), in the place where the infants are born. As a result, he claimed, in May of 1997 while there were thirty-one births in Nombre de Jesús, twenty-six of them are registered in Ilobasco where women went to the hospital to give birth. What this meant for him was the probability of a loss in revenue for Nombre de Jesús. It was an issue he raised again when the *equipo* invited him to accompany them to a meeting at the Health Center.

This meeting was with Marta Dejada, a medical student who was assuming the direction of the Health Center as Dra. Álvarez was going on pregnancy leave. I had accompanied Eda to Nombre de Jesús to meet with her. We were joined by Esperanza, the local promoter for the LD program, and a recently elected member of the municipal council, and three of the midwives who had come into town for a workshop at the health center that was canceled so we asked them to join us. In the meeting, Eda assured Dra. Dejada that the *Casa de las Parteras* would not be competing with the clinic. They negotiated an agreement by which Eda could do pap smears and the health clinic could send them in. This division of labor, Eda pointed out, would be an advantage to the clinic as they could get credit from MSPAS for having performed the service. Eda also asked if they could use the sterilization equipment. Dr. Dejada readily agreed and offered her backup if emergencies ever arose. Meanwhile, Mechu, the new mayor joined us so I

asked her about the twenty-six births in Ilobasco. She claimed to know of only four or five births in the last month.

If the number that the mayor is citing is true, it raises some questions about the claim of both the Dignas and the Health Center that women in Nombre de Jesús prefer to use midwives to doctors. The response to Eda's presence at the *Casa de las Parteras* also suggests that these claims may be misleading. In her first two months of holding office hours once a week, she treated one hundred and seventy-two cases. Of the approximately thirty-four pregnant women in the municipality, twelve had already sought services at the *Casa de las Parteras*. Two children had been born at the *Casa* without any complications and the midwives were also offering consultations. Women were coming for treatment for emotional problems as well as gynecological care. They were still working on forming a county health committee to develop a long term approach to health problems.

Labor Pains: Are the Dignas' Outgrowing the Midwives?

As the Dignas have grown, the roles of women like Mama Tina have been usurped by those who have more technical skills, whether they are simply more literate or have formal training in areas like medicine. This process was a reflection of three factors: the maturation of the organization, the changing political conditions in El Salvador, and the increasing transnationalization of Salvadoran feminism. These have resulted in a shift in the Dignas' approach which is reflected in a subtle change in wording in the mission statement of the organization. In 1993 the Dignas' "Global Plan"

they described their objective as “to construct an organized force of women with the capacity to intervene in the national reality to better the living conditions of Salvadoran women and to elaborate proposals that integrate the construction of peace, reconciliation, and national democratization so that they do not forget or postpone the needs and interests of women” (Dignas 1993: 12). But in the Global Program for 1997-2000, the construction of an organized force of women was reduced to one of four strategies through which the organization would achieve their objectives of “the eradication of gender subordination, the democratization and sustainable development of the society, and the empowerment of women” (Dignas n.d.: 17). Organizing women, in and of itself, was no longer a goal. As a result, women like Mama Tina, were no longer as valuable an asset as they were in earlier stages of the organization’s life.

The Dignas emerged in semi-clandestinity under the direction of the RN while the war was still being fought. The Peace Accords, however incomplete, established the political conditions for them to establish their autonomy and build an organization that was recognized as a representative of “civil society.” In small towns like Nombre de Jesús, these changed conditions had a dramatic impact on the work of the Dignas. Instead of trying to recruit women into an illegal political party engaged in a war, the Dignas have spent the last five years openly promoting a new perspective on gender relations. It would be a gross overstatement to claim that the Dignas, or even the women’s movement, are responsible for the kinds of changes in reproductive patterns that have resulted in El Salvador being classified as being in a “moderate” stage of demographic

transition (Valdés E. and Gomáriz M.: 1995). But as Mama Tina's stories tell, their work has clearly reshaped the way that women who work with them look at their gender role. Her story also illustrates that it is not just individuals' self-images that the Dignas' work has affected. Their discourse and practices have influenced other NGOs, political parties, the local government, the church, and the Ministry of Health.

The Dignas' work is situated by more than the social, economic and political conditions in El Salvador: they have also been part of and responded to transnational economic and political processes. Mama Tina's memory that the Dignas' first meetings were accompanied by a North American points to one source of support that they received for initially engaging in an exploration of feminist thought. Their international contacts have provided resources with which to advance their projects. But at the same time, those proposals have had to be shaped in response to the priorities of those agencies which have in turn contributed to the directions the Dignas' work have taken. The Dignas have also had to respond to the national impact of global economic processes. The neoliberal policies of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund aimed at "modernizing" the economies and governments of countries like El Salvador justify and necessitate limitations on social services that make the preservation of "traditional" practices like midwifery appealing. Even more concretely, changes in the government in Spain resulted in the cancellation of two grants that had been awarded to the *Casa de las Parteras*. The increased dependency on outside funding, while it enables organizations like the Dignas to actualize projects that would otherwise be unrealizable, makes them

vulnerability to additional fields of power which dilute the influence of women like Mama Tina.

Whether or not the Dignas can maneuver around the contradictions within the midwives' role remains to be seen. The midwives and the central *coordinadora* are operating with distinct, though not necessarily contradictory goals. The midwives want to be paid for their work while the Dignas want to promote reproductive rights. While the Dignas' may realize their goal without the midwives' being paid, it is unlikely that the midwives will remain an organized force if they are not. The continued expectation of the midwives from Nombre de Jesús that the Dignas will find them funding is unlikely to be realized. At times, the Dignas' treatment of the midwives contrasted with the organization's goal of "empowering" women. Decisions about the project, such as the hiring of the doctor, were continuously made without their input. At the same time, the midwives often failed to assume responsibility when it was offered to them, such as when Marielos sought their input on how to operate the house. None of the midwives had the kinds of skills that would enable them to write funding proposals or manage a birthing center.

Elisabeth Friedman has described how transnational activism of the women's movement in Venezuela has increased "top-down leadership that misdirects resources and alienated supporters" (1997: 19). Both Friedman and Alvarez (1997) have pointed to what Friedman calls "transnationalism reversed or how transnational organizing opportunities affect national contexts" (*ibid.*: 1). There are three factors that Alvarez

identifies as important considerations when looking at the impact of transnationalism reversed. These include: the characteristics of the national movement, the sources of the movement's funding, and the ideologies of administration in power. The latter refer to the distinct attitudes and approaches toward women's rights of different parties or factions that may control of the state apparatus.

Alvarez also suggests caution when evaluating the impact of feminist gains in the transnational arena (1997: 5). According to her, there are four trends which have reshaped the women's movement in Latin America: a multiplication of the contexts where feminists can be found; a professionalization and specialization of women in the movement which she refers to as NGOization; increased networking between feminists in the region and around the globe; and transnationalization (ibid.: 4). She sees the potential that Latin American feminists could come to rely on UN agreements rather than organizing a grassroots constituency of women:

the relationship between advocacy-focused groups and larger social constituencies has undergone significant strain in recent years *precisely* (original emphasis) as a consequence of the growing NGOization, formalized networking, and transnationalization of more [of] the policy-oriented sectors of the women's movement.

While Alvarez does not advocate the abandonment of feminist demands directed at the transformation of the state or international regimes, she calls for the building of a "more expansive pro-women's rights constituencies and to alter the sometimes less-than-democratic character of (national, regional, global, and gendered) civil society" (ibid.: 8). The question remains whether the Dignas in Nombre de Jesús will move in this direction.

It is unclear that the midwives can “empower” themselves to become more effective advocates for themselves, or if the Dignas are willing to continue to advocate for them.

Finally, my research left me with questions about the putative *cultural patrones* that lead to the use of midwives by women in the countryside. The conflicting figures provided by mayor and the health center about the number of women giving birth in the hospital, the response of the women to the presence of the doctor in the *Casa de las Parteras*, and Velázquez’ (1996: 93) estimate of the economic benefits provided to the State health care system by the midwives suggest that cultural patterns may not be as important a factor as has been suggested. Rather if women are provided with an alternative that is affordable and accessible, such as the doctor who worked with the midwives, they will readily transform their supposed traditions.

The next chapter looks at a supposed cultural pattern that the Dignas are attempting to change, motherhood. In their work with women who are seeking child support from the fathers of their children (*madres demandantes*), the Dignas have used feminist theory to develop a strategy to confront “irresponsible fatherhood” (*paternidad irresponsable*), a problem which has achieved national recognition. They use the contradictions between the Salvadoran ideology of motherhood and the reality that many Salvadorans face to organize women to confront national attitudes and state policies. In the process, another contradiction is generated by the differences between those organizing the *madres demandantes* and the *demandantes* themselves, similar to that which appeared between the midwives and the *coordinadora*. These conflicts are

intensified by the policies of transnational funding agencies. In the case of the *madres demandantes*, as we will see, the tension between empowering women and mobilizing them to support a feminist agenda erupted into a dangerous crisis.

Chapter 3: Challenging the Hegemonic Ideologies of Motherhood and *Machismo*

For each of the three years preceding the signing of the Peace Accords, an average of slightly over two thousand women came to the Attorney General's office (*Procuraduría General de la República* or PGR) in San Salvador. They came because the fathers of their children would not contribute to their support, and because the Salvadoran state, in lieu of establishing a welfare system, had given the PGR the role of tracking down deadbeat dads. By 1996, the number of women coming to the PGR had grown to almost five thousand, an increase of over one hundred percent, and by all reports, the number was expected to continue rising at a rapid rate.³³ This growth results from a number of structural factors such as the ending of the war and changes in state policies. But it also reflected the Dignas' decision to go after the women seeking child support in order to organize them to challenge the hegemonic ideologies of motherhood and *machismo*.

In this chapter I look at the work of the Association of Mothers Seeking Child Support (*Asociación de Madres Demandantes* or AMD), an organization that grew out of the Dignas. Their efforts have created a new collective identity in El Salvador, that of the *madres demandantes*. This identity is examined in terms of feminist theories on women's role in reproduction and the impact of that role on women's status.

Recognizing the importance of evaluating these questions in their historic and social context, I then go on to describe the process in El Salvador that women must go through

³³ Figures cited are from the *Libros de Actos* of the PGR, the notebooks where clients names are noted. These notebooks are kept in the PGR Archives.

in order to obtain the state's assistance in securing child support. This is followed by the history of the AMD and a discussion of its relationship to both the Dignas and the Attorney General's office, the state agency in charge of administering child support.

But the goal of the AMD is not just to change the way that the state treats *madres demandantes*, but to change the way women look at their own roles as mothers. How they attempt to do this is examined by looking at the dynamics of a weekly drop-in group held at the AMD. What the meetings reveal are the multiple ways that women in different positions in the organization construct their identity as mothers and as *madres demandantes*. They also reveal the obstacles that make it difficult for the AMD's to create democratically structured feminist organization of *madres demandantes*.

The life history of Rosa Imelda, one of the *madre demandantes*, illustrates the various forces which require women to seek the aid of the state in securing support for their children. The chapter continues with a discussion of how the AMD has helped to expand the state's ability to fulfill that role within the constraint posed by its neoliberal policies. This leads to the question of the value and meaning of maternalist collective action. While some feminists have challenged the strategy of organizing women on the basis of the traditional role of motherhood, I point out how such movements, while not feminist, can clearly gain improvements for women. While recognizing the value of concepts such as practical and strategic needs in developing organizing strategies, I argue that categorizing women's groups on the basis of these dichotomies privilege certain kinds of women's movements. In doing so, the important contributions of Central

American women's movement and their integration of class analysis into their feminist praxis are overlooked.

In addition, I caution against romanticizing about the nature of any movement whether it is feminist or maternalist. Issues of corruption can occur in groups with the best of intentions and, as my final sections demonstrates, transnational feminist funding may be contributing to internal stratification within the AMD that could marginalize poor women. The limitations set by the funding guidelines may make it more difficult for some women to take a consistent and active role in leadership. For those who are concerned with empowering women, this is a far more important criteria than whether a group is maternalist or feminist.

Motherhood in Post-War El Salvador

The Dignas recognize the profound difference between the ideology of motherhood and the real lives of the women who mother in El Salvador. They attribute these contradictions to the fact that the ideology had not caught up with the economic, political and cultural changes that have swept through much of Central America in the "lost decade" of the eighties. Political conflicts had torn the region apart and realigned social forces; economic changes had accompanied Central America's increasing incorporation into the world market; and cultural transformations in the roles of women and men had reshaped the workplace, civil society, and the state. But Salvadoran women's power in the family had not increased at the same rate as their responsibility in

society. While women were more and more active outside of their homes, they still were expected to fulfill their domestic responsibilities which could take up to thirteen hours a day even for urban women.³⁴

The census data on Salvadoran women depicts “a female population that is particularly young, living in a densely populated county, and for the most part poor, half urban and half rural. They have a tendency to form couples early and to still have a large number of children. Thus women are the heads of thirty percent of the households, in the majority of cases without a stable relationship” (García y Gomáriz 1989: 105). For those women with little or no schooling, the percentage of female headed households goes up to forty (Lazo 1996: 76). Women who mother in these families are extremely vulnerable. With little education, their employment opportunities are limited, and they are often forced to accept low paying jobs with poor working conditions.

Since the 1960s, at least, the number of domestic partnerships³⁵ (*uniones de hecho*) among Salvadoran couples has been equal to the number of formal marriages (White 1971: 246; Baires *et al.* 1996: 30). Thus it is not uncommon for young women to have their first children before they are formally married, particularly among low income women. More than two-thirds of infants are born out of wedlock (García y Gomáriz 1989: 113).

³⁴ This figure is based on the calculations of women in a workshop held by the Dignas in 1993 (Baires *et al.* 1996: 18).

³⁵ While I am using this term to describe partnerships that are not legalized, these relations are also referred to as common law marriages, informal unions, and free unions.

But when marriage does occur, it is often not “forever” and marriages have been becoming less permanent since 1975. In that year, one out of every thirteen marriages ended in divorce: by 1984, it was one out of every ten (García y Gomáriz 1989: 110). The average marriage in El Salvador lasts between three and five years (Baires *et al.* 1996: 30). But the effects of the war and migration as well as high levels of teenage pregnancy and male desertion have contributed to the pre-existing “weakness of the marital bonds.” Alastair White (1973: 245) attributed this characteristic of Salvadoran family structure to the lack of property ownership. Writing before the war, he pointed to the fact that since Salvadoran women could earn almost as much (or as little, to be more precise), as their male partners, women preferred domestic partnerships over marriage because of the independence that it provided them.

As a result, Salvadoran families take many diverse forms. Little precise data is available on the percentage that diverge from the ideal nuclear family though it is generally accepted that the realization of that ideal is more common among upper class urban women than it is for their lower income counterparts. According to a 1985 survey, of one million households “in almost 800,000, there were persons who were either not head of the family, their partner or their child, that is to say, that there were other family members or persons who lived with the primary couple” (Valdés E. and Gomáriz 1995: 113).

If the bond between couples in El Salvador is weak, those between mother and child are extremely strong. El Salvador is considered by demographers to be in an

incipient or moderated stage of fertility decline with the birth rate dropping from 6.5 in 1950-1955 to 4.0 in 1990-1995 (Valdés E. and Gomáriz 1995: 44).³⁶ But as this chapter demonstrates, for many Salvadoran women motherhood is seen as the ultimate achievement of their womanhood and their life. Despite the hardships that they must overcome to provide for their children, and the rapidly changing conditions women have been confronted with in the eighties and nineties, motherhood is a role that Salvadoran women approach with eagerness and without much deliberation. The average age at which women have their first sexual relationship is thirteen although 74% of sexually active teenagers are not familiar with methods of birth control (Lazo 1996: 92).

One of the most significant changes that Salvadoran families have faced in the sixties and seventies is the increasing participation of women in the wage labor market. In both absolute terms, and relative to men, women were drawn increasingly into the wage labor market.³⁷ Some researchers estimated that women would make up as high as 40% of the economically active population (García y Gomáriz 1989: 105) by 1990, but even at lower estimates (24% by Valdés E. and Gomáriz 1995: 67), there is agreement that Salvadoran women's participation in the waged labor market has grown steadily. However, women are still heavily concentrated in the service industry, often self employed, or in domestic work (García y Gomáriz 1989: 117-119; Valdés E. and

³⁶ These figures vary significantly based on education, age, and area of residence (urban and rural) but the decline has been across the board.

³⁷ The decrease in the male PEA is attributed to their higher levels of international migration, the incorporation of males into the military during the war, and the increased number of male casualties because of the conflict.

Gomáriz: 79), both sectors which are low paid and insecure. At the same time, evidence shows that while there was demonstrated increase in female wage labor, there was no corresponding rise in male participation in domestic work (García y Gomáriz 1989: 117)

A concurrent effect of this pattern was that during the economic crisis of the eighties, Salvadoran women became unemployed in greater numbers: “in 1978, women constituted 28% of the unemployed, in 1980 they rose to 44%, and by 1985, they were a majority, some 54%. Put another way, what appears irrefutable is a *feminization* of unemployment and the crisis occurred in El Salvador” (García y Gomáriz 1989: 120).

The political and economic crisis that dominated El Salvador in the eighties affected men and women in drastically different ways. By 1988, 80% of the Salvadoran population was considered poor (García y Gomáriz 1989a). Households headed by women were over represented in the ranks of the impoverished, and among those directly affected by the conflict such as internal refugees and migrants.

While Salvadoran mothers may have fared better economically in two parent families, a study showed that domestic violence was a widespread phenomena (Cañas 1989). This pioneering investigation surveyed elementary school children in San Salvador and found that 57% answered affirmatively when asked if their mother was physically abused by the father.

Given this reality, the Dignas questioned why women valued motherhood so highly. Echoing the title of an often quoted article by the late Martín-Baró (1990), they point to the conflict and ambiguity that surround women’s experience in the family.

Martín-Baró emphasized that despite the fact that the structure of the family incarcerates women in many ways, it also provides them with a safe harbor. A harbor that is built, in part, he acknowledged, on “the mythical image of the mother, object of song and poetry” (ibid.: 272-273).

The Dignas saw the romanticization of motherhood as an ideology that prevented women from recognizing the real nature of women’s roles in the family and society. They pointed out that the form that the Salvadoran family took had changed drastically because of the war and the economic crisis. But they challenged the notion that these families were abnormal or “disintegrating,” and attacked the policies which ignored families which were not headed by men. Instead they advocated that the ideology of family be revised to reflect the reality:

To understand your reality and to try and adjust the ideology, the laws, and public policy to this reality, is an ethical imperative for all (*todas/os*) who are committed to the democratization of society, because this process must not stop at the doors of the home but penetrate the structures of inequality that are maintained in the heart of the very forms of family life (Baires *et al.* 1996: 163).

This chapter looks at how the Dignas sought to fulfill that ethical imperative. Adopting a social constructionist approach toward the gendered roles of parenting, they sought to make men financially and socially responsible for the children they engendered within, and outside of, formal and informal marital relationships. They attacked the ideology of *machismo* which encouraged men to act sexually irresponsible and/or in a violent manner, and to deny the paternity of their children when necessary or possible. However, it was not just an ideological attack, but one which used feminist theory to map

out an effective strategy. As this chapter will show that strategy was to mobilize the *madres demandantes* themselves to examine their own attitudes, to challenge the behavior of the fathers of their children, to counter the hegemonic ideologies of motherhood and *machismo*, and to remake state policy on the family. Their task was made easier when international agencies from Spain, the Basque Country, and Canada funded the project.

“We Want Responsible Fatherhood”

About eighty women sat quietly in the audience listening to presentations by representatives from the Salvadoran Institute for the Protection of Minors, the Ministry of Education, and the Attorney General’s office (*Procuraduría General de la República* or PGR), the state agency in charge of administering child support. But when the moderator, Ana, the Dignas’ coordinator of their program on *cuotas* (child support payments), called out slogans, “We don’t want handouts, we want responsible fatherhood and fair support payments (*no queremos ayuda, queremos paternidad responsable y cuotas justas*)” or “democracy in the streets, our homes, and our beds (*democracia en las calles, la casa, y la cama*),” the audience responded with obvious enthusiasm. The practice was reminiscent of the *consignas*, or slogans commonly used by the revolutionary left during the war, but they were delivered in a manner appropriately tailored to the setting. The *Asociación de Madres Demandantes* (the Association of Mothers Seeking Child Support or AMD) had invited the participants to an upscale San

Salvadoran hotel to celebrate International Children's Day with a forum on how to protect the rights of children.

In front of the audience was a table with the panelists. A group of children was seated in a separate section on the side of the speakers. Various banners of the AMD were hung on the walls around the room. One which commemorated their second anniversary carried the phrase, "I need my dad (*Necesito mi papá*)."

At the entrance, participants were asked to sign in and were given a rolled up poster tied with a purple ribbon (see Appendix B). At the top of the poster it read "Children's Rights (*Derechos de la Niñez*)."

Below a turquoise background shows a letter written to a father by his child although it is obscured by two others letters that are superimposed on top of it. But one can make out the words "dad, I need, clothes, education, health, shoes, to keep me safe and strong" (*papá, necesito, bistuario, educación, salud, calzado, para mantenerme sano y fuerte*). The first of the superimposed letters is addressed to *Señor Procurador*, the Attorney General. It reads: "We children ask you to demand that the person who pays my father not be allowed to fall behind on paying the child support (*cuota alimentacia*) that my papá contributes to our support. We demand this and more." It is signed children first (*los niños primero*). It has a drawing of two relatively happy looking girls holding money in their hands. The image on the second letter contrasts dramatically with the first. This one consists of a boy with his ribs showing and tears streaming from his eyes. To the left of him is a bubble with the image of a well-dressed man. Around the man is written, "Papá, if you help me maybe I can be a professional some day. It's your obligation. I am

your son.” Out of the head of the half naked, starving, crying boy is a line to another bubble, “papa, I need your economic help.” Another bubble goes from the boy’s mouth to another plea, “Papá, only you can help me. I want to be a man of means (*hombre de bien*). In order to feed myself, I see that I need a good education.”

Two officials, one from the Institute for the Protection of Minors and the other the Ministry of Education, spoke first about what their agencies were doing for children. One of the women who has petitioned for child support (*demandante*) spoke next. Her humble manner and simple attire contrasted sharply with the two well dressed bureaucrats. She painfully described how her children were affected by being abandoned by their father. Appealing to the officials, she concluded by expressing her desire that her children would grow up to be proud to be Salvadoreñas because they feel cared about by their government, the institutions in the country, and their communities, as well as their fathers and mothers. Several children spoke next, two who were on the panel, as well as several others who had been sitting in the section off to the side. They missed their fathers and longed to have them in their lives, they poignantly told the audience. Some were more articulate than others but their statements seemed unrehearsed. Child after child spoke about wanting their fathers to visit them and take them out. Several talked about their dream of once again living together with both their mother and father.

After the children had finished, the *Procurador* was introduced. Dressed in a suit and tie, he spoke without notes about the work of his agency in support of children, the need to expand that work, and the limitations the institution faced in trying to do so. He

acknowledged the important contribution of the AMD, and credited the organization with encouraging the PGR to seek out different ways of getting *cuotas* from *demandados*, the men who have been ordered to pay child support. But the fact that so many men worked in the informal sector, he lamented, limited what they could accomplish. Despite his supportive comments, when Ana opened the discussion for questions and comments from the audience, he was the target of much anger by the *demandantes*. Their cases were neglected by the workers in the agency, several of the women complained, particularly those whose *demandados* payments were in default. One woman described how the employees of the PRG made her feel that her *demanda* was unjustified and that she should be working instead applying for child support. The *Procurador* acknowledged the problems in the institution, citing lack of salary increases for his staff and the terrible working conditions, and promised to work to improve the situation. One of the AMD organizers asked representative of the Ministry of Education if there were any programs to create “new fathers.” The employees enthusiastically described the talks (*charlas*) that were being given in the schools to combat *paternidad irresponsable*, or irresponsible fatherhood. She pointed out that the Minister of Education was highly respected in Latin America and not only was she a woman but the Ministry was primarily female, and was taking a “maternal” approach to reforming education. The forum ended as waiters in black bow ties and pressed white shirts circulated with trays of sandwiches and sodas.

A New Collective Identity

This interchange was made possible by the emergence of a new collective identity, *las madres demandante*. The identity was being constructed through the AMD's struggle for adequate child support and against *paternidad irresponsable*, one of the most important and innovative feminist strategies to emerge in El Salvador. The Dignas' recognized the unrealized subjectivity of the crowds of women who gathered daily in front of the PGR. They saw these women as the embodiment of many of the unmet needs that are central to women's oppression in El Salvador, and, potentially, a means to challenge the gender roles that subordinate women. As the forum illustrated, they used the contradictions between these dominant cultural constructs and the reality of the lives of the *demandantes* to organize and mobilize women who seek the intervention of the state to extract economic support from the fathers of their children. By mobilizing these women and exposing them to a feminist analysis, they are attempting not only to challenge existing gender roles but promoting a new relationship between the state and the family. It is a relationship where the Salvadoran state would take an expanded role in legislating what had previously been private social relations.

The approach of the Dignas and the AMD to changing the state is shaped by the view that the role of civil society in a democracy goes beyond individual participation in elections. It is a view that was forged through active participation in a civil war that was waged to challenge economic and political inequality. Activities like this forum are designed to reshape the attitudes which inform the practices of the policy makers within

state institutions. For instance, the perspective that *cuotas* are not handouts, but payments to which women are entitled as a right, was reinforced with the posters, in the slogans, on the banners, and in the testimonies given by the children and *demandantes*. The *Procurador* and other high ranking officials were compelled to incorporate this discourse in their responses, if only during the forum.

But AMD's focus is not limited to reshaping state institutions; rather, a prior goal is to promote the empowerment of their own constituency by creating an organized force to provide emotional support, deliver services, and generate political power. Through the forum, women, whose social and economic background would have otherwise made it unlikely that they would gain access to the *Procurador*, were afforded an opportunity to address him directly. The event enabled them, and their children, to present their experiences as *demandantes* in their own terms, to the official in charge of the agency.

Reinscribing Motherhood?

Throughout the event, I noticed that their stress on children's need for their fathers made me uncomfortable. The forum's title, "How the Rights of Children are Defended . . . 'I Need My Father,'" and its emphasis on children's need for the economic and emotional support of their fathers seemed to reinforce an image of the nuclear family as the norm. With more than 30% of Salvadoran families headed by women, and even higher percentages among the poorer classes (Lazo and Ruíz 1996) with whom the Dignas work, promoting such an impossible ideal seemed contradictory.

Thinking about how the feminist movements in the United States have struggled to legitimize families that fail to conform to the heterosexist, middle class, white nuclear “norm,” I wondered if they had considered the risks of advocating such a model. For me what immediately came to mind were cases where lesbians have been forced to fight for their rights to custody of, or even visitation with, their children, not just because of their sexual preference, but because having a female partner would result in the child being raised without a male presence. I thought of the work on “othermothers” (Collins 1990: 119) women other than the birth mother who raise children, and on shared parental responsibility, “child-keeping” (Stack 1979: 62). Both Collins and Stack show that these alternative family structures that are often overlooked when the family must deal with state institutions. I recalled cases where even when sexual abuse by the fathers was suspected, women have been mandated to relinquish their children to the care of a man they claimed were abusing them, because “children need their fathers.” These types of situations made me wonder if the AMD’s advocacy of children’s need for their fathers would someday backfire (see Appendix C).

The evening after the forum I had the opportunity to explore these questions over dinner with Vilma Vasquéz, one of the founders of AMD. I shared with her my concerns about their emphasis on children’s need for their fathers. Weren’t they worried that it might be turned around on them such that women would be denied custody or that joint custody would be granted and women who had done nothing but raise children would be left with no support? Her response took me by surprise. She felt that North American

women had excluded fathers in a way that failed to recognize childrens' need for their fathers. As far as she was concerned, women in the U.S. who did not go after the fathers were basically self-serving.

Vilma's comments reminded me of my response to a proposal she had made to me when I attended the Sixth Latin American and Caribbean Feminist *Encuentro* in El Salvador in 1993 (see chapter 5). The Dignas were looking for someone to help them develop mechanisms to identify Salvadoran men who had ceased to pay their *cuotas* after immigrating to the United States. They wanted to use the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service to put pressure on these men or to have them deported. Because of the increasingly virulent xenophobic attacks on immigrants, I declined to get involved, feeling that potential damage of such a project to immigrants' rights outweighed the potential benefits to women. But the nature of her request illustrated how the approach of these Salvadoran feminists to the relationship between motherhood and women's subordination differed significantly from those of some North American feminisms.

Feminist Debates on Motherhood in the Unites States

The differences in the experience and meaning of motherhood that emanate from distinct historical, cultural, and economic conditions were overlooked, and some would say erased, by some early second wave feminists. In their attempts to demonstrate that women were subordinated and to challenge that status, they argued that women's subordination was universal but not inevitable. The role of woman as mothers was one of

the key elements in these explanations of women's oppression.

Radical feminists such as Firestone (1970) identified women's biological responsibility for childbearing as the source of women's oppression and called for the implementation of artificial reproduction to liberate women from its yoke. Adrienne Rich (1976) criticized Firestone's view as technological and distinguished between the institution of motherhood and women's experience of it. The latter, she claimed, was aimed at ensuring that women stay under the control of men while the former carried the potential of much creativity and joy. Rich pointed out that it was not the biological capacity to bear children that determined the oppressive nature of the institution; it was the social conditions, both material and ideological, under which the mothering was carried out. She called for the dismantling of the patriarchal impositions upon motherhood in order for it to be viewed as one choice out of many options that should be available to women.

Feminist social scientists argued, like Rich, that it was not biology alone that explained what they saw as women's universal subordination. Rosaldo (1974) claimed that "an opposition between 'domestic' and 'public' provides the basis of a structural framework necessary to identify and explore the place of male and female in psychological, cultural, social, and economic aspects of human life" (23). Women's "domestic" orientation resulted from their nurturing of children, a task while seemingly natural varied culturally accounting for the differences in women's status in distinct cultural settings. But, she insisted, the fact that women were universally restricted from

the public realm because of their domestic orientation meant that the key elements in eliminating women's position would be to expand women's role in the 'public world' or to increased men's participation in the home. In the face of cross-cultural evidence that women were not universally subordinated and critiques that her formulation was based on Cartesian dichotomies (Leacock and Nash 1977), Rosaldo later retreated from her claims about the universality of the "public/private" paradigm. But Rosaldo's claims deeply influenced feminist theory.

Anthropologists were not alone in looking to motherhood as the source of women's subordination. Psychologist Dorothy Dinnerstein (1976) suggested that male dominance was rooted in the psychological effects on children of women's monopolization of mothering. Nancy Chodorow (1978) also pointed to the process of psychological character formation as an explanation for women's gender role as mothers. Using object relation theory, she argued that the process of separating from one's mother differed dramatically for boys and girls resulting in major differences in the personality structures of the genders. Both Dinnerstein and Chodorow called for increased participation of fathers in child rearing to ameliorate the effects of the processes they identified.

Not all North American feminists have emphasized the negative impact of women's role in mothering. Sara Ruddick (1984) argued that the experience of caring for children fosters a particular kind of morality, "maternal thinking" in women. For Ruddick maternal thinking is not a biological phenomena but is the result of women's

social responsibility for child raising. Di Leonardo (1985) has pointed out how this “moral motherhood” was used to construct a new theory of feminist pacifism in the 1980s. Some women argued that they were particularly entitled to challenge militarism because of their capacity to bear, and/or experience in raising, children equip them with a particular abhorrence of war and a great investment in preserving peace. This is a claim that is similar to that which has been woven through a variety of women’s resistance movements in Latin America such as the CoMadres and Madres de Plaza de Mayo. I will return to this perspective below.

Socialist feminists also saw women’s primary social responsibility for child rearing and their concomitant exclusion from equal participation in positions of power as central factors in women’s oppression, but they analyzed a different set of processes in their attempt to explain its source. Based on Engel’s (1972 [1884]) recognition that there is an important relationship between how property and production are organized, and women’s status (see also Leacock 1981, Reiter 1975, Sacks 1979), socialist feminists focussed on how that status was shaped by the role of women in production and reproduction (Edholm, Harris, and Young 1977; Benería 1979). They expanded the conceptualization of reproduction to go beyond biological reproduction, or childbearing, and incorporated the various roles women play in reproducing the labor force. The subordination of women was attributed to the division of labor which assigned women responsibility for the unpaid tasks of reproduction, particularly motherhood. Studies such as Elisabeth Croll’s evaluation of the experience of women in the Soviet Union, China,

Cuba, and Tanzania (1986), where socialist governments attempted to draw women into the wage labor force, indicated that such explanations were inadequate. While the emphasis of this theoretical approach on the analysis of the particular historic and economic conditions contributed substantially to the understanding of how motherhood was socially constructed, the research failed to achieve its goal of explaining the roots of gender inequality.

Their inability to do so was based upon a problematic premise. By the 1980s the assumption underlying feminism that gender was a universal category that shaped women's experience beyond class, race, ethnic, and national differences was being challenged. Black women pointed out that the dynamics described by Dinnerstein and Chodorow, for example, failed to take into account the specificity of their experiences with motherhood (Davis 1981, Hooks 1981, Joseph and Lewis 1981). In addition, white feminists had failed to effectively critique the work on Black motherhood such as the Moynihan report (1965) which portrayed Black women as matriarchs and welfare mothers whose failure to conform to the cult of true womanhood was the source of dysfunction within the African-American family. Resistance to this ideology often took the form of glorifying motherhood, forcing Black feminists to develop a nuanced analysis of the complex institution in order to avoid providing ammunition which could be used to vilify it. Patricia Hill Collins' (1990) analysis of Black motherhood is a case in point. Arguing that "Black motherhood is a fundamentally contradictory institution," she points to the key to the contradiction: "African-American communities value motherhood, but

Black mothers' ability to cope with race, class, and gender oppression should not be confused with transcending those conditions" (ibid.:133). Leith Mullings also notes that feminist analyses of female headed households often view them as a form of independence rather than an imposed situation or one chosen "within a range of options severely limited by hierarchies of race, class, and gender" (1995: 133). This perspective resonates in the efforts of the Dignas to *conscienticize* the *demandantes* to view their circumstance from a similar place of ambiguity. Like Collins and Mullings, they recognize that value accorded the role of mothers in Salvadoran society does not erase the tremendous burden Salvadoran mothers shoulder.

In addition to the critiques of African-America women, other women of color and from the "Third World" challenged the way that feminism had essentialized them as women, ignoring that factors other than sexism may have an even greater impact on their identity and on the conditions under which they live. Decrying the ahistoric universalizing of Western feminists' strategies for analyzing motherhood cross-culturally, Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991) called for a recognition of the fact that while women have responsibility for the role of mother in a variety of societies, this is "not as significant as the value attached to mothering in these societies" (60). It is not that women carry out the role of mothering that is significant, but the way that role is valued, or not, in different societies. As the complexity of the dynamics between mothering and women's status was increasingly recognized, the efforts to theoretically link that relationship to a universal explanation of women's oppression gradually were

abandoned.

The focus of feminist theorizing on motherhood shifted quite abruptly to the issues of surrogacy and new reproductive technologies when the case of baby M was jettisoned into the mainstream press. As Elayne Rapping (1990) discusses the case, it presented a situation which compelled many feminists who had argued that motherhood was a social, rather than biological, construction, to argue that the baby belonged to the birth mother because of their biological bonds. The historical context of the case (the birth mother was poor while birth father was an educated professional who had contracted with the mother to be inseminated, bear a child, and turn it over to him and his wife) illustrated the shortcomings of theorizing outside of political and historic contexts.

The AMD's organizing, and this analysis of that process, is based on the recognition that motherhood is a social relation constructed under specific historic and social conditions. But saying this should not obscure the fact that these conditions do not determine the meaning that motherhood takes for individual women or how they act on that meaning. In fact, the AMD illustrates what role human agency can have in affecting how motherhood is constructed.

**Setting the Stage for Demanding the *Cuota*:
the *Procuraduría General de la República***

The faint outline of the words *Procuraduría General de Pobres* (Attorney General of the Poor) can still be made out on the facade of the tall concrete building that housed the PGR prior to the 1986 earthquake. The structure has been left standing

unused, with spilled files still visible from the doorways one walks past to get to the current offices. These are housed in a series of crudely constructed wooden buildings, or *cabuñas provisionales* as the *Procurador* called them. The *Procuraduría* was established in the early 1950s as part of the process of modernization of the state apparatus which accompanied the policy of import substitution (Vázquez and Murguialday 1996). The name was updated to *Procuraduría General de la República* in the 1970s. Originally the institution was established to provide some relief to the misery of the old, infirm, and abandoned children. During the war, when being in a union meant being caught between the death squads and the guerrilla, the PGR's role in representing workers expanded. But since the passage of the Family Code in 1994, the increased mobility of the population during the war, and the signing of the Peace Accords, attending to *la cuota alimenticia* has become a major function of the PGR.

The functions that are grouped together in the *Procuraduría* indicate that state institutions, like other classificatory systems, reflect the particular values of the cultures in which they are situated. The PGR's current constitutional mandate calls for it "to watch over the defense of the family and of persons, and the interests of minors and others incapable of taking care of themselves." This function is to be fulfilled by "giving legal assistance to persons with few resources and representing them in court in the defense of their individual liberty and labor rights." It is a very different role than that of similar institutions in other countries, I was told by Licenciado Miguel Angel Cardoza

Ayala, the *Procurador General de la República*, the Attorney General.³⁸ In other places the Attorney General's office generally represents the state and those accused of crimes, he explained. But in El Salvador its function is quite distinct. The institution was established to provide legal and social services to those with few resources.

But to the Dignas, the PGR is something altogether very different. They see the institution as "the largest stage in the country where men and women each day face off over the fulfillment of their respective roles in caring for children" (Vázquez and Murguialday 1996: 13). This is a very literal description of the process that women go through in order to solicit the aid of the state in convincing the fathers of their children to financially support their offspring. Poor women, mostly those who have had *uniones de hechos*, informal unions, or common-law marriages, come to the PGR when the fathers of their children cease to support them. Eventually, if they are even initially successful, they must meet face to face with the fathers of their children to negotiate an amount that he will contribute to their upkeep. But if the PGR has created the stage for these negotiations to take place, the AMD has become an unexpected actor, sometimes welcome, sometimes not, whose improvisations are rapidly changing the scenery.

For many of the women who come to make a *demanda* at the PGR, the first step is to legally establish the paternity of their children. *Demandados* (those who are the objects of the *demandas*) often initially deny that they are the fathers of their child even when they know it to be true. In some cases it is possible to document the existence of

³⁸ Interview done in the office of the *Procurador General de la República*, San Salvador January 7, 1997.

prior relationships to establish paternity. Many of the cases are much more complex, however, such as the ones where women become pregnant as a result of a rape by their employer. This is a particularly high risk for domestic workers who are often young women from the countryside and as a result are extremely vulnerable to the assaults of men in the families where they work. Recognition can be voluntary or it can be forced (*forzoso*), secured through a legal procedure in which the woman has to submit evidence to a judge. Since DNA testing was not even available until recently and still remains out of reach of the vast majority of women who come to the PGR, the process of securing recognition of paternity is often unsuccessful, generally prolonged, and almost always extremely painful and humiliating for the women involved.

When paternity is established, or if the *demandado* recognizes his children, the *cuota* is established through the Department of Family Relations (DFR) of PGR. The *demandante* (the one making the *demanda*) must present her identification and the birth certificates of the children. The DFR worker will send a notice to the workplace or home of the *demandado* informing him of the date and time that he must appear for the *comparendo* (appearance). The appointment can be anywhere from two to three weeks from the date the woman initiates the process. If the *demandado* does not appear for the first appointment, he will be summoned again. Legally, the *bachilleres*³⁹ (workers in the DFR) are supposed to send out a warrant if he does not show up after the second time he

³⁹ The title comes from the fact that originally, one had to have received their *bachillerato*, or high school diploma to work in the DRF, and professionals are usually referred to by a title. Currently the requirement is that they be getting their law degree. Consequently, a number of the staff is permanently in their last year of law school.

is summoned. According to an investigation by the Dignas, fewer than half show up the first time and more than a third appear only after being called three or more times (1996: 129). Returning for these appointments represents a significant hardship for women who have few resources, who must sacrifice earnings to attend, who are responsible for small children, and who must travel into San Salvador from inaccessible areas. If the *demandado* does not show up, a warrant for his arrest will be issued but is often ignored.

If he does appear, the *demandante* and *demandado* sit down in the crowded cubicles of one of the *bachilleres* who acts as a negotiator. While officially the head of the DFR is supposed to preside over the meeting (*el comparendo*), but the case load long ago made that an unrealistic procedure. The *demandante* presents the child's needs while the *demandado* documents his ability to contribute to the child's upkeep. If they arrive at a mutually acceptable amount, the *cuota* is set. When an agreement cannot be reached and the *demandado* has a regular salary, the *bachiller* imposes a preliminary *cuota* until more evidence can be provided. If the *demandado* works in the informal market or for himself, the Department of Social Work of the PGR is notified and they impose a *cuota* after carrying out a socio-economic study.

Once established, the *cuota* is supposed to be deducted each month from the *demandados'* paycheck by his employers and deposited directly into the PGR. Women have to come to the Accounting Department (*Control de Depósitos*) of the PGR to pick up the *cuota*. But often the money does not arrive and the *demandado* goes into default (*mora*). When this happens, women are forced to go back to the DFR to initiate the

process of investigating the *mora*. Many women also soon return to the DFR when they find that the *cuota* that was established is inadequate and they must appeal for it to be increased.

The *Cuota* as a Tactic in Challenging *Machismo*

In soliciting a *cuota*, women are coping directly with what is regarded by most Salvadorans as a cultural trait of Salvadoran men, *la paternidad irresponsable*, irresponsible fatherhood. Increasingly recognized as a problem, it is, however, generally seen as an innate component of traditional Salvadoran masculinity or *machismo*. But the Dignas have rejected the belief that gender roles are natural. They have promoted a feminist perspective that reframed *machismo* as sexism and argued that it supported traditional gender roles were that were socially constructed to ensure male power and female subordination. The issue of *paternidad irresponsable* provided them with a vehicle to directly challenge these roles. The introduction to their first investigation of the issue states that “in the opinion of the Dignas, the *demanda de cuota de alimenticia* articulates the practical necessities of thousands of women with the conception that they, along with the rest of society, have about motherhood, fatherhood, and the family” (Baires et al. 1996: 8). Through the AMD, they sought to organize *demandantes* around these practical necessities, to *conscienticize* them about their rights as women, and to challenge the cultural patterns that encouraged *paternidad irresponsable*.

But the Dignas went beyond challenging the ideological underpinnings of

machismo. They recognized the growing importance of the role that the state played in shaping gender and family relations in the period “democratization” and “modernization” that El Salvador was going through following the war and the implementation of the Peace Accords. The response of the state to *paternidad irresponsable* was insufficient, according to their perspective, simply “translat[ing] the interests of women (that the fathers contribute to the sustenance of the children) into a legal issue (the right to receive child support) and into an administrative issue (the collection of the payment) (1996: 16).” The Dignas understood that the state had the capacity to use institutions like the PGR to move beyond the mere treatment of the consequences of *paternidad irresponsable*, for example, to adopt policies that could lead to the restructuring of Salvadoran gender relations. The tactic of organizing *demandantes* was intended, not only to reshape women’s conception of gender roles, specifically the rights and obligations of motherhood and fatherhood, but to pressure the state to make institutional changes that would actively combat *paternidad irresponsable*.

Separating Sexuality from Reproduction

I asked Vilma Vásquez,⁴⁰ one of the original members of the Dignas and a founders of the AMD, about the history of the Association. She started by explaining that the initial project followed the first major reevaluation of the Dignas’s “strategies to enable women to accumulate power and economic autonomy as well as participate

⁴⁰ Comments are based on my notes from an untaped interview on February 20, 1997 in San Salvador.

equally in the strategies, politics, and benefits of the economic development of the country” (*Mujeres por la Dignidad y La Vida* 1993: n.p.). Up until 1993, their major focus had been working in rural communities developing projects, such as bakeries, animal raising, and local cooperative stores, aimed at generating income for poor women, specifically those in repopulated villages, and more specifically, in areas where many of the Dignas’ founders had operated as FMLN *guerrilleras*. The strategy behind these projects was based on theories which were circulating in transnational feminist development circles. These theories divided the motives behind women’s organizing into practical needs versus strategic interests (Molyneux 1985; Moser 1989). In providing women a means to an income and legitimate excuse to get out of the house and meet with other women (their practical interests), their goal was that women would become interested in the feminist ideas (the strategic interests) that the Dignas were promoting. Once they had the opportunity to reflect upon their own experiences, with the support of women from the Dignas, they would be motivated to organize as women and join the organization.

But the strategy had not been working as they had planned. The challenges of making the projects function overwhelmed the processes of changing women’s consciousness. Despite the fact that the projects were successful in channeling some funds into women’s hands (for the most part), few of them became feasible economically. Weighing the large amount of time and money that was being spent on the projects and the small number of women they were affecting, some within the Dignas

began questioning whether the efforts that these types of project required were justified (See *Mujeres por la Dignidad y la Vida* 1993; Stephen 1997).

The Dignas could have continued to raise money to keep the projects going, however, according to Vilma, there were several other issues which made the organization, amidst much contention, decide to shift their orientation. The relationships between the poorer rural participants in the productive projects and the more educated urban women who formed the core of the Dignas shared some of the same characteristics that many of the women had experienced in the RN, and had rejected when they asserted their autonomy from the party. Vilma explained how the women from the Dignas came to be viewed primarily as a source of funds by the participants. They found themselves falling into *asencialismo*, the practice of giving people things and maintaining their dependency rather than enabling them to help themselves. What they wanted was to find better ways to make women “protagonists” and it did not seem to be happening through the productive projects. Consequently at the annual Dignas’ assembly at Coatepeque in 1993, a proposal was approved to stop developing productive projects and to focus on organizing women around feminist issues.

During this the same period, Vilma told me, she had filed a *demanda* against the father of her youngest son. As a result she not only had a first hand knowledge of the humiliation and frustration of the experience, but she became aware of the large number of women who were coming to the *Procuraduría* each day to go through a similar process. Norma Vázquez, a Mexican feminist who worked with the Dignas, proposed

that they do an investigation of the situation of the *demandantes*. The issue seemed like a good one, Vilma recalled, because of its interlocution (*interlocución*) with the state. All the laws used the nuclear family as a model, she explained, when the reality is that the prevalent form of family in El Salvador is a woman with children. The question for the Dignas was how to reshape the ideal to take that reality into account.

Vilma's personal history, she explained, of working in the Ministry of Agriculture had provided her with some positive experiences in negotiating with the state and with the confidence that she had the power to do so. She felt that it was important to do so in order to balance out the relationship between the state and civil society. But she was also not the only Digna who had experience in working with the state. Gilda Parducci⁴¹ had joined the Dignas after spending more than ten years in exile in Costa Rica where she had encountered feminism working with *El Colectivo Pancho Carrasco*. Before leaving El Salvador in 1981, however, Gilda had worked in the *Procuraduría*. When the Dignas began working on the *madres demandantes* project, she discovered that many of her former colleagues were still working there and was able to reestablish a relationship with them. While her contacts were not sufficient to convince the *Procurador*⁴² to allow them to give trainings to the staff, it did enable the Dignas to incorporate the views of current and former staff into their research. At the same time

⁴¹ Based on notes from an untaped interview with Gilda Parducci on November 12, 1996 in San Salvador.

⁴² The most recent *Procurador* told me that he did not know that the Dignas did trainings. But he was very pleased with the fact that Cemujer was providing workshops on gender to his staff.

that the investigation was being carried out, Vilma and another member of the Dignas, Arecey López, began organizing meetings to advise the *demandantes* of their rights and to treat their emotional distress. These centered around a variety of problems, according to Vilma: incest, powerlessness, motherhood, child abuse, and battering. Soon even the *Procuraduría* staff began sending difficult cases to the Dignas to get assistance (including, according to Gilda, custody cases where giving the women the children may not have been the best alternative).

In this conversation, Vilma emphasized a point that she had made to me in other discussion we have had. She explained that in El Salvador sexuality and motherhood were intricately linked. While for men, sexuality and fatherhood are completely different, totally separate, women here do not see them as separate options, she claimed. For women, their sexuality did not exist apart from motherhood; sexuality implied reproduction. As a result she saw one of the major goals of the feminist movement as that of tearing apart this dyad (*el desmontaje de estos dos*) and to open up the potential for women to experience sexuality in terms of their own pleasure by separating it from reproduction.

One of the risks that she saw in the AMD's work is that they are going to turn children into property and that they may undermine women's rights to their children. That is why she felt that it was so important that this work be done from a feminist perspective that both recognizes the often overlooked investment that women have in their children and is committed to making women's work more visible. But at the same

time, she expressed concern that AMD not repeat the errors that other Latin American women's groups have made around the issue of women's role as mothers. She does not want them to reinforce that idea that the role of women is as mothers.

The Dignas Give Birth to the AMD

According to Ana Murcia,⁴³ the coordinator of the Dignas' *Cuota equipo*, the original investigation by Sonia Baires, Dilcia Marroquín, Clara Murguialday, Ruth Poñanco, and Vázquez (*Mujeres por la Dignidad y la Vida* 1996) was intended to develop their empirical knowledge of the situation rather than making any demands. But women soon began coming to the Dignas seeking support and the organization started formally providing legal services to *demandantes* by the end of 1994. The idea of organizing the AMD, as a tool for lobbying, came later, according to Ana. First they organized a group around the issue of violence but it was not successful. Then in 1995 they started a "*grupo de atención organizativa*," a group in which the women would be treated and organized. This developed into an initiative which went beyond the Dignas goal of "analyzing, pushing forward, and supporting the collective action" of the *demandantes* (Vázquez and Murguialday 1996: 79) to one which actually "brought the *demandantes* together as a group which would express their political interests" (*ibid.*). With funds from the European Union and Canada, the office of the Association of Madres Demandantes, separate from the Dignas, opened in 1995 around the corner from

⁴³ Based on notes of an untaped interview with Ana Murcia on January 17, 1997 in San Salvador.

the *Procuraduría*.

By that time, they had already accomplished some dramatic achievements. Through pressure and negotiation, they had succeeded in resolving numerous difficult cases that had been stalled in the *Procuraduría*. When, as part of the Peace Accords, the National Police was dissolved and the administrative staff and troops laid off, they had mounted public campaigns, including press conferences, to demand that the *demandantes* of these employees receive a fair share of the severance pay that their *demandados* were awarded. While the AMD's proposals were not adopted, their reactions demonstrated their ability to respond to the needs of their constituency. Then in July of 1995, UNICEF awarded the Dignas' their first annual communication award for their work in generating publicity around the issue of *cuotas alimenticias*.

As the AMD established itself, three competing and sometime conflicting sets of activities, and several groups of actors with distinct characteristics, emerged within and around the organization. The activities included the provision of legal and psychological services to *demandantes*, mutual-help groups for guided feminist reflections on the experiences of motherhood and being a *demandante*, and lobbying to challenge the institutionalized *machismo* in society, in general, and in the policies and practices of the PGR in specific. The activities were directed by a nucleus of women, most of them originally from the Dignas, with a history of involvement in the FMLN and the women's movement. Increasingly the services were provided by a broader circle of women who either formally affiliated with the Association by paying dues, or who did so informally

by consistently participating in the daily activities of the organization. Finally there were the women who used the services that were provided but did not become any further involved with the organization.

In the middle of 1996, the Dignas went through an organizational restructuring. Previously the organization had had a general secretary and two coordinators; one coordinator was responsible for the programs in metropolitan San Salvador, the other coordinated those in the rural areas. The restructuring established the eleven programs which were operating when I arrived with the *Coordinadora* as the decision making body. At that time, the AMD separated from the Dignas and became administratively independent. According to Ana, the crisis at the Dignas at this time caused the two groups to “lose their orientation” in terms of their relationship to one another, and competition arose as to which group would determine the direction that the struggle would take. In our interview Ana expressed a desire to strengthen the relationship between the two groups but as the coordinator of the Dignas’ *equipo*, she felt unable to do so. However, while the AMD operated increasingly autonomously, their primary funding came through a grant made to the Dignas. This situation made the relationship problematic in ways that will be discussed below.

While the AMD worked with *demandantes* coming to the San Salvador office of the *Procuraduría*, the Dignas’ *Equipo de Cuotas* began to organize *campesina demandantes* in Sensuntepeque, one of the two district capitals in the department of Cabañas. Cabañas had been one of the earliest and most important centers of the Dignas

work. Their only productive project that managed to survive independent of the Dignas once they changed their focus was a bakery located in Santa Marta. The original inhabitants of Santa Marta fled the war to refugee camps in Honduras such as Mesa Grande and the remote rural area had been repopulated by the RN in 1988 with former residents who were subsequently joined by demilitarized *guerrilleros* and *guerilleras* after the signing of the Peace Accords. The Dignas' decision to stop promoting the productive projects cost them much support in Santa Marta. Women in the community were already divided between the Dignas and a women's organization that had been set up by the RN. This paralleled the way that the government had established parallel unions during the war to undermine FMLN supported labor groups. But the Dignas maintained three local promoters in Sensuntepeque, including one who worked on the issue of *cuotas*. As elaborated in their 1997 planning session, their goals included:

1. organizing the *demandantes* in the district of Sensuntepeque.
2. investigating the services available there, particularly the issues surrounding the need to negotiate *cuotas in-kind*. Because of the rural economy, *demandados* commonly did not have access to cash and were only able to pay the *cuotas* by providing portions of the products that they raised. As a result, *cuotas* were often granted in terms such as a specified number of *quintales de maiz* (bushels of corn).
3. specializing on the issue of *reconocimiento* (recognizing paternity) by developing a theoretical approach and documenting the problems associated with it in order to raise it to a level of public debate .
- 4 continuing to support the AMD in the formation of feminist leaders in an alliance to struggle politically and in their still overlapping financial commitments.

The Dignas *equipo* consisted of the coordinator, a local promoter in Sensuntepeque, two

lawyers, and a social worker. They relied on the Mental Health *Equipo* to provide psychologists. Until the end of 1996, the Dignas also sent their lawyers to hold weekly consultations and their psychologists to facilitate their self-help sessions at the AMD. When tensions between the two groups intensified in late 1996, I was told that it was in part because of the AMD's dissatisfaction with services they were receiving from the Dignas, particularly from the lawyers, and their failure to resolve the complaints. By the beginning of 1997, the AMD stopped using the legal and psychological support of the Dignas. As did all the Dignas' *equipos*, the Association had participated in an annual evaluation in January of 1997 in cooperation with the Dignas' Violence and *Cuota equipos*. These evaluations, and the formal planning process which accompanied them, were part of the requirements of international funding that the Dignas received. Soon after they completed the evaluation, the AMD restructured both their relationship with the Dignas and their own internal structure.

Orienting Civil Society toward a New Relationship with the State

Before the restructuring, several of the staff had worked as promoters, circulating between the waiting areas of the DFR and the Accounting Department which is in a building around the block. This was where I came upon Anabel Salazar and Reina Vigil, the two promoters, the first time I visited the office. I had been told that the office was around the corner from the *Procuraduria* but was having a hard time finding it. While asking directions from one of the food vendors in the shacks which ring the agency, the two

women strolled up carrying notebooks and flyers about the organization. I introduced myself and asked them where I could find Vilma Vásquez, whom I already knew. As we walked to the office, they began to tell me about their work.

Over the next few months, I occasionally accompanied the promoters as they went on their rounds. My fieldnotes from Thursday, December 12, document the process of arranging one of those experiences:

On Monday afternoon, I stopped in at the AMD before going to the gym (*El Palacio de los Deportes*) to workout to see if Anabel or Reina would be going out in the morning. Neither of them was around but Patricia [the secretary] told me that they would be in later and she would let them know that I was coming by the next morning. When I got there Tuesday morning, Reina was about to go out. Patricia told me that she had given Anabel the message and she had said nothing to Reina but “*ni modo*” (it doesn’t matter), Reina was there and she grabbed some flyers about the *aguinaldo*⁴⁴ and together with a women who needed some kind of intervention, we headed over to the *Contabilidad* [Accounting] office.

The *Contabilidad*’s office is around the corner from the *Procuraduria*. The AMD’s office is in the middle of the two but a block west. So if you leave in one direction you hit the *Procuraduria*. If you go in the other, you’ll pass the *Contabilidad*. On the way over, Reina told me that the office had been full the last couple of days and she expressed amazement at how many women were waiting outside the *Contabilidad*’s office when we arrived. In fact, she sent me back to the office to get a camera so she could document it. At first it didn’t seem so crowded to me. Half of the three rows of seats were empty in the waiting area, an open veranda covered by a corrugated metal roof. But when I looked closer, I realized that the empty seats were unoccupied because they were in the blazing midday sun. Several women, many with several small children, were standing in shaded areas waiting to be called.

There’s one window [where women receive services] and the line of women leading to it stretched out into the street. As we came closer, women began to approach Reina with questions and problems. For the entire time that she was there, every time she stopped moving, or even

⁴⁴ The *aguinaldo* is Christmas bonus that is a benefit expected as part of a regular salary. The legislature had just passed a law which allowed the PGR to include it as part of the quota.

when she was in motion, women crowded around her. A few minutes after we arrived, a social worker from the *Procuraduría* came out [from inside the building to the waiting area] and gave a talk. “Thanks to the work of the Association,” she began and went on to explain the passage of *Decreto* 880 which entitled women who were receiving a *cuota* to an additional thirty percent of the *aguinaldo*. This talk was the only information the government provided on the *aguinaldo*. On the other hand, Reina was handing out the flyer, frequently handwriting the telephone number of the *Asociación* on it, to women who eagerly took it from us.

After the social worker finished her talk, she came over to talk to Reina and give her some additional information. Then she and Reina went inside the office and Reina sat at a desk in the hallway from which she attended several women. She then went inside to confer with one of what seem like exclusively male civil servants (with the exception of the social workers who were female) who had information about who had deposited their *cuotas* when, or not . . .

We went back to the office after about an hour. But within a short period of time, Reina was headed back for another round and I again went with her. We were accompanying a woman who’s ex worked for the PNC and it turned out that her *cuota* had been deposited but it came later than usual. Again [Reina] was swamped by women with questions about the *aguinaldo* as well as concerns about late payments and other general issues.

When we got back to the office Anabel had arrived and so I took off with her to the *Procuraduría* . . . As opposed to the other office, the *Procuraduría* [we were in the DRF] was relatively empty, according to Anabel. Posters from the AMD are displayed on the doors as you enter and on the walls of the waiting area. Anabel’s style was much different from what I observed of Reina’s. As she handed the flyers out, she gave a little talk about the AMD and how women could improve their situation by joining together with women in the same condition. When one of the women told her that she was just beginning the process, she reminded her that she was not doing this for herself but for her children and this was their right, “*No está rogando*,” she told her. “You are not begging.”

The demand for the promoters’ services was not always as great as it was the day I documented in my notes. What made it so intense during this period was that a decree had just been passed that stipulated that the *demandados*’s Christmas bonus would be discounted as part of the *cuota* had just been passed, a process that will be discussed

below. But this excerpt illustrates the process by which the AMD attracted women to their organization by providing them with support and services.

It also demonstrates the degree to which the *Procuraduría* had come to rely on the organization to supplement its services. There was an uneasy, unofficial cooperation between the PGR and the Association in which the promoters worked with *demandantes* in ways that the institutions' scarce resources limited their staff from doing. Douglas Carranza Aguirre,⁴⁵ the director of the Office of Information and Reception of the PGR, readily acknowledged this to me. He explained that many of women who come to the PGR are completely ignorant of what they must go through in order to solicit a *cuota* and are profoundly intimidated by the process. "From this point of view," he told me, "I think that the Association of *Madres Demandantes* has played a very important role, a role in orienting [the women who come to the PGR]. On the other hand, they generate a kind of confidence in these women."

In their discussions with me both he, and as will be discussed below, the *Procurador*, emphasized the importance of the AMD not just in supplementing their services but in building Salvadoran civil society. Stressing their contribution to his department, Carranza expressed the belief that "it is worth it to strengthen associations like this one, that are, as I said, orienteers. We, here, as the ones who receive the applications for assistance that the women submit, there's not sufficient personnel to be able to launch the work in the field and to carry out this mission of orienting people who

⁴⁵ Based on an interview done February 10, 1997 in San Salvador, El Salvador.

come in from the countryside. People [come to us] who are peasants (*campesinas*), who because of their way of life often have little knowledge of the basic rights that they have as women and children, as minors.”

But not everyone in the *Procuraduría* had an equally positive assessment of the work of the Association. The director of the Department of Family Relations, Hilda Edith Herrera Reyes, rejected the idea that the AMD had contributed to a greater awareness of the problem of *paternidad irresponsable*.⁴⁶ She pointed to the 1994 adoption of the Family Code as the most significant factor in increasing the rights of families in El Salvador (as Carranza and others also did). Until that time family law had been based on the Civil Code of 1860. The adoption of the new law “initiated the process of making the Family Code known publicly, of making rights known publicly, [international] conventions about children’s rights . . . Today women know about their rights.” For her and her staff, the major problem with the Association was that the promoters often gave the *demandantes* erroneous information.

Magdalena Ramos, one of the *bachilleres* who set up and mediated the *comparendum* between the *demandantes* and the *demandados*, accused some of the AMD promoters of “arrogance.”⁴⁷ I talked with her one afternoon in her small cubicle. The *demandantes* often complain that the physical space of the *Procuraduría* afforded them little privacy as, in the course of negotiating the *cuota*, they revealed the intimate

⁴⁶ Interview February 10, 1997 in San Salvador.

⁴⁷ Interview February 19, 1997 in San Salvador.

and often painful details of the lives. This was aptly illustrated as other *bachilleres*, having overhead my conversation with Ramos from several cubicles away, joined in the discussion. Their comments revealed the tension between their awareness that they, themselves, could someday be in the situation of the women they attended, and their responsibility as the arbitrator the laws and policies of the PGR. “I think of each of these women as possibly being myself,” Ramos told me. “Who knows, tomorrow I could be in their place.” The *bachilleres* complained that the AMD gave women erroneous information and insisted that the *bachilleres* should do things that went beyond what was permitted by law.

They know the procedures, as do we, as lawyers. Something administrative, some simple paperwork, we know the process and, as lawyers, we stick to the procedures. We’re not going to do what they want like impose a *cuota* when we’ve just called the guy in for an appointment . . . Or that we go bring him in here . . . We would be violating their rights. We all have rights. The man might be irresponsible but he still has rights. The constitution gives him them. A constitutional right would be even worse! . . . [The AMD promoters] give [the *demandantes*] the incorrect information so they think that we are uninformed which is really bad and it make it so you don’t want to work . . . What the Association does, and maybe it’s not just them because the Dignas also do this and other women, what they do is to undermine one’s work.”

The workers were aware that the *Procurador* was sympathetic to the complaints that the AMD brought to him and they resented that the promoters used this against them. “For example,” one of the *bachilleres* that had joined the discussion recalled, “one time a woman [the AMD] sent over said that she had come before and something had been sent . . . no, that [the *demandado*] had been called for the first time, he was from the police, and they went away angry. They didn’t understand. ‘Now we’re going to go to the

Procurador!” That’s the threat, ‘We’re going to the *Procurador*.’”

The different views of the AMD by the various officials and staff of the PGR, illustrate the danger of generalizing about the state’s response towards resistance. Even within one institution, it is clearly not monolithic. On the street level, the *bachilleres* are required to negotiate between the *demandantes* and *demandados* within the confines of the law and the reality that the already limited resources of many of these families are frighteningly insufficient to cover the needs of the children, women, and men involved. The pressures applied by the AMD are clearly making their jobs more difficult. But for other departments, such as the Office of Information and the Control of Deposits, the promoters’ have provided services that have supplemented the overburdened staffs of these departments.

Sensitizing the *Demandantes*

There was one positive effect of the Association’s work which both the staff of the DFR, and the other PGR officials I interviewed, recognized; Participation in the Association was improving the self-esteem of the *demandantes*. Herrera, the head of the DFR, recalled that while attending the celebration of the first anniversary of the AMD, she ran into several women who had previously passed through her office. She noticed significant changes in their attitude. “Women whom I had seen before as timid and with low self-esteem, now they speak out, they stand up for themselves. They have found their voice,” she remarked. Even the *bachilleres* appreciated that the AMD was addressing

needs that they had neither the resources nor time to address.

Within the PGR, there are multidisciplinary teams including psychologists and social workers but as Carranza told me, they are “available only for a minuscule number of cases because the flow of people is terrible and the personnel is scarce.” While the AMD did not have the resources to individually address the emotional needs of all the women who came to their offices, they made it a much higher priority than the PGR. They had psychologists from the Dignas who were available once a week to see women and they could refer women who were in need of more attention to the Dignas’ Mental Health *equipo*. But the most effective mechanism they established for providing women with emotional support was the Thursday morning drop-in group. Not so incidentally, it was also the AMD’s primary vehicle for raising the *demandantes*’ consciousness about their role as women and challenging their attitudes toward motherhood. Excerpts from my edited fieldnotes provide a sense of the meetings:

Thursday [October 17, 1996] I came back to the AMD as I was hoping to accompany the promoters as they made their round of the *Procuraduría* but neither of them nor Vilma was there. But at least one woman was waiting for the *Reunion de Sensibilización* when I came in at 9, the scheduled time of the meeting. (This thing about time, I will eventually figure out. A forum was supposed to start at one today. I arrived with the three speakers at about 1:40 and it started at about 2:15). By 10:10 about fifteen women have gathered in the chairs set up in the open space of the second floor office around the corner from the *Procuraduría*. Monse, one of the psychologists from the Dignas, has spread out colored pieces of paper on the floor. Each one has a “feeling” written on such as: capable, content, happy, abnegated, scared, responsible, committed, complete, fulfilled, cheerful, self-sacrificing, overburdened, guilty. I have asked Monse to introduce me and ask the women if it is okay if I observe their meeting. They respond with applause.

“How does it feel to be a mother?” Monse asks and instructs them

to select the words that describe how they are feeling today. The women get up from their chairs and pick words, several for some of them. (I recognize some of the women from the *foro*.) Monse asks who would like to explain why they chose the words they picked up. The first woman, Angela⁴⁸, (I know her name only because they are all wearing name tags made of pieces of paper cut in the shape of flowers. The tags are hung up on the bulletin board between meetings.) explains that she is angry because her case is not going as fast as she had hoped, happy to be with these other women and that her case is in process, lucky (*dichosa*) to be responsible for her son, and feels alive because of her work. Monse responds by asking her, "Haven't you made a lot of sacrifices?" "Yes," she responds. Monse seems to be trying to point to the underside of motherhood. As women continue to filter in, she talks about how women have been trained since childhood to be mothers and that it's not all that it is supposed to be. "It's difficult!" she says characterizing her remarks as "a little reflection." She asks for another volunteer . . . Sara jumps in . . . She tearfully describes her situation. Her oldest daughter is with her mother who has been deathly opposed to giving her up. Her husband has custody of her son whom she is trying to get back. But because the father is more lenient and has more money, the son does not want to come back to her. She's terrified that her youngest daughter will decide that she too wants to leave. Monse provides her with toilet paper to wipe away the tears.

Monse's response is that we think our children are "ours, our property and these are valid feelings." But she added it's necessary "to learn to take time for ourselves." [Later when I asked Monse about the meeting she remarked that she was very unsatisfied with it because there was too much idealizing of motherhood for her to deal with it effectively.]

By 10:30 there are 22 women.

One of the women with whom I had chatted before the meeting, Sofia, describes her situation next. She was left by the father of her three children for another woman. So she takes half the furniture in the house and leaves with it. He has brought charges of robbery against her and there is an order for her arrest [In El Salvador, civilians can initiate charges.] She is terrified that she will be arrested and her children will be left alone. There is a lot of response from the women in the room. One encourages her to "trust in God" but her litany of her own struggle details that she's also made use of Tutela Legal [a Catholic legal rights service], the Institute for the Protection of Children and the AMD.

Monse also affirms Sofia's right to the things that she took. .

⁴⁸ The names of women in the groups are pseudonyms.

.These last two women have taken up about a half an hour each. Monse gives instructions for the others to keep it short so that more women can speak. Irma has chosen the words responsible, animate, and content. She says that she is proud that she has put her daughter through school and happy that she is in first place in her class. Marina, one of the more middle class looking women in the group, is celebrating her one year separation. She tells the group that she did not leave her house so that she would not lose it. She has grabbed the words *realizado* (self-actualized) because she has been awarded 1500 colones a month for a cuota (US\$173) for six kids. [This is not bad considering that the *Procuraduría* reported that 65% of the *demandantes* receive less than 100 colones per month or about US\$11.50 (Baires et al. 1996: 136).]

Debora speaks next. She cannot pay her daughter's school fees and unless she comes up with some of it, they are threatening not to pass her. Her ex-husband says that he will pay it if she withdraws her demand. Again this generates a lot of response and support. One young woman who says that she is still with her husband explains that she is a teacher and advises her to go to higher authorities in the school system to explain the problem assuring Debora that she can get some more time. Debora has also selected cards with the words happy and calm and that is how being with these women makes her feel she says.

One of the women comments that women can work but no matter how much they work, they are going to need "*la ayuda de el,*" his help. Monse is quick to correct her. "It's not help, it's their responsibility." With that she calls the meeting to an end.

Most of the women hang around chatting. I turn to the woman who has been sitting beside me. She had continuously tried to talk to me during the second half of the meeting and as politely as possible I tried to discourage her from talking to me and encouraged her instead to talk to the group. She had selected a card which indicated that she was afraid. "I don't have the courage," she told me. So after the meeting I encouraged her to tell me her story. About twelve years ago, she was raped by her boss and ended up with twins as a result. She has decided to put in a *demanda* as the boys are getting older and asking about their father, and as they get older, the costs of raising them increases. The father has a good job at *Pollo Campero* (the Salvadoran equivalent of Kentucky Fried Chicken) not far from the office of the Association. And she referred to a new law that made her decide to put in *la demanda*. When she informed him of this he threatened her with arrest.

I told her that I didn't think he could have her arrested and called over to Lorena, the other woman I had chatted with before the meeting. Lorena seems like a real fireball. "I'm not proud to be a single mother,"

she had interjected in the meeting. “I’m tired, mistreated, and bored!” Another woman came over, Maria, also came over to encouraged her. Maria offered to accompany her to her appointment the next day. Lorena shared the fear that she had felt before going to her appointment earlier that morning. Both talked about the support they had found at the *Asociación*. I left them talking noting how the woman, who had struck me as possibly being developmentally disabled, was becoming much more coherent and articulate as she moved beyond the terror that had gripped her throughout the meeting.

The next week I went back again.

Thursday Oct 24 I went headed over to the *Asociación de Madres Demandantes* for second *taller de Sensibilización* . . . This meeting started a little bit earlier than last week. But Monse and Larissa [another of the Dignas’ psychologists] . . . ask those who are coming for the first time to identify themselves and tell us about why they are here.

A woman who is covered with burns over her face and arms tells who she has left her children with someone who is now trying to get permanent custody. She has come with Debora who wants to tell us something else about the woman but Larissa stops her saying that she can speak for herself. The woman sitting beside me appears very sad and suffocating from her fear. She tells us that her three children are living with their father and she wants to get custody. She was sent by Cemujer. Another woman says that she has heard the talks at the *Control de Depósito* and wants to see what the AMD could offer her. There is a woman who discovered that her husband had a lover after he died, a *demandante* with an 8 year old who has never gotten any support, and a woman sent by Lorena for help with a problem with her husband.

Larissa asks for someone to explain what goes on in the meeting. Irma explains: Courage, resolve, peacefulness, counsel, and accompaniment. Sara explains that its emotional support. Larissa emphasizes that “we talk about feelings, we support each other. (Larissa stresses mutuality throughout the meeting.) The meeting is to talk about ourselves because we never think about ourselves. It’s a network to mutually support each other, to bring us together so that we don’t feel alone. Its a space for just us. It’s good for us.” Debora confirms that “I have changed.” Pati says that a friend brought her to see the lawyer who listened to her like she had never been listened to before. She says that she has been helped by the psychologist so that she’s no longer afraid.

We engage in an exercise to draw the persons and things that comprise our world. Monse did not give me paper at first but several of

the women point it out to her and she gives me one to draw. Many of the women draw their children as the center of the picture and leave out a picture of themselves which Mionse and Larissa point out and comment upon. They ask me to show and explain my picture.

At the end of the meeting, Arcely announces a press conference they are having Tuesday. They have been pressuring the *Procuraduría* to claim a part of the Christmas bonus, *el aguinaldo*, for the *demandantes*. They have written a decree that they are going to submit to the Legislative Assembly. She recruits women to attend a press conference.

My notes from the following week included this description:

Larissa built on the exercise by asking the group to draw a picture of our mothers and to put on one side what it is that we don't like about her and on the other side to put what we would change . . . "What does this have to do with us," Larissa asks and then explains, "We are a reflection of our mother. What we don't like and don't want to do as mothers, is what we didn't get as children." Several women draw pictures and say that there is nothing that they would change about their mothers, that they were wonderful, perfect, sacrificed everything for them. When one of the women she wouldn't change anything, Larissa tells her that she doesn't believe her. "Are you the same as your mother?" she asks them. Some say yes, others respond negatively. Unloved, indifferent, ignored are some of the other words that come up. "What do you want to change and what does it have to do you?" She is not easy with them.

Afiliadas, Promotoras, and Feministas

These Thursday morning meetings, according to a study of the AMD (Vásquez and Murguialday: 1996), were cited by all the women interviewed as a major factor in making them feel better about themselves. The study differentiates between the women who helped organize the Association, women whose primary contact is as the recipient of services, and those who are participate actively in the groups but on a voluntary basis. This latter group was referred to by the staff as the *afiliadas*, which, translated literally,

means those who have joined the organization. But since very few of the *madres demandantes* could afford even the modest membership fee that would legitimately bestow that title upon them according to the by-laws of the organization, the term was liberally applied to those women who came in regularly for services, participated in the groups, brought in other women, and provided support for those who found their own way. What the study found was that for the *afiliadas*, the Thursday meetings had contributed significantly to their pride in being *demandantes*.

Vásquez and Murguialday's descriptions of the dynamics of the meetings match those that I attended. They also noted that the meetings regularly start late, beginning only after the psychologists arrive and introduce the objectives and methodology of the group. Pointing to the psychologists' constant efforts to get the women to go beyond talking about their problems to expressing their feelings, they saw the proof of the efficacy of the process in the differences between the *afiliadas* and newcomers: "Women who are there for the first time seem to appear perplexed when they are asked about something they probably have never thought about; those that have been coming longer have learned to recognize and express their feelings more easily" (ibid.: 57). They go on to summarize how the experience contrasts with the treatment they normally receive:

No one has scolded them, rather they have been supportive of them. No one has accused them of being responsible for what happened. The different points of view have been expressed with respect and good judgement. Someone has treated them like adults with the ability to talk about things. They have told them that they have rights and that it is good to fight for them. In a welcoming environment, they have been able to reflect on their experiences and have been given a different way of looking at it (ibid.: 60).

Despite the rhetoric of mutuality, the exchanges within the group circulate in particular patterns which highlight the contradictions between the goal of organizing the *demandantes* to speak for themselves and the promotion of a feminist perspective which is not organic to the *demandantes*. The participation in the group by the paid staff of the AMD was primarily limited to the role of the psychologist facilitator and the making of announcements about activities like the press conference. I also observed one of the other paid staff insisting that the *demandantes* behave appropriately in meetings by sitting women down and grabbing a newspapers out of the hands of a women who continued reading after the meetings had started. Although “they were all *demandantes*,” I never saw any of the paid staff participate in the meeting like the other *demandantes*.

The AMD’s conscious and active reconstruction of the identity of *madre demandante* with a feminist critique of the hegemonic notion of motherhood was a process that was directed by the women who had founded the group. Unlike the *afiliadas* who are encouraged to develop pride in their identity as *madres demandantes*, the organizers’ sense of identity comes from their perception of themselves as “political figures with an important task to fulfill” (ibid.: 61). Their identity as *madres demandantes* was a political choice which had become (or they came to as) a job. As a result, it has been much easier for them, for the most part, to assume an attitude toward motherhood that reflects their feminist perspective and challenges existing ideologies.

Just as the paid staff does not participate in the *sensibilizaciones*, the *demandantes* had very little input into the management of the organization or the

development of its strategies. For example while the *demandantes* were encouraged to attend the press conferences referred to above, the time it was scheduled for was changed so that it was actually held in the place and during the time that the Thursday meeting was supposed to be happening. The press conference preempted the *sensibilización* without warning. The chairs were arranged so that the *demandantes* were seated behind a table where three of the organizers sat, read a statement to reporters, and answered questions. Once it was all over and the meeting was able to begin, Larissa, the psychologist leading the group, had to ask one of the paid staff to explain to the women what the press conference had been about and why they were doing it.

The AMD relied on the skills and analysis of feminists with a background in the revolutionary left to mobilize women from diverse backgrounds. The services such as the Thursday meetings, legal and psychological counseling, and the support of the promoters attracted the *demandantes* to the Association. Once they arrived, they were drawn into a struggle to change not just the attitudes of the *bachilleres* in PGR but the way the Salvadoran state treated mothers.

From the conception of the idea at the Dignas, the aim of starting a group of *madres demandantes* was to recruit women into an organization that would be democratically structured, and that would eventually become an autonomous group. This strategy differed from that of the traditional Salvadoran “mass” organizations formed by the FMLN during the war. Usually mass organizations employed a vertical authority structure headed by a politicized leadership whose role it was to mobilize and direct their

supporters. The Dignas had rejected this model when they left the RN because of the “corruption, impunity, and abuse of power by the ‘aristocracy’ of the popular movement” (Baires et al. 1993: 119) that they felt it bred. Instead they attempted to develop new feminist models of organization which would empower their constituents to analyze their situation through a feminist perspective and to advocate for their own needs. The goal of the AMD was not only to create a vehicle through which women could struggle for their rights as *madres demandantes*, but a place where, in the process, they would develop a consciousness of their oppression as women, and would ultimately join the broader struggle of the women’s movement.

During the time that I spent with at Association, this process was far from being realized. Despite the fact that they had held three Assemblies, the strategies, as well as the elaboration of the overall direction of the AMD were made for the most part by the *directiva*, which consisted of Vilma Vásquez, Nely Rivera, and Arcely López. Several of the women who had been employed as promoters when I first arrived in September also participated in meeting to decide the day-to-day operations. After the beginning of the year, they changed the structure. According to Anabel, she was in charge of outreach and training (*difusion y capacitación*), Arceli and Clelia Trejo of follow-up (*seguimiento*), Reina was responsible for information (*información*), Nely for finances, and Vilma was in charge of “political pressure.” There was also a bookkeeper, a secretary, and a cleaning person, respectively. They had also just hired another woman to coordinate the *demandantes* who were being trained as promoters. This was a group of

four of the *afiliadas* who had shown a high level of commitment to the organization.

Women trying to get *cuotas* come to the AMD primarily because they are seeking the services that the organization has to offer them. Few of these women get involved any further. Vásquez and Murguialday found that there were only 30 women who had “affiliated” with the organization at the time they did their study; by the time it went to publication, the number that had risen 70 (1996: 81). At the Assembly which followed in 1997 over one hundred women participated.

What follows is excerpts from the life story of one of the women who chose to affiliate with the organization, Rosa Imelda. Like most of the women who come to AMD, and unlike most of the women who are in positions of leadership there, Rosa Imelda was not directly involved in the revolutionary left. But there are some ways in which she is quite different from most of the women who come seeking help. As her story reveals, her sense of self is very strong, a characteristic that has enabled her to stake out a role in the AMD. She is very articulate, intelligent and literate, traits which have make her an effective advocate for many of the other women who do not share those traits especially when confronting recalcitrant bureaucrats. She is also a clever politician; despite her lack of experience in organized politics, she was able to outmaneuver women in the AMD whose political background was much more extensive.

Rosa Imelda’ story is not that of a “typical” *madre demandante*, especially since she now has a husband who supports her economically and unequivocally encourages the work she does at the AMD. Few other women in the Association are in a similar

situation. Most must support themselves and their children, and, as a result, have not had the educational opportunities that Rosa Imelda has enjoyed. But her life history vividly illuminates the pressures and processes that shape the forms in which social reproduction takes place in El Salvador. Those modes of reproduction impact the interactions between men and women, between the couple and their children, and between the family and the larger society. The nature of Rosa Imelda's relationship with her older children's father has several elements commonly found in Salvadoran marriages. For example his initial courting of Rosa Imelda, as well as his later philandering behavior, fits the description of *machismo's* "arrogance and sexual aggression in male-to-female relationships" (Stevens 1973: 90).

In addition, Rosa Imelda's involvement with the AMD exposes some of the contradiction created for local feminist organizing by the requirements and limitations of transnational feminism funding. I will return to this issue after Rosa Imelda's narrative of her life history .

The Life History of Rosa Imelda

The process of choosing a woman with whom I would do a life history varied with each branch of the Dignas that I studied. Initially it seemed that selecting a women from the *Asociación de Madres Demandantes* (Association of Mothers seeking Child Support, or AMD) would be easy as the program was concentrated in San Salvador which made the women involved with the program much more accessible to me than

those who worked with other *equipos*. I rapidly realized that the AMD had several layers of involvement as well as an internal hierarchy, and so had to decide from what level I would draw my life history. The first layer consisted of the three women who had initiated the group and remained its intellectual, political, and organizational directors. While these three were all *demandantes* themselves, each of them also had years of involvement with the left, and two of them had been important leaders in the women's movement. The second tier was made up of the five or six other paid staff, two of them administrators, and the other outreach workers (*promotoras*). The *promotoras* approached the *demandantes* waiting outside the offices of the *Procuraduría*, the state institution responsible for child welfare, and provided them with support and services. Most of the *promotoras* also came from the left, some were related to other women who worked in positions of greater authority in the organization, and several of them had their *licenciatura*, or university degree.

I quickly decided that rather than interviewing one of the women in these paid positions, I wanted to talk to one of the grassroots woman of the AMD. While the staff were *demandantes*, their history on the left and their committed involvement in the feminist movement made their experiences particularly exceptional and quite distinct from the *afiliadas*. The *afiliadas* demonstrated their commitment to the issue by their consistent active but voluntary participation in the organization. Because my goal in doing the life history was to capture a sense of the source of that of commitment, I began to try and identify one of the *afiliadas* who would be willing to participate in a life

history. After discussing potential interviewees with the staff, I approached one of the women, who was at the office regularly and who participated actively in the *sensibilizaciones*. I had been struck by her ability to articulate the feminist critique of motherhood motivating the founders of the AMD into everyday language. But unfortunately although she said she was willing to talk with me about her life and involvement with the AMD, over the next several months she repeatedly failed to show up for our appointments or to return my phone calls. When I would see her again at the office and ask if she really wanted to do the interview, she would assure me she did. Finally, I was forced to find someone else and I approached Rosa Imelda.

Rosa Imelda was also a regular in the office and by the time I interviewed her, she had been incorporated into a program that the AMD had initiated to formally train some of their clients, or *usarias*, as *promotoras*. We also had difficulty finding the time to do our interview as both of our schedules were quite full. In addition to working at the AMD, Rosa Imelda was the captain of a championship softball team which was playing regularly. I was trying to finish up observations and interviews in the limited time I had left. On one occasion when we made a date, another Dignas' event required that I cancel, but I invited Rosa Imelda to join us as we had to pass through her town on the way to the event. But in typical fashion, we arrived at the meeting place two hours later than had initially be programmed by which time she had gone home. Despite this, Rosa Imelda did not give up on me and we became quite close through a crisis at the AMD. Her role in the crisis, which will be discuss later in the chapter, illustrates the power and the limits to

that power that the constituency in a grassroots based NGO like the AMD may have.

More than any of the other women in my life stories, Rosa Imelda fails to “represent” the circumstances of a “ideal” *madre demandante*. Unlike most of the women in the Association, she left the father of her first two children rather than being left by him or being abused so severely that she was forced to flee. The father of her first two children was actively involved in one child’s life, and it was the other child that initiated the demand, not Rosa Imelda.⁴⁹ Finally she is now married to a man who has helped her raise all of her children and who supported her in her work at the AMD. But what Rosa Imelda’s story does illustrate are the social conditions that propelled her into an unwanted pregnancy despite her own goals to better herself.

What is also notable about what I share of Rosa Imelda’s story is how few traces it bears of the effects of the war. In parts of the interview that I have edited out, she mentioned the fact that five of her brothers and a former boyfriend were killed in the war. But as Rosa Imelda was born in 1962 and raised in a town close to San Salvador, the war seemed to have a less devastating impact on her on her life than the breakup of her family of origin.

When I asked Rosa Imelda to tell me about her life, she began with the separation of her parents. It was a pivotal event in her life as it caused Rosa Imelda and her twelve siblings to be “scattered like birds in flight, looking for refuge.” As the youngest, the separation hit her particularly hard. Even before the separation, her parents had struggled

⁴⁹ According to Vásquez and Murguialday (1996) it was, however, quite common for women to be motivated to initiate *demandas* by their older children.

economically. Her father worked as a day laborer (*jornalero*) and her mother sold grains from a small stand in the market of San Martín, a town at one of the first crossroads to the east of San Salvador where the highway splits off to Suchitoto or continues on to Cojutepeque. According to Rosa Imelda, her mother left, in part, because of her father's financial irresponsibility, and then, of course, there was another woman.

. . . I had thought that their separation was because my father was very materialistic, in a particular economic way. As they say, he believed that you could buy a lot of stuff with a single colon. I think that their differences came from that and caused them to separate for real. Then we realized that it was because of another woman that they separated . . .

The separation precipitated a tremendous crisis, "*una crisis bastante grosera*," for Rosa Imelda and her siblings. Her description highlights the absence of any resources beyond the family, such as community or state institutions, to address the disintegration of her family.

. . . all of us were wandered around the streets. I say wandered around because, I was with my sisters, my other brothers with other brothers, and well, with other uncles. All of us flying around had a lot to do with their separation because we had to leave the house, you see. And even though it wasn't a good thing, it was there that we learned how to defend ourselves, because otherwise we wouldn't have overcome this too. Because when they separated, we, at least I, was in the second grade, twelve years old.

Her father abandoned her family, taking their meager resources and dedicating them to his new family. Her mother's own struggle to survive meant that she could not even pay the school fees or buy the supplies that Rosa Imelda needed to attend school. For most poor young Salvadoran women, this situation would have meant the end of their schooling. But despite her circumstances Rosa Imelda was determined to continue. In

order to do so, she went to live and work for a woman who promised to pay for her schooling. However, as often occurs when young women go to work as domestics, the situation soon became problematic.

The woman was one of those women who have coffee shops, businesses. So because I wanted to get ahead, to continue learning, I went to work with them and they had promised me that they would help pay for my studies . . . I was thirteen when the father of my two oldest children began to harass me. I was, well, I would say, resigned that . . . no, you know what I mean? Because I had seen the example of my mother. I said, what will I gain if I get a man? They only bother you, they just hurt you and nothing more. That's where they'll leave you.

Rosa Imelda's lack of interest did little to persuade her boss' son to leave her alone. He pursued her relentlessly and when she turned to her family for support and protection, she found little help.

He would not leave me alone. He followed me everywhere including one time when I fled and went to my sister's house. I told her, "Look, this man. . ." because in reality I saw him as being much older than me [he was fifteen year her senior], "Look, he is harassing me and so . . ."

"Oh," she said to me, "you don't have to live with him forever. Why are you running away? If he likes you. . ."

"No! No! I want nothing to do with him! I want to continue studying so why don't you let me live here with you?"

She had a big enough house. So she said, "Fine, there's a room there, and you can sleep on the floor, there's a mattress . . ."

Rosa Imelda's sister's attitude reflected the reality of the situation that her younger sister faced. Without parental support, this man might have been her best alternative, a perspective that Rosa Imelda's friends reinforced. So while her sister provide her with a place to stay, she failed to give her the support that might have allowed her to effectively resist his advances.

It was something of a battle for this man to try and someday win me over. And so with me seeing so much discrimination from my sisters, my mother, my father who had dedicated himself to his other child with another woman, and so I . . .

One day I said to my sister, "Look I am going [to school] today because I have homework that I have to do with some friends which I have to do or I'm not going to get a grade."

"Look for someplace to stay because I'm not going to open the door."

"So why don't you give me the key so I can open it?"

"No."

"It's that . . ."

"No."

So later talking with a friend, I said to her, "Look, I am living with this situation which I don't like and it's making me feel bad."

"But look, if this man offers you a home, why don't you go with him?"

"No, it's not like that. Look, there's no.., I mean."

"Don't be stupid. You know that this . . . Look at your sister, her sister-in-law, she has a bed, a kitchen with everything, a television. And you, what are you to your sister?"

"Well, it's true, I said. "But listen, what benefit am I going to have if I go with this man?"

"He's going to buy you all this and you're going to be okay and not have to go around being a servant⁵⁰ these people.

So, well, it began . . . I left her and he began to harass me. He says, "Come on, let's go. You can see that your family doesn't treat you well."

"Who told you that?" Because although it was true, I always tried to cover it up. "Who told you that?"

"No, you know that your dad left your mom. Your brothers, your other sisters have partners, so what are you going to lose if you come with me? Come on, let's go."

She finally gave in and went with him. But she was not without suspicions.

But I was still worried, you see, and so when we went back to a sister's of his I said to her, "Listen, does he have a wife?"

"No, he doesn't."

"I don't believe it since he's older and so I don't believe it."

"No, he doesn't have one, he doesn't have one and so, look, why? He's with you"

⁵⁰ The word she used was *cholereando* which probably comes from a nahuat word *cholera* or servant (Rivas 1987: 66).

“ . . . Yes, it’s that . . . ”

I don’t know. It’s just that I couldn’t take it anymore. The guy insisted, he insisted. His sister told me that he didn’t have a woman. “Go with him.” I don’t know but I was getting it from all sides, so I decided to go with him.

Later he took me to his sister’s, an older sister. I remember well. I can never forget hearing her ask him, “What have you done?” She said to him, “What have you done?”

As Rosa Imelda listened, the sister chastised her brother for running with women. She encouraged him to take her back to her family but to no avail. “*El hombre*,” as she still referred to him in this part of the narrative, brought her to an uncle’s, and left her there with assurances that he would return in eight days. But before he did, the uncle also encouraged her to return home to her family. He advised her, “ I tell you that you should be ready, when he comes back, because, he’s going to come back, when he comes back, tell him to take you to home, and that he’s going to have to bring you back there, or there are going to be serious consequences.”

And sure enough, the next day the *hombre* came back. But he did not bring her home, instead he brought her to another sister who had a food stand in a traveling fair. It was this sister who confirmed that *el hombre*, whom she finally referred to by name, Daniel, was indeed married and that his wife was likely to show up with their two children. But at that point, “I couldn’t flee because I could already see that my period was late . . . ”

She made a deal with the sister to pretend to be her friend if Daniel’s wife showed up. The wife did show up. Rosa Imelda’s described the stubborn resistance of a pregnant fourteen year old to an increasingly hopeless situation. But it is a recollection

that reflects a recognition of women's oppression.

So sure enough, the next day this tall beautiful woman arrives with a baby of about nine months, a girl, and I keep looking at the girl, and then looking at him.

And this little girl look exactly like him. So this woman comes and maybe [I act like this] because I have so much resentment of how people have always wanted to take advantage of women. She says to me, "Make her a milkshake."

I say, "Listen to me, my sister-in-law," talking with confidence. "Listen." "No," she says, "I told you she was his wife."

"You do it if you want, but I'm not," I say to her and from that moment, I started thinking about leaving. "Tell your brother to give me money and I'll go home as if nothing ever happened."

"But this pregnancy you're carrying?"

"This doesn't matter to me," I told her.

The woman comes over and began to get suspicious. "Look, and her, who is she?"

"She's a friend."

"Look, Daniel, why haven't you come home? It's been some time since you've been there and I need you and . . ."

And right, I'm supposed to put up with all this! All of a sudden, she says to him, "Listen and her, who is she?"

"She's just a friend of Marta's [the sister]," he says to her. She stares at me. I felt horrible. I stared at him as if to say you are a shameless cynic but I say I'm not going to treat him like a man, rather I'm going to demonstrate that I am stronger than him. So when he says to me, "Isn't it true that you are Marta's friend?"

"Yeah, why?" I say to him. Just like that, "Yeah, why?"

"See, she's a friend of Marta's."

"And she's your wife?"

"Yes," he says to me. "She is."

"Ah, it's nice to meet you, and she's your baby girl." I take the baby and rock it in my arms.

Rosa Imelda suggested that her refusal to comply with the order to make her boyfriend's wife a milkshake may have come from a sense of women's oppression. But her subsequent behavior, going along with a deception of the wife, indicated that this analysis reflects Rosa Imelda's emerging feminist perspective. However throughout her

narrative, Rosa Imelda described a young women with an awareness of women's subordination who attempts to act in solidarity with other women.

After she has held the baby, Rosa Imelda told me, she asked if she could talk with Daniel. She took him aside and offered to leave and let him go back to his wife. But he refused and instead he gave his wife money and told her that he would meet her at home later. As she watched the women climb into a bus, Rosa Imelda, despite her caution, her suspicions of men, her desire to keep on studying, her resistance to Daniel's advances, and her attempts to find out if he was already married, was confronted with the fact that she had been betrayed and deceived by this man. As Daniel tried to appease her, she revealed feelings distinctly devoid of maternal romanticism.

I sat on a rock, a tall one like this, and he said to me, "How do you feel?"

"I feel nothing," I told him. "The truth is that I think I have a lot to learn in life."

"But don't feel jealous."

"You don't love me but unfortunately I think that I am realizing that I don't love you, I don't love you but this pregnancy. . . it doesn't matter to me, this pregnancy. So when this girl, or boy, is born, I will bring it to you and you can raise it."

"Don't be that way. I can't believe it. I am beginning to care for you and you for me."

"No, if you are beginning to care for me, why have you taken advantage of me? You are an old man and you have many bad habits. You are using me and I don't know why."

"No, look, I love you and the truth is that this woman is right. I am married to her but, look, it was her that insisted and . . ."

I say to him, "Look, it would be better if you shut up. You are a coward and after all this woman has done for you! You will do the same to me!"

As they were talking, the wife snuck up behind them and was about to hit Rosa Imelda

on the head with a rock when Daniel saw her and grabbed her hand. When Rosa Imelda realizes what is going on, he is about to hit her.

“Don’t hit her!” I tell him. “You are the guilty one here!”

The woman says to me, “You are the guilty one!”

“Look, I didn’t know about you and I don’t want to have problems because of men and so I think you [the man] should pack your bags now and go with your wife and forget about me, pretend you never knew me.”

He comes and says to me, “No, she’s the one that’s got to go and I am going to go with you,” he says to me.

Despite Rosa Imelda’s claim⁵¹ that she insisted that Daniel go with his wife, he did not. But nor did he leave her. Instead he maintained two households. He bought a house where Rosa Imelda had their first child, a daughter. But forced into the relationship by her circumstances, her feelings for him did not grow. “I felt nothing for him. What I felt was resentment towards my family. . . believe me I am not one to criticize my dad and mom but I’ve always blamed them for having kids and more kids in such a tight situation where they couldn’t help their kids get ahead.” By the time her daughter began to walk, Rosa Imelda found herself pregnant again. It was not that she had decided to have a family with Daniel, but with few other options, she endured. She told me, “it seems to me that I made love with him, had sex, to get him off of me because I never felt anything for him. . . I would say he took advantage of me because at sixteen, I had another kid . . .”

Daniel’s womanizing habits did not stop with Rosa Imelda. They became apparent during her second pregnancy. He had put a shop in part of the house and hired women to work for him. One day one of the women approached Rosa Imelda.

⁵¹ Originally Rosa Imelda told me that he had left his wife and lived with his sister. It was only in a conversation in 1999 that she admitted that he had never left his wife.

She says, "Listen to me, why don't you leave him?"

"What? Who are you to come around here ordering me?"

"It's not like that, look, it's that you are, like, excuse me for saying so, but you are a fool. Look, you are over there in the other side [of the house] doing your housework with your kids and he's over here happily climbing on top of these other women."

Rosa Imelda was not surprised by the news and with a little planning she was soon able to catch Daniel in the act. When she did, she assured him that he shouldn't be worried because,

'I didn't care about this since I first got together with you so that I wouldn't be in the street. And maybe so that I wouldn't be roaming the streets and vulnerable to all kinds of dangers, I made a commitment, became obligated to you. If I knew that you never wanted me, I never wanted you.'

By the time they had been together for seven years, they had worked out an arrangement. Daniel lived with his wife but he left money for Rosa Imelda and the kids at the house each morning. This was not an unusual arrangement. Couples like Rosa Imelda and Daniel who were never formally married, never formally divorced. It was common for the man to move out, often to live with another woman, or to move between different houses. When a man contributed economically to a woman's household, they would usually expect the woman to do domestic work for them and would assert exclusive sexual access to the woman. Initially Rosa Imelda accepted this arrangement because she preferred not to have him around but needed the support to survive. "Get involved with whoever you want," she told him. "But you better leave me money to help me with these kids because it wasn't my idea to have them." Gradually Rosa Imelda began to rebel against his expectations, refusing to do chores like ironing his clothes, a task she hated.

But it was not just the domestic duties that Rosa Imelda resisted. Eventually she got romantically involved with a neighbor, the man who was to become her husband, Rafael. At first they just exchanged glances from their windows, she told me. A neighbor excursion provided them with the opportunity to talk. Afterwards Rafael made it clear to her that he was interested in developing a relationship. She recalled that when she protested, Rafael pointed to her vulnerability as a women without a male protector.

'I would like for us get things clear here because I'm worried about you being alone in your house. A friend of mine has said that he's going to break into your house because he really likes you. So if you don't want to hear the good new, you're going to have to hear the bad news. I'm telling you this so that you can tell the guy that you have someone and that you won't be alone all the time. Besides, I want us to start going out. But how can I go out with you if you have a husband, the man that I see going into your house?'

They started going out, first meeting at the field where Rosa Imelda played baseball and then continuing to see each other.

I began to feel like my life was starting over. I don't know, sometimes maybe I had blamed myself. I went with [Daniel] because he was there. It wasn't as if I was waiting for the [man] that I was supposed to meet. But destiny decided it and I had my kids with this first one and then he pushed me to the edge.

I was honest, very clear, and I told [Rafael], "I am with this man out of desperation, mostly because of resentment about my parents' separation and because of the example they gave us. Truthfully I don't want to get involved with anyone else."

Despite her protests, Rosa Imelda began to see Rafael regularly. He proposed that they marry but her earlier experiences made it difficult for her to trust him enough to risk losing the support she had from her children's father. Rafael persevered, demonstrating a caring attitude toward her and her children, until one day, Daniel caught them coming

back from an outing together. After a tremendous argument, Rosa Imelda fled leaving her children behind. While Rafael tried to get her to marry him, Daniel attempted to convince her to get back together, she added, enlisting the help of members of the National Guard to intimidate her, “as it was during the war.” In the end, Rafael won her over. Daniel brought the kids back and, as Rosa Imelda recalled, finally conceded.

“Look, you beat me,” [Daniel told Rafael] “but that’s fine. You were right. You were the one who was fulfilling my obligations and duties as the father of these kids. The only thing I ask of you is that you don’t prejudice this woman against me. I did take advantage of her but I recognize it and the day that you begin to think about leaving her, I will come back and collect all the kids you leave her with.”

Rosa Imelda soon became pregnant and she and Rafael were formally married. She expressed gratitude that he treated her first two children the same as the two they had together as well since [Daniel] “never assumed responsibility for [his children’s] expenses.”

But it was neither Rafael nor Rosa Imelda who initiated the claim for child support against Daniel. Rather his son, Daniel, who approached his mother with the idea.

Rosa Imelda described her reaction:

I never would have wanted to do this because, after all, it was I who left him. He [her son] was like this.

“With what I’m telling you, I hope that you are not going to go back with him, that you’re not going to feel resentful.”

“No, it’s not going to make me agree to go back with him.”

“But he’s always helped you with us?”

“No, son, he has never helped me.”

“So, Mom, I’ve decided it’s time that he supports me and, look, I have this friend in school and my friend says that his dad supports him through the *Procuraduria*.”

Rosa Imelda's son had had no contact with his father for thirteen years at that point although they lived in close proximity. She recalled Daniel's reaction after he approached his father for the first time:

"I asked him for a pair of shoes and, you know what, he gave me fifteen pesos (less than US\$2), but that will do me." He went and got his birth certificate and came back and talked with Rafael. He told him "I want my mom to support me in making the *demanda*."

"That's why I have this *demanda*," Rosa Imelda concluded. "Not because I, definitely, maybe I was one of the, I am or maybe it would be better said, I was, one of the many women who stubbornly insist on saying that I can do it alone. I don't want anyone to help me because I have always been at the beck and call, caring for these kids. Because look at the behavior of my son. Thank God, he's not in a gang, he's a good boy. If I'm ever curious and ask the principal about his conduct, I can assure you that this man would say to you a ton of stuff, he tells me that my son is an excellent student, that he would like to have all his students be like Daniel.

When I asked her about her initial experiences at the *Procuraduría*, she told me that it was horrible.

When the *el bachiller* told me that I would have *el comparendo* [the hearing to determine the level of child support] on such and such a day and that he was going to come. "Who is going to come?"

"The guy [Daniel]."

"No," I told her. "I don't want to see him."

"But, no, that's how it's done."

"Listen," I said to my son. "I'll get your clothes ready and you are going to come with me because it was you who initiated this thing."

He says to me, "You don't think I have the courage to do it. You don't know me," he says to me.

"Let's go." So we went and when [her son's father] got there, he kept making this terrible face at us. He walked up to me saying "Why are you doing this when I wasn't the one who left you? This is what you deserve, that I didn't help you with them."

So my son comes over and stood looking at him, "So why are you suing me like this?"

"So that we don't have to come begging to you for help but instead you'll be required to fulfill the duty that you have to me."

“I don’t ever want to see you. You are not a son to me.” [Her son] didn’t respond to that but when we were in front of the *bachiller*, she asked him, “Do you love your Dad?”

“No,” he said. “My Dad is the other one that I have in my house.”

“There, you see, *bachiller*! So what is this kid doing here?”

“He’s the one who fathered me but the other one raised me.”

“No, *bachiller*, I’m not going to give him anything.”

“No,” the *bachiller* said to him. The boy didn’t say anything. The woman just listened. “So you have to make support payments.” The *bachiller* required him to do it.

For me it was very easy, I didn’t even have to say anything. I just observed because I didn’t even want to see this guy. That’s how I feel. Then he went into default. He didn’t give me anything for about a year.

I asked her how much she got.

It was 150 colones (less than \$US20). This is what bothers me, that even though I am helping other *compañeras*. No, it doesn’t bother me, to help others satisfies me, but my own case is completely stalled. I have been stymied for seven months of trying to get an increase and I haven’t seen anything! The Ministry is trying to establish his salary, how much the man earns and because of this they haven’t been able to follow up. But what they are going to do, *La Licenciada* Hildith told me, they are going to send him an order and so when he showed up and they do an investigation, I should win the case.

In this process, I met Guadalupe. When she became familiar with my case, I told her everything, she said to me, “Women how did you do this? You are very well prepared to work here!” And so it was her that brought me to the Association.

With Guadalupe’s encouragement Rosa Imelda joined the Association and eventually decided to come work there full-time.

It was because of her that I got here and here I have stayed because I like all this and how it has gone. At least up until we’ve started having problems with these women. But I’ve been with them for a while . . . Rafael has never harassed me about it, “Look, you are doing nothing but running in the streets.” No, nothing, including having no pressure when I say to him, “Look, Rafael, I want to go out for a beer. Let’s go, come on!” . . . What’s most important is not to have anyone repressing me in my home. They say to me, you can’t do this or that and I say, no, I do what I

want in my house. Just as you've heard, I can leave in the morning and not come home until the following day and he'll say "Who'd you stay with?" "With so and so." And that's it. . . . I have learned a lot. It has been quite the experience that I've been through and it will help me with what I want to study, social work. And god willing, I'll start next year.

Rosa Imelda's story illustrates the vulnerability faced by poor Salvadoran women, particularly young women without strong family ties. The breakup of her family precipitated her relationship with the father of her oldest children but, unlike her mother, she was able to retain his financial support until she found a safe alternative. It was still another man but this time one whom she chose.

While Rosa Imelda did not need the Association's support to pursue her *demanda*, as her story shows she could clearly empathize with women who were going through the process. Her participation in the organization helped her to recognize the price at which she had bought her survival and encouraged her to reflect on the reasons for the painful choices that she had made in the past and to see them in a broader context of women's oppression. Guadalupe, the Spanish lawyer, was right when she recognized Rosa Imelda as a perfect candidate for the organization. She was one of the most consistent volunteers and was eventually selected as one of four *demandantes* participate in a program to train the *demandantes* themselves to be *promotoras*. Her personal strength made her a powerful advocate for the women who she accompanied to the *Procuraduría*. It was that very strength and what she learned at the Association that enabled her to challenge the situation when she, and the other *promotoras*, decided that they were being exploited by the Association itself.

Changing the Institution of Motherhood

The AMD won two major victories while I was in El Salvador but this was not the first time that the organization had successfully promoted major policy changes.⁵² As part of the Peace Accords, the National Police and several branches of the armed forces were dissolved. In November 1994, those that were laid off were given severance pay. Coming only a few months after the AMD had begun to organize, they were able to pressure the *Procurador* so that he announced that the armed forces would deduct the equivalent of twelve months of *cuotas* from the severance pay from those who were *demandados*. Unfortunately, despite this change in policy, the mechanisms to implement it were not established in time and many women discovered that the severance pay had already been dispersed by the time they arrived to claim their portion. Other women failed to even put in claims because of threats from their ex-partners who were, or who had been, police or military. Despite the lack of success, the campaign mounted by the Association attracted more women into the AMD and raised awareness of the problem of *paternidad irresponsable*.

Over the next year, the AMD continued the campaign, holding demonstrations in the *Procuraduría* with sixty children carrying signs saying, “*Señor Procurador*, make my father pay my child support;” developing a play which they presented in the PGR, in market places, and public plaza; and designing new strategies to increased the level of the *cuotas*. Their efforts were recognized by UNICEF, the United Nations Fund for

⁵² The information in this section comes from Baires et al. 1996.

Children, who gave the Dignas their first annual award for communication. The Dignas, in turn, gave the AMD the award money.

By September of 1995, when President Cristiani offered voluntary retirement to employees in the public sector as part of his privatization of the state, the AMD was prepared. They held a news conference criticizing the fact that deductions for the *cuotas* were not considered as part of the plan. The *Procuraduría* sent a proposal to the Legislative Assembly two days later which was rewritten as Decree 568. The law required that 30 percent of the severance pay be deducted and handed over to the *demandantes*. The AMD worked actively to lobby for the passage of the bill. They also fought to include a provision that would require that the of Human Rights Ombudsman (*Procuraduría de Derechos Humanos*), an institution set up by the Peace Accords, verify that women whose *demandado* was going to retire be notified in time to guarantee that they could access the funds. While this amendment was not included, Decree 568 was passed quickly enough that women had time to claim their *cuotas*.

The news conference that was discussed earlier was part of a campaign initiated by the AMD to have a *cuota* deduction taken from workers' yearly bonus known as the *aguinaldo*. Workers with a formal salary are awarded an extra months salary in December each year, ostensibly to cover the additional expenses of Christmas and New Years. The AMD proposed the idea to the *Procurador* and he accepted it. His description of the process illustrates how effective they had become in negotiating with this state institution. According to the *Procurador*, "The initiative behind this law came directly

from the AMD. The *aguinaldo* decree is a product of our rapprochement with them. The idea came up precisely during a discussion with them. They proposed the idea, we discussed it, and [the *Procuraduría*] presented it to the Legislative Assembly.” In his assessment, it was one of the principle achievements of the institution in 1996. But more importantly for the AMD, he pointed out that it was, effectively, an increase in the level of *cuota* that women were receiving, an increase that otherwise would have never been approved in the Legislature.

The second victory of the AMD that I witnessed came in January as the election campaigns for the Legislative Assembly and local governments went into gear. The AMD, along with the “Legislative Initiative” of the women’s organization *Movimiento de Mujeres Mélida Anaya Montes* (known as MAM or Las Mélidas), developed a proposal that they sent to the Legislative Assembly. They proposed that all candidates for elected office be required to get a “*solvenia*” from the PGR certifying that they were not *demandados*, or if they were, that they were up to date on their payments. On the day it was to be considered in the Legislative Assembly, I accompanied a group of the *demandantes*, about ten of the women and three staff, to the Assembly. It was a moderate sized auditorium which seats the legislators (*diputados*) at desks in a semicircle facing a stage where the President of the Assembly, Gloria Salguero Gross, sits along with others. Behind them is constant activity of young suited men, talking on telephones and attending those at the table. The spectators sit facing the stage behind the legislators. The first piece of correspondence read was from the PDC *Diputada*, Rosa Mélida Villatoro

Benítez from Morazán. She was the head of the Assembly's commission on the family (she was defeated in the elections that followed). While her maternalist concerns about poor women and their children have made her one of the AMD's primary conduits in the Legislature, she is virulently anti-abortion, which was what her correspondence was about. Apparently it was just polemic and they passed on to the correspondence of the AMD.

Lorena Peña, the FMLN representative and the president of MAM, introduced the proposal for the *solvencia* with the argument that paying child support was "a moral element that every legislator, male and female, should have." Representative of party after party got up to support the proposal to the cheers of support from the AMD contingent. Even Arena, who the AMD had identified as having at least two candidates in default, supported it. Despite the outpouring of support, the legislators began a debate about whether to vote for the proposal as it stood or send it to committee for review. As the technicalities were debated, several of the of the *diputadas* came up to consult with the women from the AMD were seated in the gallery. Eventually the issue was resolved and a vote was taken. The bill was passed unanimously and its passage was front page news the next day (see Appendix D). As I walked out with the AMD contingent, we ran into Salgero Gross. As she and Vilma exchanged congratulations and accolades on passing the bill, I was struck by how the issue had brought together two women from such opposing positions: one was a former urban commando for the FMLN; the other, the president of the political party which reputedly was behind the death squads.

While the AMD knew that there were candidates from both the FMLN and ARENA who were in default, they did not anticipate that the head of the ARENA Youth, Walter Araujo, would owe 30,000 colones to his ex-wife. Araujo was the poster boy of the party. Young, handsome, and extremely articulate, he had been prominently featured in campaign ads criticizing the FMLN for having been a “terrorist” organization. News of his default generated enormous publicity and calls for his resignation from the party. While he denied that he had failed to support his son, claiming that it was a misrepresentation, and criticized his detractors for saying things that his child, he also paid the debt and received his clearance.⁵³

Both of these initiatives demonstrate the political sophistication of the AMD. This acumen was largely attributable to the paid staff, particularly the *directiva*. They had developed working relationships with the *Procurador* and elaborated a proposal that enable him to expand his budget without violating the neoliberal policies of the state. In addition, it was hard to argue that children should not get a portion of what their fathers receive for Christmas. It was equally impossible for any of the *diputados* to argue that someone who was behind on child support payments should be allowed to take office. The proposal and the ensuing publicity in Araujo’s case generated significant publicity around the issue.

The *directiva* of the AMD has been extremely effective in conceptualizing

⁵³ Central American leftist politicians have not been immune from the changing environments created by emerging feminist discourses. The former *Sandinista* President in Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega, is accused of having sexually abused his stepdaughter.

actions that used hegemonic ideologies of motherhood to take advantage of the contradictions in public policy. The possibilities of doing this were enhanced by processes accompanying the Peace Accords, such as the establishment of Human Rights Ombudsman, and by the prevalence of the discourse of modernization and democratization that came in the wake of the Accords. In doing so the AMD built on a Latin American phenomena best known through the work of the Argentinean *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* (Agosin 1990: Fisher 1989) but represented in El Salvador by the Committee of Mothers of Political Prisoners, the Disappeared, and the Assassinated of El Salvador, Monsignor “Oscar Arnulfo Romero” or CoMadres (Stephen 1994).⁵⁴ Insisting that their actions were motivated by maternal instincts rather than political motives, the CoMadres organized women who had lost children and spouses to publicly challenge the military and para-military forces. Incorporating key elements from ideology of motherhood, combining it with liberation theology and the discourse of the international human rights movement, the CoMadres carved out a space for resistance by creating a new set of social relations. Like the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, they took their demands to the streets denouncing the disappearances, “captures,” and assassinations of the children and other family members. Their status as self-identified mothers initially

⁵⁴ The CoMadres was not the only group in El Salvador which advocated on behalf of this constituency. CODEFAM, the Support Committee of Families for Political Prisoners and the Disappeared, “Marianella García Villas,” and COMAFAC, the Christian Committee of Mothers and Families of Prisoners, Disappeared, and Assassinated, “Padre Octavio Ortiz - Hermana Silvia,” also worked in this area and formed a coalition with the CoMadres in the late 80s but because they were mixed gender, smaller, and less effective, they were not as clearly identified as a mothers’ group.

provided them with a measure of safety: the government did not take the actions of such women too seriously. But as their tactics became more daring, for instance their occupation of the Salvadoran Red Cross in 1978, the repression against them became more murderous: their offices were bombed, members were captured and tortured, and, finally, disappeared. Despite the danger, they continued to work publicly, demonstrating in the streets; occupying foreign embassies, cathedrals, and government buildings; and reaching out internationally for political and material support.

Feminists have debated the value and meaning of “motherist” groups such as the CoMadres and the Madres de Plaza de Mayo. Their existence has been seen as part of the broad cultural manifestations which Evelyn Stevens referred to as “*marianismo*,” the Latin American exaltation of the Virgin Mary. Claiming that *marianismo* is the female counterpart to *machismo*, Stevens describes it as “the cult of feminine spiritual superiority which teaches that women are semi-divine, morally superior, and spiritually stronger than men” (1973: 91). These qualities supposedly engender in women “abnegation, that is an infinite capacity for humility and sacrifice. No denial is too great for the Latin American woman. No limit can be divined to her vast store of patience with the cruel men of her world” (ibid.: 94-95). She points out that the representation of this image is ubiquitous: “The image of the black-clad, mantilla draped figure, kneeling before the alter, rosary in hand, praying for the soul of sinful menfolk, dominated the television and cinema screens as well as the oral tradition of the whole culture area” (ibid.: 96).

While such sweeping generalizations ignore the vast diversity in race, class, ethnicity, experience, and history among “Latin American women,”⁵⁵ the Co-Madres clearly drew on aspects of this imagery to create the space they needed to denounce the state’s violations of human rights. When they appeared in public, they wore black dresses and white kerchiefs to create an image that was easily recognizable and which disguised their individual identity. Alicia Garcia Panameña, one of the founders of the CoMadres, explained the symbolism and how it served their purposes:

‘ . . . Black signifies the condolences and affliction we carry for each person killed. And the white head scarf represents the peace we are seeking--but it must be a peace with justice, not a peace with impunity! We also carry a red and white carnation: the red for the spilled blood, the white for the detained-disappeared and the green leaves, the hope for life. That is our complete dress. Since we first went out into the street dressed like this in 1983, the army has never tried to disrupt our march, because it is not the same to capture someone who is dressed in civilian clothes to whom one can do anything, just anything, and one who is dressed in black, because everyone knows that the dress is the Committee of Women [sic].’ (Schirmer 1992: 33-34).

Some feminist have questioned whether actions which employ such imagery actually challenge the ways the ideology and practice of motherhood contribute to women’s oppression in Latin America. Jaquette raised this question in the introduction to a collection of essays on the Latin American women’s movement. She asked, “Can an approach to political participation that begins with the differences between women and men, rather than an emphasis on their equality, succeed?” (1989: 2) In an essay in the same collection, Feijoó answers that question with a qualified “no.” In her analysis of

⁵⁵ See Ehlers 1991 for a critique of the *marianismo* model.

the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, Feijóo argues that

. . . a defense of human rights based on women's reproductive roles reinforces the conventional sexual division of labor . . . The Argentinean case, showing the explosion of women as mothers onto the political scene, carries great potential for change. But for this potential to be transformed into new concrete realities for women as a whole, it is necessary to strike a balance between a concept of motherhood that breaks away from tradition and those elements that reinforce old behavior (ibid.: 88).

Navarro also saw these forms of resistance as reinforcing women's prescribed roles:

"Their refusal to acquiesce in the loss of their children was not out of character, but a coherent expression of their socialization, of their acceptance of the dominant division of labor and of their own subordination within it" (1989: 256-257). Looking at Peruvian women's neighborhood collective kitchens, Barrig also saw the organizations' appeals to the dominant gender ideology as not only reinscribing traditional gender roles but reducing the potential for new ones to emerge. She claimed that "by accentuating the division of labor by sex, it weakens or obstructs the alternative possibilities for constructing a different self image" (1989: 139).

But such views have been challenged by those who insist that such movements can serve as vehicles for women to "gain a gendered consciousness of political woman/motherhood and a responsibility of collective citizenry (Schirmer 1992: 61). In a study of three types of "struggles of women-as-mothers" in Argentina, Schumler (1992: n.p.) not only concluded that such activities result in changes in private and public institutions through collective actions but documented how they "enable women to become agents of change within their families, in terms of transforming the sexual

division of labor as well as the power and authority structure of the groups” (1992a: 24).

Ackelsberg and Shanley argue that in the case of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo

. . . the traditional language the Madres used to decry the disappearance and torture of their children existed in tension with but did not negate the transformative potential of their protest. Their activity challenged the traditional distinction between the political or public and the domestic or private aspects of life, undercutting the notion that women’s proper place was in the home (1992: n.p.).

While agreeing that such movements may change women’s lives, Stephen sees it as important to recognize that such transformations are not uniform nor universal. She argues “that labeling movements as either ‘feminine’ or ‘feminist,’ with corresponding ‘private’ and ‘public’ makes little sense and does not capture the richness and complexity of the political ideologies and agendas they have developed” (1997:29). As Jelin concludes, the correlation between the use of a maternalist discourse and subsequent transformations in women’s social position “depends on the historic conditions and the development of the social forces themselves” (1989: 204).

However, some women’s groups do identify themselves as feminist and others do not. What that means about the organization may say more about their context than it says about the nature of the group or the work that they do. Brusco, in her work on evangelicism and gender in Colombia cautions Western feminists not to “not exclude women from feminism because they value the roles of mother and wife and because they see the family as their source of strength” (1995: 3). But one should not impose a feminist label on a women’s movement simply because it transforms women’s gender roles or “glorifies and supports what is female” (ibid.). This does not mean that they are

operating under “false consciousness” (ibid.) or that their collective action cannot transform gender roles. But it is not legitimate to designate these women as feminists when they have not chosen the label for themselves. Doing so also obscures how difficult and courageous it may be for Latin American women to self identify as feminist. In doing so, they risk scorn, ridicule, and marginalization. But as the next section illustrates, to say one is a feminist does not mean that one always acts in ways that give women more power. Nor, as García-Gorena points out in her work on Mexican mothers and the antinuclear movement, does being a mothers’ group. She reminds her readers that “[m]other’s groups thus should not be romanticized; many of these groups are divided along race and class lines, as are other organizations and movement” (1999: 121). This insight, as we shall see in the final section, is a critical one in evaluating the kind of change that any women’s group, be it maternalist or feminist, is attempting to effect.

Motherhood, Feminism, and Democratizing the AMD

Within the AMD, the differing attitudes toward motherhood is one of two tensions that illuminate the complexity of the process in which the organization is engaged. In in-depth interviews with twenty-five *demandantes* who either used the AMD’s services or were affiliated with the organization (Vásquez and Murguialday 1996), it was found that they all believed that motherhood to be women’s ultimate attainment. These women considered their children to be their major source of satisfaction and, despite the myriad of problems that they face in caring for them, could

not imagine a life without them. Describing the intense closeness that they have with their children, one of the mothers quoted in the report commented that “when [my children] are not near me, I feel like I can’t breath, that I am drowning and I have to go see them right away” (Ibid.: 47). As a result the women also feel strongly that they are uniquely qualified to care for their own children and that while their children’s father should (or has an obligation to) provide for the child’s needs, all that is entailed in doing so is to provide financial support. They reject the idea that the fathers should have more of a role in their children’s lives and are unwilling to contemplate sharing custody of their children

On one hand, the women who founded the Association, view many of the women as suffering from “obsessive” motherhood (ibid.: 61). The approach of the AMD and the Dignas is to encourage the women to go beyond what Adrienne Rich has called the experience of motherhood (1976), to critique the way that experience has been institutionalized at women’s expense. As illustrated by the description of the Thursday meeting, they encourage women to adopt a perspective on motherhood that recognizes its burdens as well as its benefits. The AMD also promotes the idea that men have rights to the children as well as responsibilities, a concept that few of the *demandantes* are willing to accept. Thus while they enthusiastically support the demand for *paternidad responsable*, it means very different things for those constituency of the AMD than it does for their *directiva*.

There are profound differences in the attitudes and characteristics of women who

are the *usuarias* and *afiliadas* of the AMD, and women whose work (and vocation) it is to organize them. In interviews Vásquez and Murguialday found that

for [the *directiva*], the work of raising women's consciousness is as, or more important, than the concrete help that the women get to resolve their particular case. They recognize, however, that these distinct visions create certain problems. [As one said,] 'I think that in the Association there are two things: our interests and the interests of the women. They come more because we help them with their cases and our interest is more in making them aware of the issues that many women experience and that they also suffer'" (ibid.: 23).

While they try to build an organization by encouraging women to assume a positive identity as *madres demandantes*, that identity is only part of how the women in *la directiva* position themselves. They are making a political choice to act as a *madre demandante* which is part of their larger concern with the status of women in general.

This discrepancy accounts, in part, for why the Association has not developed a democratic structure. The leadership of the Association employs a discourse which advocates empowering women, particularly those who are marginalized economically. They also claim that the organization represents *madres demandantes*. But the women which come to the organization seeking services have a completely distinct agenda from the women who started the organization. The different perspectives and capabilities of the women whom they were recruiting into the organization have made it difficult for the leadership of the AMD to build an organization that was truly "of the demandantes." Without the leadership of the *directiva*, it is unlikely that the new recruits would carry on the work of promoting a feminist approach to the issue of *paternidad irresposable*. Women who come seeking assistance and finally managed to get their *cuotas* often leave

the Association.

Vilina Vásquez told me that they were working towards expanding the participation of “*las mujeres*” in the management of the organization. They had had three Assemblies with the *afiliadas*, they have been training the women in workshops, and the women have elected representatives. One of the obstacle, she noted, is that the *cooperantes*, or donors, are not interested in funding the democratization of organizations. This is a point I will return to below.

One of the ways that they sought to better incorporate the *demandantes* was through an internship program where four of the women were given a stipend (*un viático*) to work as promoters. They were trained to do outreach in the waiting areas of the PGR, to take information from women who came into the office seeking help, and to accompany women to their meetings at the PGR and advocate for them as much as possible. But while I was in the office I often saw the staff send them on errands and treat them as if they were their personal assistants. I found myself wondering how long these women would accept this kind of treatment.

I soon found out that it would not be long. I stopped at the AMD office late in the morning June 9th on my way to try and dig up some figures from the archives of the PGR. I wanted to ask Vilma if there were any things in particular that they wanted me to look for them while I was there. She was in a meeting with Nely Rivera, Areceley López, and Ana Murcia. While I was waiting for them Rosa Imelda came by and invited me to lunch. After we got our food at a nearby canteen, Rosa Imelda told me that she and the

three other *demandantes* who had been working as promoters since February through the internship program were having their hours cut back and were not happy about it. While they had been working full-time, they were being paid under minimum wage.

Technically it was not being called a salary but was referred to as the *viático* and amounted to 1100 *colones* (US\$125) per month without benefits, holidays, or sick pay.

On top of the cutbacks, they were upset, she told me, because the *directiva* was hiring men to organize the *demandados*. The promoters were furious that their hours were being cut back supposedly because of budget constraints, but at the same time the Association was hiring men! The *directiva* had explained that they had received funds from another source to hire men to *concienticize* other *demandados*. But the women were not satisfied with these explanations. Knowing little about the funding of the organization, they did not accept that money coming from different sources was limited in how it could be used. The *promotoras*' suspicions were heightened because of the differences in their views about men's roles in parenting and those of the *directiva*. The *directiva*'s lack of consultation with their constituency before implementing the plan contributed to the *promotoras*' resentment the presence of the men as did the fact that the man who had supposedly been hired was the ex-husband of one of the *directiva*.

Over the next few weeks the conflict escalated. I stopped by the office on June 26th to drop off a contact sheet of photos I took during an action they did at the PGR on Father's Day. I found Rosa Imelda fuming from the interactions which had occurred during a meeting earlier in the day. The *directiva* had proposed a compromise: they

offered the *promotoras* part-time work in areas outside of San Salvador. The women were not satisfied with the offer and informed the *directiva* that they had a copy of a receipt that showed that the *directiva* had been embezzling funds. The promoters had been signing blank receipts for their *viático* and the *directiva* had been filling them in with a higher amount in order to extract additional monies from their funders. How the *promotoras* got the copy of the receipt was never answered. Several of the intermediate staff were accused of having given it to them but they denied it. Wherever it came from, it was a tremendous bargaining tool for the women because had they gone public with it, the publicity could have severely damaged the Association's credibility. Unfortunately as the crisis unfolded it also became clear that without it, the women's complaints probably would have been ignored.

I was deeply troubled by what was going on. It seemed to me that Nely, Arcely, and Vilma were treating these women exactly like men in the political parties had treated them: using the *madres demandantes* to raise money to do what they determined needed to be done politically in the name of the *madres demandantes* but without their consent, feedback, or supervision. Rather than empowering the promoters, they seemed to be trying to diffuse the ability of those *madres demandantes* who had developed sufficient organizing skills to challenge their power. First by attempting to lay them off, then by proposing to send them to work in different parts of the country and cutting their hours, the *directiva* seemed to be adopting classic management strategies to undermine worker solidarity. Their commitment to feminist process appeared to be breaking down in the

face of economic shortfalls.

I hoped that Vilma could provide me with an alternative explanation. I called her Friday morning at the AMD office. Nely answered and said that she would give her the message. I was home all morning but she did not call back. Later in the day, I talked briefly to Ana at the Dignas about what was going on at the Association and asked if we could talk. We made plans to meet Saturday morning at the Dignas office.

When we met with her I learned that the breach between the Association and the Dignas was wider and more antagonistic than I had realized. Ana virtually knew nothing of their plans for or treatment of the promoters, while Rosa Imelda had told me that she considered Ana to be in the same camp as Nely, Arcely, and Vilma. I had had some indications that that was not true from a conversation I had had earlier with Ana in which she had indicated her disagreement with the Association's decision to start a *demandados* group. Sadly but much to my relief, Ana confirmed my impression about what was going on. She told me that if she could, she would like to talk to the promoters.

It took a lot of convincing to get Rosa Imelda to meet with Ana. She had received a call at the office a few days after the meeting which she interpreted as a death threat. At that point she was ready to quit the AMD. She was not sure if it was a *demandado*; the man on the phone had identified himself with a name she thought she might have recognized. But when Nely responded dismissively that they all had receive death threats, it made Rosa Imelda suspect that the call might have been staged by the *directiva* to get her to quit. Amidst the tension, underlying fears about the *guerrillera* past of the

directiva emerged. “These women are ex-guerrillas, you know,” she told me. “They are upset with what’s happening and who knows to what extent they’ll go.”⁵⁶

Despite her reservations, Rosa Imelda decided to come speak with Ana who convinced her to bring the other women in. They set up a series of mediated meetings with the *directiva* to attempt to resolve the conflict in a manner that would not damage the Association. The promoters demanded that they be paid the amounts that the receipts had indicated that they were given, and threatened to go to the Ministry of Work if their demands were not accepted. The meetings were extremely painful and hostile but eventually the *directiva* agreed to pay the women and to rehire them but in new positions. During the meeting, Nely, who was in charge of finances, painstakingly documented that the money was not embezzled for personal gain but was used to pay for the transportation and meals of *demandantes* when they were asked to participate in activities like the press conferences and the celebration of Father’s Day. None of the funders are willing to give AMD money for these activities and so they used the false receipts to transfer funds into a discretionary bank account.

This crisis illuminated several dynamics. Nely’s explanation about why the receipts were doctored illustrates both the limitations under which the organization was operating and whom they were willing to squeeze in order to accomplish their goals despite the limitations. The fact that the funders fail to recognize the need to provide

⁵⁶ In Vásquez and Murguialday’s study of the *demandantes*, they found an underlying level of fear of the AMD’s association with the FMLN prevented some women from making a stronger commitment to the group.

support for transportation and meals reflects a lack of understanding of what it means to organize poor women in El Salvador. Women who are raising children with less than ten dollars a month in child support have to work. If they do manage to get, or take, time off, they do not have the extra resources to spend on busfare or food in order to come into the city for a meeting, an event, or an action. Just getting the women to the office requires resources which funders are hesitant to provide because of the difficulty in ensuring that such funds are not misspent or used, in and of themselves, to recruit women to participate. They want to be sure that the *demandantes* are coming to the Association's events because they support them, not because they get the fare to come into town and a free lunch.

But in order for these women to develop the skills and experience that will enable them to fully participated in the organization, such support is critical to ensure their access to the training and information that they need. In our interview, Vilma had complained that democratizing the organization was difficult because of the lack of funds to support the activities which would facilitate the process. The *cooperantes*, or donors, she told me, are not interested in funding the democratization of organizations.

Still, the *directiva* made a choice about who would be paid less in order to skim the funds into a pot for other *demandantes*. This was not a decision that was made by the *demandantes*, in fact, it took advantage of women who were willing to work for less in order to receive training. What made the *directiva* extremely angry was that someone from inside the organization had to have given the copy of the receipt to the promoters

but no one ever admitted to doing so. Despite the acknowledgment that what they had done was wrong, they exerted much pressure on the mid-level staff to confess. This suggested that their acknowledgment was less than genuine. In part, the tension was heightened because of fears that another political party was beginning to organize a parallel association from within the PGR.

The tensions created by stratification within the Association are a direct result of the contradiction of organizing the *madres demandantes* from a feminist perspective. The goal fostering a participatory model among women who do not necessarily embrace that point of view runs counter to the goal of creating an organization that represents the *madres demandantes* themselves. The ability of women with experience in the revolutionary left and the feminist movement to recognize the contradiction that *paternidad irresponsable* represents to the modernizing state in El Salvador has provided them with an opportunity to challenge gender ideology successfully. Whether their experience will enable them to resolve the contradiction within their own effort is yet to be seen.

The Dignas challenged the hegemonic ideologies of motherhood and *machismo* through their work on child support. They have remade the identity of “*madre demandante*” and used their version to mobilized women to challenge Salvadoran gender roles, ideologically, psychologically, and politically. But their success in challenging the attitudes and policies toward motherhood have not been replicated in their efforts to legitimize women’s right to refuse motherhood through abortion. In the following

chapter, I look at the Dignas' approach to securing abortion rights and the obstacles that they face.

Chapter 4: When is an abortion, an abortion?

The work of the AMD demonstrates that Dignas had developed an effective strategy to call into question hegemonic constructions of gender roles in parenting. But they were not as successful in redefining the terms of debate on the issue of abortion. Abortion was one of their "*nudos*," or a knot that they could not untie. Access to safe and legal abortion was one of the reproductive rights that the Dignas and other Salvadoran feminist organizations demanded in their political platforms. But the leadership of these groups were forced to admit that their grassroots supporters did not share their commitment to abortion rights and, in fact, may be more likely to support the position of the Church, the major force opposed to legalizing abortion in El Salvador.

As a result this is not an issue around which the Dignas are attempting to organize Salvadoran women. Rather they try to *conscientizar*, or raise the consciousness of women. In training workshops they introduce the feminist view that women have the right to control their bodies, provide medical justifications for abortion that replace moral or maternal judgements, and challenge the religious prohibitions against the practice. In this chapter, I begin by describing a workshop in which the Dignas present new ways of looking at abortion to a group of health promoters. I suggest that in the process, they may be overlooking local understandings that have been used to justify abortion practices among low income rural women. Because the Dignas have incorporated hegemonic feminist ideology about abortion rights, urban feminists see the failure of their mostly rural base to share their commitment to abortion rights as opposition to abortion. These

may not be completely antithetical views, rather the difference may reflect a broad social ambivalence about abortion.

Abortion is a common, though clandestine, practice in El Salvador, as my discussion below of underground clinics illustrates. However, because of the ethical, religious, and political prohibitions against the practice, the local hegemonic discourse on the practice denies that abortion is a women's right. But with a gender system that ultimately makes women responsible for the children they bear, abortion is social and economic practice that Salvadoran women will use to control their fertility whether it is legal or not. As my discussion will show, peasants are not the only ones who subscribe to the ideology. Actors with significantly more power such as doctors, policy makers, and politicians have their own ways of avoiding, or using, the ambivalence about abortion in Salvadoran society.

In April of 1997, the Salvadoran Legislative Assembly passed a new penal code eliminating the limited circumstances under which abortions could legally be performed. In the rest of the chapter, I explore the forces which are acting to restrict Salvadoran women's access to abortion, and describe how the Dignas are responding to these processes. Their efforts to use a feminist perspective to analyze the obstacles that Salvadoran women face in securing access to abortion illustrate the dialectic relation between theory and practice that characterizes Dignas' methodology.

The Dignas are feminists who view gender as socially constructed but, as a result of their involvement in a Marxist revolutionary movement, they recognize that "they do

not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past” (Marx 1963: 15). As a result an essential part of the Dignas’ strategy is to develop new pro-abortion ideologies to counteract the hegemonic Catholic and right-wing discourses that prohibit the practice. I examine the process by which the Dignas and other Salvadoran women’s groups begin to construct these new ideologies and how they attempt to disseminate them among their supporters, through the media, and to their political allies. But, as I document, there is a wide discrepancy between the discourse of transnational feminism which the Dignas have adopted and the discourse in El Salvador about abortion, even in terms of the Dignas’ grassroots base. I look at the Dignas’ attempt to bridge this gap and to consolidate the commitment of women in the movement to their position. The latter issue is examined both in terms of the organizational dynamics of the Dignas as well as the issue of abortion. Finally I raise the question of whether ensuring access to abortion through legislative action is the most viable strategy in El Salvador, and if such a question should also be considered by feminists in the United States.

Putting a Face on Abortion

“What does the word ABORTION make us feel?” Answering this question was the first part of an exercise in a Dignas’ training series on gender held at their office in Suchitoto. *Aflicción, desgracias, miedo, and tristeza* (grief, misfortune, fear, and sadness) were the words suggested by the women in the group I sat in on. The

participants were peasants who worked as health promoters for a NGO in the surrounding communities, most of which had been repopulated with ex-guerrilla fighters and former refugees after the war. Abortion was the topic of this workshop, the final of nine workshops (*capacitaciones*) that had occurred over several months. Seven of the ten promoters who attended were female, and three, including one of the males, were in their teens. The Dignas had provided the workshops without charge to the promoters or their organization and, in addition, had given each participant money for transportation as well as two free meals.

Marielos Romualdo, the coordinator of the Dignas' Reproductive and Sexual Health *equipo* (RSH), began the workshop by dividing the participants into small groups to discuss three questions she gave out along with large sheets of blank newsprint on which to record their responses. I sat in on a group with two women and the two female adolescents. As they discussed what to write for the first question, the woman holding the pen, insisted that they tell her the exact words to use and then, seemingly frustrated and embarrassed by her limited ability to write, passed the pen to one of the younger women. With the agreement of the others, the younger woman, who wore a pair of wire rimmed glasses making her look quite scholarly, summarized their reaction in a sentence, "*La tristeza, porque si aborta la consciencia no va estar tranquila.*" (Sadness because if one aborts, your conscience is not going to be peaceful.)

The second question had three separate parts: "Do you know someone who had an abortion? Why did they abort? If you yourself had had one, would you like to tell us?"

While in answering the first question, the promoters had responded to one meaning of the word *aborto*-- in Spanish the word refers to both miscarriages and abortions-- in their effort to answer the second set of questions, their discussion initially only referred to miscarriages, and primarily incidents where women had aborted after being beaten by their husbands. I asked them about cases of *aborto inducido*, induced abortion. While they had a very hard time coming up with any examples, they all seemed to know of various methods of inducing abortion. Taking an overdose of AlkaSeltzer was one example, and when I asked why AlkaSeltzer, they explained that the label warned against taking it when pregnant so it was assumed to be an abortifacient. Finally one of the young woman said that her aunt had borne a child with birth defects and it was said that it was because she had tried unsuccessfully to abort.

The final question that Marielos had given to them asked if they thought that many women in El Salvador had abortions, which kind of women had abortions, and in what conditions. Their response was simply "*Las mujeres que no quieren hijos*" (The women that don't want children). When the small groups came back together to share their conclusions, the other groups reflected very similar attitudes. No one admitted to having had an abortion or knowing someone who had induced an abortion. But all of the groups agreed that there were a lot of abortions. When I asked my group why, if there were so many women having abortion, none of them knew anyone who had had one, they claimed that it was because most of the women who had abortions were from San Salvador. Another group defined it more precisely: women who aborted were between

the ages of 12-20, were suffering from malnutrition due to a lack of vitamins, or had been beaten by their spouses.

As we went over the responses of the different groups, Rubidia Martínez, a young woman new to the *equipo*, wrote them down on large sheets of paper taped to the wall. Ofelia López, the local promoter who was leaving the *equipo* to devote more time to her campaign for municipal council (see chapter 5) and was being replaced by Rubidia, talked about the high incidence of abortion and the silence surrounding it, how it was faceless (*sin rostro*). As she strode back and forth across the patio where the promoters sat in white plastic chairs, she emphasized the need to support those we know who have gone through the experience of abortion. Punctuating her comments with wide sweeping motions of her arms, she pointed to the issues and institutions that impact on abortion: family, economics, paternal irresponsibility, obligations, and religion. The reality is that many of us have had pregnancies that we did not want, she insisted. Walking back and forth in front of the half circle of chairs, she lamented that we don't talk about how ambivalent we are about motherhood. Because even if we don't want or cannot afford another child, we must have it if we become pregnant. It doesn't matter that a woman can die giving birth to a child she doesn't want, she concluded. None of the promoters had any comments so we broke for lunch.

When we reconvened Marielos detailed the medical aspects of *aborto*. She emphasized both the inability of the human fetus to survive outside the mother and the deleterious medical consequences of illegal abortions on women's health in El Salvador.

Eleven out of every one hundred women who come in for medical treatment are coming in because of *aborto*, she told them, and the majority come in with serious complications. In 1995, she added, there were 10,000 *abortos sépticos*, with infections⁵⁷. Contrary to what they suggested, all types of women have abortions, she continued, women who are Catholic, married women, mature women, and women who have a partner⁵⁸. She also informed them that abortions were legally permissible when the pregnancy was the result of rape. Finally she explained that the Church has not always considered the fetus a person and recounted that earlier in its history, the Catholic Church was not opposed to abortion.

The health promoters had little to say in response to both Marielos and Ofelia's presentations. But it was not because they were unwilling to speak out. When the discussion moved on to how they were going to bring what they had learned in the workshops to their communities, they readily expressed some concerns. One of the young women complained that it was extremely difficult for them to attract people to these kinds of meetings. They would need refreshments (*refrigerios*) and videos to draw participants. The older man who participated told them that it was unclear whether the NGO with which they worked even had funds to pay them anymore. What they wanted to

⁵⁷ A much smaller number was reported by *El Diario de Hoy*. They cited 646 cases registered in the National Maternity Hospital though they did not specify if that was the figure for the year to date or annually (June 13, 1996).

⁵⁸ According to the Director of the National Maternity Hospital the majority of women having abortions are over 30, have three or more children, live in urban areas, are married formally or informally, and are working class housewives.

know was whether or not the Dignas could provide the funds. Marielos agreed to check into it. They then held a ceremony in which each of the participants who attended the requisite number of sessions was presented with a certificate that recognized their participation.

The Dignas have identified the trainings with health promoters as a key strategy in their efforts to improve reproductive health care. According to their *Programa Global Triannual 1998-2000*, the purpose of these workshops is “to sensitize the population around the issues of reproductive health as a woman’s right, the realization of [those rights being] ... a prerequisite for sustainable development...and indispensable for a democracy” (97). These workshops are a vehicle through which they are promoting a view of reproductive health that targets not simply individual beliefs and behaviors but links those social practices to economic and political processes, relationships that anthropologists have often failed to recognize (Ginsberg and Rapp 1995, Greenhalgh 1995).

While there are no studies on Salvadorans’ attitudes to abortion, the sentiments expressed in meetings and my conversations within the organization indicate that, even among the Dignas’ staff or the participants in its programs, women’s right to abortion is not accepted, much less in Salvadoran society. However, the responses of the women in this workshop hinted that, at least for rural women, this may not be entirely true. The fact that the Spanish word *aborto* refers to both miscarriage and abortion may point to the fact that in earlier times the difference between *el aborto espontáneo* and *el aborto*

inducido was seen as a continuum and not a break between moral and immoral behavior.⁵⁹ In the group I sat in on, the women shifted between interpreting *el aborto* just as miscarriage or as miscarriage and/or abortion, depending upon the context. This suggests that they too may have a more porous boundary between what separates abortion from the miscarriage depending upon the circumstances.

Feminists and feminist anthropologists have recognized that the biological or material basis of reproduction notwithstanding, the way those acts are experienced and interpreted, the social relations of reproduction (O'Brian 1983: 21), are historically and culturally constructed. In her controversial work on maternal detachment and infant survival in Northeast Brazil, Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992) challenges theories which claim that maternal bonding is psychobiologically scripted or evolutionarily developed. She claims that high rates of infant mortality shape the maternal thinking and practice of poverty stricken women in the shanty town of Alto do Cruzeiro. She describes mothers who have "delayed attachments to infants" (ibid.: 340) because some of their children are "thought of as born 'already wanting to die'" (ibid.: 342). Vacillating between relativizing and moralizing (Linger 1993), Scheper-Hughes points to the historic and sociocultural contingency of how mothers' treat their newborns. While some have questioned whether Scheper-Hughes has the evidence to support the statements that she

⁵⁹ This practice is not limited to Spanish speakers. Potts, Diggory, and Peel note the difficulty in establishing an internationally accepted definition of abortion. According to them, the word miscarriage "can be synonymous with abortion or limited to the description of spontaneous abortions" (1977: 21). The medical and legal implications of this distinction are discussed further below.

makes (Coughlin 1992, Kucinski 1993, Margolis 1993), Scheper-Hughes denies that she is making claims that are universally applicable. Nonetheless her depiction of the “mortal neglect *and* intense maternal attachment” (1992: 356) convincingly challenges universal assertions about the nature of mother love. Rather, she demonstrates that it is an emotion whose wide range of expressions is constructed by cultural and socio-economic conditions, and which may be suppressed in crisis.

Ana Lowenhaupt Tsing (1993) provides another example that indicates that the establishment of the “personhood” of a newborn is a negotiated process that must be examined in terms of the social relations of reproduction rather than assuming that motherhood is programmed by instinct. She relates an experience from her fieldwork in Indonesian and describes how it reshaped how she looked at American ideas about childbearing. While in working with an indigenous community in the Meratus Mountains, Tsing witnessed the birth of an infant which was not expected by the mother, Induan Amar. Because the child’s father was off on a hunting trips several days away, he was not present to deliver the baby as was the custom nor could he perform the rituals that were necessary to welcome the newborn. After the delivery Tsing noticed that the mother, along with her mother and a sister, were not attending to the needs of the child. While Tsing intervened at first, she stepped back when she began to suspect that the birth was not only unexpected but unwanted. The women’s lack of nurturing, she concluded, reflected that they did not yet consider the newborn a person. The baby died within a few days. When she returned five years later, Tsing found that what she had considered a

birth was understood by the other participants as something else: “Induan Amar’s male relatives recalled the story of her first birth as a late miscarriage, frustrated just for a moment by the actions of a naive anthropologist” (ibid.: 118).

Tsing details how her perspective on mothering and childbirth shifted because of the experience. When she returned to the United States and was confronted by a series of court cases prosecuting young women for delivering their babies in inappropriate places like toilets and motel rooms, she recalls that it generated none of the “baby-saving sentiment” that the birth in Indonesia had initially evoked in her. She explains:

In the United States, debates over reproduction have pressed the personhood of the infant-fetus farther and farther toward conception; women are increasingly expected to mourn the death of fetuses, wanted or unwanted. In the abstract, it seems unthinkable to treat a newborn baby, however premature, as a nonperson. Prosecutions follow this cultural logic in criminalizing inappropriate or unsuccessful births. Further, the inappropriate disposal of newborn and fetal corpses, whether in clinics or ghettos, has become a symbol of the disintegration of civilization. Most important, perhaps, U.S. American culture makes reproduction a female domain to which men are peripheral. Women charged with endangering newborns in U.S. prosecutions are presented as offending standards of female responsibility and morality (ibid.).

Both Tsing’s experience and the phenomena described by Scheper-Hughes identify processes through which the death of an infant through neglect is culturally constructed into a miscarriage, or seen as an inevitability. The line between abortion and contraception is even more ambiguous and, as Rosalind Petchesky points out, “the very concept of abortion is a particular way of constructing an event whose boundaries and content have differed in different situations” (1990: 29). She explains that beliefs about when life begins, and attitudes toward the differences between interventions before or

after conception, have varied across time and cultures. As Marielos pointed out, even the stance of the Catholic Church, abortion's most vociferous opponent in the second half of the twentieth century, has varied over time.

The Dignas' efforts to build a new consensus around reproductive rights, in general, and abortion rights, in particular, highlights a contradiction between their role as a NGO representing women's interests as part of Salvadoran civil society and their ideological commitment to feminism. In a society where the hegemonic discourse portrays abortion as a mortal sin and a crime, the majority of women in El Salvador would probably disagree that the promotion of abortion rights contributes to the "bettering [of] the quality of life of women" (*Programa Global 1998-2000*: 18). The Dignas and other organizations in the Salvadoran women's movement struggle with this contradiction, using strategies that range from consciousness-raising groups to the invocation of international conventions, and which target individual beliefs, local culture, national politics, and international policies.

These elements of their strategy are evident in the workshop that I described above. The small groups sought to get the promoters to reflect on their own feelings, day to day realities, experiences, and beliefs about the issues. Ofelia's talk challenged the participants' behavior. As a native of the area, she could ignore their denials and rely on her own knowledge of local reproductive practices to point out the inconsistencies between their responses and their reality. She provided a feminist analysis of abortion in her critique of the romanticization of motherhood that had emerged when the groups

shared the results of their reflections. Marielos' talk, on the other hand, provided a framework for them to justify new attitudes. Her medicalization of abortion as a health risk and descriptions of the fetus' inability to survive independent of the mother contrasted dramatically with moral and emotional responses that the discussion groups had elicited. Rather than seeing abortion as an inevitable personal tragedy, she supplied a public health perspective from which they could consider the criminalization of abortion as the source of the problem. Her deconstruction of the Catholic Church's position on the personhood of the fetus challenged one of the primary and most influential opponents of women's right to abortion.

Marielos' discussion of the Catholic Church's changing position on the topic was clearly aimed at weakening its credibility. But it is important not to overestimate the impact that the Church has on its followers' behavior. It has been suggested that because Catholics are discouraged from using birth control, they may suffer more unplanned conceptions, generating the same or higher rates of abortion than women from other religious groups (Potts, Diggory, and Peel 1977: 121). The data on abortion rates in El Salvador is insufficient to assess the impact of the Church's opposition. However, the fact that, despite the Church's doctrine on marriage, informal consensual unions are as common as formal marriages (Baires et al. 1996: 30), indicates that Catholic Salvadoran women regularly violate religious teachings in their matrimonial practices. It can be concluded therefore that "one of the main effects of religion [is] not to stop abortion but to create problems of conscience" (ibid.: 119).

Despite the attempts to have the promoters reflect on their own feelings about and experiences with abortion, there was no effort on the part of Mariclos, Ofelia, and Rubidia to identify how the promoters define abortion or how to incorporate these understandings into the RSH program. These promoters' reticence to speak was seen as shyness, embarrassment, or evidence of their need for more information. But I suspect that there may be another explanation. These silences may reflect the differences between the RSH *equipo* and the health promoters in their definition of abortion rather than their moral or political attitudes towards it.

This hypothesis results from my experience with a series of focus groups that I helped the Dignas conduct in Talpatates, another rural area where the Dignas RSH *equipo* worked. The Dignas needed a *diagnóstico*, or an evaluation, of the state of reproductive rights in the community as they were planning to open a *Casa Materna*, a Maternity House, in Talpatates within a few months. As part of the process, Carmen Argueta, the RSH promoter in Talpatates, convened a group of the Dignas' supporters who were of childbearing age to ask them a number of questions about reproductive issues. One of the questions we asked them was whether there had been any rapes in the community. After the women answered negatively, Carmen, asked specifically about three different cases where, she later explained to me, women had been raped. With this prompting, the women readily acknowledged that these rapes had occurred. Afterwards Carmen expressed her frustration at the way local gossip had reconstructed these events so that even the women in the community with whom the Dignas had been working for

years failed to identify the events as rapes. It was not the “facts” of these cases that were contested, but how the events were characterized. However, Carmen’s protests notwithstanding, it was not the gossip that was reconstructing the events but rather her interpretation. She was challenging the hegemonic view in the community that what happened to these women was to be expected. For many of these women, what Carmen defined as rape may not have differed significantly from what they expected in their marital relations. She promoted a feminist analysis and critique of the gendered power relations that allowed men to force women to have sexual relations against their will. The local interpretations of rape, “dominant community discourses” (Tsing 1993: 119), were not the same as that of the Dignas.

Consequently I suspect that the elision of the differences in the use of the word *aborto* by the health promoters is not the result of a misunderstanding. Rather it reflects the importance of context in establishing the meaning of an action which is prohibited by the state and the church, but which may be seen as necessary in order to assure a woman’s and/or her family’s survival. We must pay attention to what is left unsaid in the dominant discourses in local communities as Tsing has pointed out (*ibid.*) but we must also attempt to decipher the ambiguities in what is said. It is the ambiguities in the use of the word *aborto* in a discussion of abortion in El Salvador that may be key to the different meanings attached to it.

The initial resistance or inability of these health promoters to talk about abortion and what it means demonstrates how taboo the subject still is, especially in the

countryside. The women in the Dignas with whom I collaborated on developing questions for the focus groups in Talpatates rejected the idea of including questions about abortion in the focus groups because they were convinced that we would not get valid responses. Even in the small group discussions of the *capacitación*, it was impossible to tell whether the promoters really did not know anyone who had aborted, if they did not know they knew someone because of the silence surrounding the subject, or if they refused to talk about their experiences with abortion because of fear or shame.⁶⁰

However, Ofelia's statements indicated that women in Suchitoto do abort. Her ability to acknowledge this openly even though she was also born into a peasant family and raised in Suchitoto may be related to her experience outside the community (see chapter 5).

Whatever the reality of abortion in Suchitoto, the *capacitación* was clearly breaking new ground with the participants by getting them to talk about it publicly.

The Dignas' goals include empowering the women with whom they work by "contributing to the generation of a new national culture and of a critical thinking that confronts and destroys the stereotypes that discriminate against women." (*Programa Global 1998-2000*: 18). In essence, what they are doing is creating a counter-hegemonic discourse on gender. Workshops like this one with health promoters are one important aspect of that process but as the final negotiations between the Dignas and the participants reflect, this process contains a tension over access to resources that occurs

⁶⁰ They are not the only ones who omit abortion from their discussion. A *diagnóstico* on the National Hospital of Suchitoto (Melgar Morazon 1996) as well as a report on pregnancy and birth funded by the *Fondo Socorro Médico Internacional* (1997) and the local midwives both failed to address the issue of abortion in the municipality.

repeatedly in the Dignas' interactions with their "*beneficiarias*" or the women that participate in their programs. The opportunities for the Dignas to promote their discourse must be constantly negotiated with the participants. The Dignas' ability to access individuals is clearly related to, if not dependent upon, their resources. Without the money for transportation and the provisions, it is doubtful that these promoters would have attended any of their workshops, much less one on abortion. Their appeal to the Dignas for videos and funds for snacks in order to recruit participants to their own presentations illustrate the terms of the negotiations between the promoters and the Dignas. Because the participants were from the network of ex-militants from the FMLN who had been selected for training by another NGO, it is impossible to know if the idea of seeking additional support from the Dignas for their work in the communities came from the promoters themselves, or was a strategy of the other NGO to get outside or additional funding for their promoters.

It would be a mistake to suggest that the promoters are the only level at which the Dignas are promoting the discourse of abortion rights. During the year that I spent with them they struggled to develop strategies that would effectively challenge the law which criminalized abortion in El Salvador. However, in April of 1997, access to legal abortions became even more limited when the Legislative Assembly voted to eliminate the three exceptions under which women could legally obtain abortions. I will argue that this legislation was primarily an ideological defeat, and one which may, in the end, prove to be a powerful catalyst for the Dignas, and the rest of the Salvadoran women's

movement, to more effectively organize around the issue of abortion rights.

To the Psychiatric Hospital and Give Them Shock Therapy!

In 1996 the Civilian National Police began a campaign against illegal abortion clinics. A report in the *El Diario de Hoy*, 16 May 1996, on the raid of an abortion clinic provides details about the nature of illegal abortion in El Salvador as well as the official attitude toward the practice. Detectives arrested a nurse who allegedly posed as a doctor in order to perform abortions, an engineering student and a beautician who helped her recruit patients, a driver/security guard, and a housekeeper. In the house where the clinic allegedly operated, they found equipment associated with performing abortions as well as a notebook with a list of doctors who could be called for assistance. The article emphasized the exorbitant cost of the abortions, from \$300 to \$1000 dollars, and quoted the “supposed doctor,” who, admitting that abortions were practiced in her house, commented that “one must find a way to earn money.”

According to the article, between fifteen and twenty abortions were performed in the house daily. An investigator told the reporter that the clinic was part of a network that advertised in the yellow pages “but were no more than ‘contacts’ to recruit women.” They listed the names of clinics such as Las Margaritas, Clínica Médica Ginecológica Santa Bárbara and ANICAR which advertised that they provide information on family planning, treatment for problems with menstruation, and obstetrical care. A detective told the reporter that “women interested in receiving an abortion call the ‘clinics’ where a

person answers and sends them to a Beauty Salon, 'Rosemary' . . . where they verify that they have the money necessary to do the abortion." He went on to explain that the price of the abortion was determined by the number of weeks of pregnancy but that clinics would not perform abortions after four months because they considered it a risk. Several persons developed complications, he added. If it became serious, they were taken to the Maternity Hospital where, he claimed, several had died, "although the PNC has no exact data on this situation." While the supposed doctor admitted that abortions were performed in her house, her husband claimed to have not known that it had been going on. The following day an article in the competing newspaper, *La Prensa*, ironically pointed out that the couple claimed to be "*evangélicos*," or fundamentalist Christians, and that the house was decorated with psalms and proverbs. Three bibles, they reported, were found in various bedrooms.

In a sidebar to the article, the Attorney General claimed that only three of these types of clinics existed in El Salvador and that the majority of them had been shut down. Despite these claims, the author of the article noted that the continued publication of newspaper ads promoting medical services such as "menstrual regulation" suggested that abortions were still available. Even more telling, the article continued, was "the high number of cases of women who come to the public hospitals with complication in their reproductive tracts resulting from having practiced abortion in clinics or underground locations" (7-A). After noting that eight percent of the patients treated at the public maternity hospital show signs of abortion, many the result of using risky homemade

techniques, the article cites the health system's figure of 10,000 *abortos* annually. But it acknowledges that does not reflect the true dimensions of the problem as these include only cases where women come in for treatment of complications. The article concludes with quotes from the First Lady, Elizabeth Calderón Sol, and the papal nuncio affirming the fetus' right to life and the sinful criminal nature of abortion.

These clinics were run by professionals, a nurse in this case, who had medical backup for emergencies; in other cases, described in articles which followed this one, the abortionists were actually doctors. Despite the illegality of the operation, the prices are within the range charged for abortions in the U.S., though admittedly costly on a Salvadoran salary. The clinics seemed to operate quite openly, advertising in the newspaper and using legitimate businesses as fronts suggesting that enforcement had been extremely lax in the past. Articles in *La Prensa Gráfica*, 18 May 1996 and 14 May 1997, documented that those arrested were often released. The involvement of Fundamentalist Christians seems contradictory but it is the Catholic Church which remains the most vociferous critic of abortion. The First Lady's opposition also presented a serious obstacle because as the head of the National Institute for the Development of Women, ISDEMU, she was in charge of elaborating a national policy on women's issues.

There are no firm statistics on the incident of induced abortion in El Salvador. According to *El Diario de Hoy*, 2 March 1997, neither the Salvadoran Demographic Association, an agency associated with Planned Parenthood International which promotes the use of birth control, or Pro-Vida, that anti-abortion organization could

provide recent data on abortion. The Director of the Maternity Hospital could not provide me with figures for his hospital⁶¹ nor could the Director of Reproductive Health of the Ministry of Health,⁶² Genovesa Morales. Even after the law governing abortion were changed and the risk that more women would die from abortions, Morales indicated that the Ministry had no intention of studying the problem. According to her, the problem was a moral one not a public health issue, and thus not a concern.

The crackdown on abortion clinics generated increased pressure on the Dignas. While many women in the organization fully supported women's right to terminate unwanted pregnancies, the organization had not yet developed an explicit stand in favor of abortion rights. They feared that doing so would provoke a backlash that would negatively affect their work. Several of the coordinators did not believe that their constituency would support such a position. However, many in the organization were clearly working to construct a new consensus around the issue as the description of the workshop above illustrates. One of the four areas of work that they prioritized in their *Programa Global* of 1996-1998, and again for 1998-2000, was the struggle for women's control of their bodies, their right to explore their capacity for pleasure, and for a sexual life separate from their reproductive capacity.

Thus while they did not specifically advocate the legalization of abortion rights, their open discussion of women's sexuality, their rejection of motherhood as women's

⁶¹ Interview held July 4, 1997, San Salvador.

⁶² Interview held July 15, 1997, San Salvador.

obligation, and their critique of the double standard that left women responsible for their children while their biological fathers ignored their existence, encouraged women to come to the Dignas when they found themselves with an unwanted pregnancy. But the illegality of abortion prevented the Dignas from providing assistance beyond counseling, or they would risk jeopardizing the organization's entire existence.

By June of 1996, the pressure generated by the campaign against the abortion clinics forced the Dignas to call for the decriminalization of abortion. In the 21 June 1996 *El Mundo*, they argued that the criminalization of abortion only served to enrich the abortionists. Morena Herrera was quoted as saying that depenalization was "one alternative, among others, which could help solve the health problem that affects a good number of Salvadoran women." She called on the Ministry of Health to convene a forum where viable proposal concerning the reality of abortion could be discussed. In the same article, the Minister of Health was quoted as immediately rejecting their proposal. He responded that the feminists "appeared to have some cables crossed if they are asking for the depenalization of abortion." There would be no forum because he would not be an accomplice of these women. He would rather "give them a space in the Psychiatric Hospital so that they could be given electric shock treatments."

The Dignas responded with a paid ad in the 27 June 1996 *La Prensa Gráfica*. The ad was cosigned by three other women's groups IMU, MAM, and the *Asociación de Madres Demandantes*. It consisted of a letter addressed to the Minister of Health calling on him to address the issue seriously. They situated the debate in a broader discussion of

reproductive health pointing to the lack of sex education, the obstacles in the way of women receiving adequate preventative care, the high incidence of women dying from abortion and miscarriage, and the political, economic, and social realities that force women to resort to abortion. The ad goes on to challenge the Minister of Health directly:

We believe that, even though you are opposed to the decriminalization of abortion, the problems we listed above are the responsibility of the Ministry of Health which should adopt policies and actions which are preventative in nature rather than punitive. If the data of the Ministry of Health is accurate and the national health system is only capable of giving coverage to 30% of the births in the country and can only provide 34% of the demand for prenatal care, we are left with no doubts aside from any dogmatism, that some day the Ministry of Health is going to have to respond to our call for attention to this issue. You decide if it will be during your administration that these issues are addressed or if you would prefer to appear in the history of this country's public health as a functionary who did not have the competence to promote a dialogue and look for solutions to a national problem that claims more human lives each day.

The ad concluded by criticizing the Minister for his remarks about giving them electric shocks, claiming that it reflected a lack of recognition that Salvadoran society was in a "new moment" and displayed a lack of sensitivity to those suffering from mental illness as well as a lack of professionalism.

In the ad, the Dignas stake out a position on abortion which poses it as a public health problem, rather than a private individual moral issue or one which asserts women's right to control of their bodies. The ad also reflects their view that it is the obligation of the state is to provide or ensure the availability of certain services, a position which flies in the face of structural adjustment policies promoted by the International Monetary Fund and reformulated in the Salvadoran government's policies

toward modernization. The lack of sex education, the inaccessibility of health care, the high abortion rates, and inadequate prenatal and obstetric care are all issues which they see as problems that the state, through the Ministry of Health, has the responsibility to address.

Their direct appeal to the Minister of Health to take up these issues echos *guerrilla* discourse during the war in its appeal to the historic inevitability of their victory. But as Rosalind Petchesky (1990) shows the roles of states toward abortion and other issues of women's reproductive health has "varied enormously according to historic and national circumstances" (ibid.: 70) and has been mediated by three successive though overlapping sources of influence: religion, the medical profession, and population planning. To these factors, feminist and human rights discourse must now be added. Recognizing that no one specific location of power determines state policies regulating women's fertility, Petchesky writes, "in the long run, women's fertility options in state societies are affected by a complex network of institutions and social forces including religion, medicine, law, the economy and the family, which are all hierarchically organized by gender, class, and race" (ibid.: 72). But she maintains that it is possible to identify the impact of particular forces at specific moments. In 1997, the availability of legal abortions under certain circumstances for women in El Salvador was suddenly withdrawn. In the rest of this chapter, I will explore the conditions leading up to that change, and the reaction it provoked within the Dignas and the broader women's movement.

Abortion Surfaces on the Political Agenda

Rosalind Petchesky claims that “it is the *visibility* [her italics] of abortion rather than its incidence that arouses organized opposition” (ibid.: 77). If this is true, it may in part explain why, despite the fact that legal access to abortion was extremely limited in El Salvador, the ARENA party made completely eliminating that access one of its final gestures after the 1997 elections. Having sustained significant losses in the Legislative Assembly, as well as losing a significant number of mayors in major cities, some speculated that pushing through the revised penal code was a vindictive political gesture on the part of ARENA. In doing so it made the women’s movement pay for its support of the FMLN in the elections and forced the FMLN to confront a major contradiction in its political agenda and that of the women’s movement. The outcome exemplified the tremendous challenges faced by feminists in countries where women’s sexuality is circumscribed by their reproductive role, and the acceptance of women’s right to sexual pleasure, much less the exercise of that right, is limited to an extreme few.

In April of 1997, in one of its final acts before the ARENA party handed over control to the newly elected Legislative Assembly, the revision of the fifty year old Penal Code was approved. One of the last minute changes was the elimination of the conditions, listed in article 137, under which the crime of receiving or performing an abortion would not be prosecuted. The first case was where extreme physical or psychic (*psíquica*) danger to the pregnant woman could be documented by a doctor or psychiatrist other than that who would perform the abortion. Abortion was also permitted

in cases where the pregnancy was the result of a crime “against one’s sexual liberty or of artificial insemination without consent” (*Programa Investigación Para La Acción Feminina* 1996: 57). In these cases, the abortion had to be performed before the twelfth week of pregnancy. Finally if the fetus was going to be born with serious physical or psychic defects (*taras físicas o psíquicas*), an abortion could be performed until the twenty-second week of pregnancy. An evaluation of the condition had to be done in a health center separate from that where the abortion would be performed but it could be either a public or a private establishment.

The number of abortions performed under these exceptions was minuscule. Ricardo Burgos, the director of the National Maternity Hospital (*Hospital Nacional de Maternidad Dr. Raúl Argüello Escolán*), told me that in the previous year, only one abortion was performed in the hospital under one of these exceptions. A woman who had cervical cancer became pregnant and “it was necessary to interrupt the pregnancy in order to begin the cancer treatment because if we didn’t she would have died,” he explained. Cases such as this where the pregnancy presented a risk to the mother or there were congenital malformations were called therapeutic abortions, he told me. The cases were reviewed by a committee of the doctors at the highest levels, “*los máximos jefes*,” to verify that they met the requirements before approving the procedure. Then Dr. Burgos would face the task of finding someone who would volunteer to perform it because “I couldn’t force anyone to do it if they had religious objection.”

“*Las violadas* (women who have been raped),” he said pausing to think in

response to my question about the number of rape victims who had received abortions. “I don’t believe we have had a single case of *violadas* where we have performed an abortion in the eight years I have been director of the hospital.” He recalled two cases of women who claimed that their pregnancies were the results of rapes that had occurred two months earlier. “We, as a hospital,” he explained,

can in no way determine if a woman has been raped or not . . . It frightened me, without having any proof, to [perform the abortion] because any woman could come and tell us that she’d been raped and needed an abortion and without realizing it, you’d have opened an uncontrollable pandora’s box. A few other times they sent me cases from Legal Medicine, the forensic department of the Supreme Justice Court, and they told me that they had been raped and that I should do an abortion. I told them to send me a judge, someone to sign something that it is actually a rape and they never sent me anything . . . I needed someone with the authority of a judge, or some kind of police investigation or something like it to prove that there had really been a rape. They never sent it to me and so we didn’t perform the abortion.

Responding to my question about why they refused to send the documents, he attributed their failure to comply with his request as a problem of “bureaucracy.”

Remember, this abortion stuff is a theme that is political, religious, moral, legal, affects one’s reputation (*de prestigio*) and there are many people who don’t want to involve themselves, many people who would rather . . . don’t want to sign anything or give their opinion, or any of this sort of thing. Unfortunately, it is only the women who pay for the positions that some functionaries adopt.

The ambiguous wording in the law allowed judges to resist authorizing the procedure pending medical opinion, and doctors to refuse to practice them without judicial authorization. Women from the Dignas and other groups recounted repeated incidents where women had come to them having been raped, having gone through all the right

channels, and having judges deny them permission to abort because of the judges personal attitudes against abortion. As Dr. Burgos pointed out, “what happens is that the period in which an abortion can be performed is limited. It’s not like you have two years to decide if someone’s been raped. Within four months, the time you need has lapsed.”

In mid January 1997, in response to the increasing debate over Article 137 in the penal code in the Assembly the Dignas had called a press conference. The press release denounced politicians’ use of women’s bodies “once again” to cover up the crisis in the parties and politics of the right. “Once again,” the announcement reiterated, “ultraconservatives oppose the spirit and doctrine of respect of civil and individual guarantees that sustains the proposed new Penal Code.” The press release criticized the attempt to make a public health problem like abortion into a crime to be punished, recalling the results of 1995 United Nations Population Conference in Cairo. Suggesting that the government was using women’s bodies as a smoke screen to cover up the “ineffective--no hopeless (*desesperadas*)--responses to the insecurity of its citizens or the conditions of extreme social poverty,” the press release concluded that “the problems which surround abortion, definitely do not put the security of the state into jeopardy” and invited the recipient to attend a press conference where the Dignas would elaborate their position.

The press conference took place in the *cuarto de capacitaciones* of the Dignas’ San Salvador office on January 13. While the invitation indicated that the event would begin at 9 am, reporters from newspaper, television, and radio arrived all morning. I sat

in on a series of interviews given by América Romualdo, the coordinator of the anti-violence program and a lawyer, and Marielos. In one of the interviews, América began pointing out that there were different points of view on abortion that were not being aired. Characterizing the epoch as one of “democratization and participation,” she insisted that the situation was not being resolved by laws prohibiting abortion or closing down clinics. “We have seen the real situation that the law is ignoring,” she told reporters. She explained that the Dignas were calling for a “serious discussion of the issue [of abortion] since women who are in the situation of needing abortions are not being listened to.” Instead all that was being heard was “the voices of men telling women what they have to do.” (*Las voces de los hombres diciendo lo que las mujeres tienen que hacer.*) She called on the Ministry of Salud to take seriously issues which were seen as “just women’s issues.”

Marielos expanded on América’s points, arguing from a public health perspective. Because reproductive health issues had never been the object of a serious investigation in El Salvador, she noted, there was a profound lack of knowledge about the actual conditions that women face. Beyond the risks of having an abortion under less than optimum conditions, she warned of the collateral effects of criminalizing abortion: women who are already hesitant to go to hospitals will be even more resistant to seek medical assistance because even in cases of miscarriage, they are regarded with suspicion. “Women are treated, not like a patient deserving attention with dignity, but as a possible criminal,” she insisted.

“The attention on the issue never reflects the responsibility of men,” Marielos continued. Pointing to the *doble moral* or the double standard between rich and poor, she emphasized that “the situation has more affect on poor women.” She concluded by calling on the Ministry of Health to approach abortion as a health problem rather than approaching the issue moralistically and driving it further underground. Both she, América, and the press release expressed concerned about the Penal Code being politicized just before the election. The press release described their effort as trying to “cover the sun with our hands.” But it concluded “the Dignas pronounce ourselves against whatever sectors resist constructing a true State of Law (*Estado de Derecho*) where society as a whole, and individual persons, will not be manipulated with demagogic postures either in the period right before electoral campaigns are launched, or at any time with proselytizing of dubious honesty.”

An article that appeared in *La Prensa Gráfica* on 28 January 1997, about a week after the news conference, documented the kinds of situations Marielos and América described in the press conference. The article covered the detention of two women from San Salvador, aged 25 and 27, accused of attempting abortions. Both several weeks pregnant, the two women who were were accused of inserting pills in their vaginas to provoke an abortion. Instead the pills caused several burns and heavy bleeding. Each woman eventually went to the hospital where, because of the nature of their symptoms, they were accused of having attempted abortions. Hospital authorities then notified a judge who ordered the women detained. In addition to their detention, the judge placed a

lien on their property for up to 3000 colones (approximately US\$300) “to answer for the public consequences of the crime committed.” One of the women reportedly denied the charges. She claimed not to have known that she was pregnant and to have taken the pills at the recommendation of a market woman in order “to regulate her menstruation.” The other woman fled the hospital after being told that she was being charged with abortion and an investigation of the circumstance of her flight was pending. At the end of the article, it reported that a third woman, 19 years old, had also apparently used the same pills and succeeded in accomplishing an abortion. But the side effects were even more severe for her and she had fallen into a coma. The judge had failed to establish her legal status at the time the article was written and she remained in intensive care.

The article tells us little about these particular women and why they opted for the course of action that jeopardized their lives, their future childbearing capacity, and their liberty. But it does provide tidbits that can be gleaned to sketch some outlines of the “situation” to which the Dignas refer. Their ages, 19 through 27, while young are not likely those of desperate adolescents seeking to conceal their first pregnancy from their parents.⁶³ That a woman from the north of the city and another from a neighborhood to the south had access to the “pills” indicates that the “remedy’s” distribution was somewhat widespread. Whether the first woman knew she was pregnant or not, a request for something to bring on menstrual bleeding has been code for abortifacients across time and culture (Petchetsky 1990: 54 quoting McLaren) and her reported procurement of the

⁶³ Adolescents between the age of 10 and 19 account for 25.6% of the population and 25% of all births in the country.

pills at the market also indicates the ready availability of such products in San Salvador. The woman's flight, and the hospital's investigation of its circumstances, suggests further resistance on her part to the state's policing of her reproductive choices as well as possible collaboration by members of the hospital staff in her escape. Finally, the third woman seemed to be placed in a separate category by both the judge and the newspaper. The judge failed to charge her, despite the fact that she had clearly aborted. The title of the article, "Detention for women attempting to abort," and the placement of the discussion of her case at the end of article without her name, distinguished her from the others. While it may not be the intent, such treatment may result in the failure to identify such cases of maternal mortality with induced abortions.

Two weeks prior to the election on 2 March 1997, *El Diario de Hoy*, which is the more conservative of the daily newspapers, ran a segment on abortion in its Sunday edition. The lead article pointed to the failure of the electoral campaign to elucidate the official position of the various political parties "on a question which could decide the vote of many Salvadorans." In addition, "the Catholic Church had raised an alarm," the article indicated. As the Penal Code was being revised, the Church "had received news that they were planning to add a fourth case under which, supposedly, abortion would be permitted, if the unwanted pregnancy caused psychic (*psíquica*) damage to the mother." According to the story, the Archbishop of San Salvador, Monseñor Fernando Sáenz Lacalle, insisted that this would lead to unlimited abortions because of the unspecified nature of the "psychic health of the mother." The articles which followed seemed to be a

direct response to the Archbishops alarm. But the FMLN's subsequent success in the elections suggest that the detailing the position of various parties either had no effect or the opposite effect that the Archbishop was hoping for in raising the alarm to which the newspaper seemed to be responding. However the results of the election may have led to the intensive campaign by the Church to eliminate Article 137 before ARENA lost its control of the Assembly.

The articles which followed were interviews with three female candidates from each of the major political parties, ARENA, FMLN, and the Christian Democratic Party, about their positions on abortion. Each candidate was featured separately with a list of personal data (age, marriage status, number of children, religion, profession, and political positions), and their responses to the questions about what they would do if their daughters got pregnant as a result of a mistake or a rape, had a severely malformed fetus, or had a condition which would jeopardize her life if she continued the pregnancy.

The ARENA candidate, *Licenciada Milena Calderón de Escalón*, is also the sister of the President. She defended the rights of the unborn but recognizing the reality of abortion, suggested that what was needed was "adequate political education." While indicating that ARENA was opposed to decriminalization of abortion even under the limited conditions in which it was now allowed, she said that they had to respect the law. But ARENA was deeply opposed to extending the conditions under which women could obtain abortion without being prosecuted to cases of women who needed abortions for psychological reasons. She concluded that "it is necessary to educate men and women so

that they form families with solid moral principles. If we want to implant peace, the only path is through the family.” Whether her daughter had mistakenly gotten pregnant, been raped, or the baby had severe deformities, she would insist that she have the baby. However in the case of the risk of death, she indicated that she would accept her daughter’s individual decision.

Rosa Mélida Villatoro Benítez, of the Christian Democratic Party, on the other hand, maintained that she would insist that her daughter bear the child even if it jeopardized her life to do so. As the president of the Legislative Assembly’s Commission on the Family, Women, and Children, her anti-abortion views were well-known. Earlier that session she had introduced a “*pieza de correspondencia*,” or a letter to be entered into the legislative record, calling for a study of the issue of abortion in the Penal Code. In the interview, Villatoro claimed that medical advances have practically eliminated the risks that pregnancy poses to the life of the mother, and that those who become pregnant as a result of rape can give their children up for adoption. She called it “immoral” to use congenital malformations as a justification for abortion. Reiterating the need to protect women from domestic violence, a position which had previously brought her into alliance with the Dignas and other feminist groups, Villatoro insisted on the need to “reestablish the traditions and values of the family.”

Like the two other *diputadas*, María Marta Valladares, identified herself as a Catholic. While the other two characterized themselves as being quite active members of the Church, Valladares admitted to being lax in her practice. Known by her *nom de*

guerre, Nidia Díaz, the representative of the FMLN, indicated a more complex approach to the issue. In her responses to how she would deal with a daughter's unwanted pregnancies, she was much more equivocal than the other two respondents. In the case of a rape, she indicated that she would let her daughter decide but expressed a desire that she would take responsibility for children conceived by violence. In the event that a fetus was malformed, she qualified her response in terms of the expected condition of the child after birth. In the case where the child was without "feeling or consciousness, could not be happy or productive," she would let her daughter decide. But if it was a case of something like Down's Syndrome, where the child would be able to interact, "in these cases, you cannot take a life, because they can be productive."

Valladares' response to the question about what she would counsel if a pregnancy was jeopardizing her daughter's life had a particular poignancy. According to the article Valladares herself had been "at the point of losing her life a few weeks after being conceived." The fetus had implanted itself outside of her mother's uterus, and the doctor treating her had suggested an abortion. Because of "her Christian principles," she found another doctor that successfully reinserted the embryo. In the case of a risk to the life of the mother, Valladares advocated that each case should be looked at "carefully." She said that would let her daughter decide, "as my mother did."

The FMLN representative emphasized the need for prevention and the importance of the Ministry of Education in promoting sex education. She also insisted that young women who become pregnant should not be thrown out of school or out of their homes.

In addition, she called for “a climate of political and religious freedom, you can’t say to someone that they shouldn’t use a condom arguing that they would be sinning.” She acknowledged that the official position of the FMLN on abortion was still being worked out:

We think that this theme needs to be debated broadly. However, as a party we are committed to preserve the decriminalized cases that are being considered for the Penal Code. It is not possible to totally prevent abortion when we have an irresponsible state that cannot deal with the precarious situation of many people.

These interviews reflect how the diverse perspectives of three of the major Salvadoran political parties are translated into their positions on abortion. The right-wing ARENA candidate expressed her party’s opposition to abortion and, while she acknowledged their acceptance of the cases in which it was permitted, she emphasized that it was due to their respect for the law. Her solution to this dilemma was an ideological approach that viewed education about moral principles and family values as the means to diminish the need for abortion. Mirroring the technocratic orientation of the Christian Democrats, Mélida Villatoro, claimed that medical advances would soon eliminate any justifications for abortion. While she was more hardline in her opposition to abortion than even her ARENA colleague, Villatoro’s emphasis on family values also included a call to address the issue of domestic violence. Diaz, on the other hand, repeatedly pointed to the role of the state in creating conditions that would diminish the need for abortion: protecting the rights of pregnant adolescents, taking responsibility for the children conceived as a result of rape, and promoting sex education in the schools.

Reflecting the Marxist roots of the FMLN's perspective, she emphasizes the ability to be productive as the criterion to determine whether or not a woman should be permitted to abort a malformed fetus. But her claim that the FMLN was committed to a broad debate on the topic and was determined to preserve the exemptions which allowed women to obtain abortions under Article 137 was challenged by the party's actions in the following weeks.

These actions were foreshadowed for me by a conversation I had during the election for legislators (*diputados*) and city councils (*consejos municipales*) which took place on March 16, 1997. I had volunteered as an international observer with the National Counsel of Churches of El Salvador (NCCES). They trained and dispersed election observers around the country and assigned me to the town of Texistepeque in Santa Ana. Another volunteer and I were hosted in Texistepeque by Lidia Ramos, a coordinator in a group associated with the NCCES and a native of the town. While Lidia was a dedicated member of the FMLN, she assured us that her household was an appropriate place for us, as international election observers, to stay because her mother was an avid supporter of one of the right wing parties. We arrived the day before the elections giving us time to visit the headquarters of the various political parties that were competing in the election. In addition, two *responsables* (officials) of the FMLN from the nearby city of Santa Ana came to the house to talk to us. When one of them heard that I was working with the Dignas we got into a lively discussion about the relationship between the women's organizations to the political parties. He argued that the women's

movement should be more understanding of the dilemma faced by the FMLN and should refrain from pushing them so hard on various issues, specifically abortion. He had been at the presentation of the women's platform (see chapter 5), he told me, and argued that they should not have included a demand for the legalization of abortion because it made it impossible for the FMLN to endorse the platform. He singled out the Dignas as being particularly extreme in their demands. I expressed surprise at this comment recalling that a few days earlier in the newspaper article referred to above, a leader of the FMLN, Nidia Diaz, had articulated a position very similar to that of the Dignas by calling for an open discussion of the topic. That was her personal position, he claimed. She was wrong in presenting it as a party position. He insisted that it was definitely not the position of the party. According to him, the party had not worked out a position.

The FMLN was not alone in lacking a position on abortion. While the leadership of the women's groups included abortion rights in their political platform, there was a strong conviction that their "*bases*," their grassroots supporters, did not share this broader commitment to reproductive rights. Although educating women about their bodies, and reshaping ideas about sexuality, motherhood, and reproduction were central tenants in many of their programs, within the history of the movement, there had never been an organization in El Salvador devoted exclusively to advocating for abortion rights. But within and among the women's organizations, there was an increasing recognition that a concerted effort would be necessary to generate a consensus on abortion.

Constructing a Discourse on Abortion

Within a few days of the elections, the need for the women's movement to actively construct a public discourse on the topic of abortion surfaced at a Panel-Forum on "Relations between the Women's Movement and the State," sponsored by the *Red de Mujeres por la Unidad y el Desarrollo* (Women's Network for Peace and Development).⁶⁴ The organization had received international funding to sponsor a series of forums on topics of importance to women. Thus while it was not an extravagant affair, the funding allowed them to hold the event at a *posada*, a kind of restaurant usually rented out for private parties or other celebrations, in a middle-class neighborhood. The event attracted approximately fifty women from a variety of women's organizations including the Dignas. It began with a panel of three women followed by discussion open to all the participants. The event lasted all day and included a complimentary lunch as well as snacks during a morning and afternoon break.

The panelists were all women who had played critical roles in building the women's movement in El Salvador. The political positions they presented juxtaposed three distinct feminist approaches to social change in Latin America. Deysi Chen, the director of IMU and co-representative in ISDEMU of "civil society" with Morena, was

⁶⁴ The Network one of a number of coalitions of women's NGOs in El Salvador, formed at various times and with distinct rationales. One was originally made up of women's groups from the various branches of the FMLN (COM), another formed to bring together the autonomous women's groups. I am not clear about the rationale behind the *Red* but it had groups with close ties to the FMLN along with some that were independent of the party. What struck me as unique about the *Red*, at least in terms of this series of discussions, was the highly visible role played of a number of European women, all of whom also worked, or had worked, within the member organizations.

the first speaker. She discussed the challenge of developing structures within civil society that are effective in challenging the power of the state. She was followed by Mercedes Cañas, the first woman to write about domestic violence in El Salvador and a respected feminist researcher. She argued that struggling to achieve change through the state was a trap. The state, according to Cañas, was dominated by small minority which generated “ways of life that reproduce power structures.” Criticizing the hierarchical nature of the women’s organizations, she accused them of reproducing the structures of power that they had rejected in the political parties. To her, the fact that the FMLN had made significant gains in the elections was of little consequence because if they assumed power, the change that they could implement would be limited by the policies of the World Bank. As an alternative to what she saw as the futile efforts to generate genuine feminist change through traditional politics, Mercedes advocated personal transformation as the most legitimately feminist avenue of change. “We must transform ourselves personally, and our movement,” she concluded.

The third speaker was Lorena Peña. Known during the war by her *nom de guerre*, Rebeca Palacio, Lorena had just been reelected as a FMLN representative to the legislative assembly, is the president of MAM, and is known as an outspoken feminist. She insisted that women could not afford to disengage with the state. Pointing to the homophobia and anti-feminism of the FMLN, she asserted that despite these problems, pressure on the state from the women’s movement via the party was imperative to effect change. She went down the list of the victories that had been gained since the women’s

movement had organized: education reform, ISDEMU, the law against domestic violence, the law regulating the free trade zones, and the requirement that all legislators be up to date on their child support (see chapter 3). “We won,” Peña claimed, “and we won because we had the backing of the women’s movement.”

Abortion, however, was a different story. “With abortion,” she lamented, “we have not won because there has been no consensus.” Referring to the issues of abortion and sexual preference (*libre opción sexual*), she asked, “What are we going to do when the movement does not have a consensus? Are we going to struggle for abortion rights and gay rights? Are we going to enter the 21st century with the social standards of the 15th? Patriarchal values and neoliberal politics (*valores patriarcales y política neoliberal*)?”

These questions reverberated within the Dignas. The organization had recently initiated regular discussions (*debates*) in their office in San Salvador. Focussing on topics like violence and feminist ethics, these were to be internal forums in which the coordinators would develop their thinking on difficult issues. While all the coordinators were expected to attend these discussions, the promoters were encouraged to attend only those sessions regarding topics that were pertinent to their work. With the increasing controversy about abortion, the issue of sexual and reproductive health was selected for discussion in early April.

The first discussion was facilitated by a consultant, Clara Murguialday, the Basque feminist who had previously worked with the Dignas. Nine of the eleven

coordinators attended the meeting along with fifteen promoters, approximately half from the rural municipalities and half from San Salvador. Clara began by defining some terms commonly used in the discussion of reproductive rights and identified the sources of the terms. She explained that the right to healthcare is contained in Article 25 of the International Declaration of Human Rights, that the definition of health comes from the World Organization of Health, and that the concept of reproductive health was developed in the conferences in Cairo and Beijing. All of these agencies and conferences were familiar to the women in the room.

Clara defined reproductive health as: the freedom to procreate when and however many offspring are desired, to choose a preferred method of fertility regulation, and to have a healthy and satisfying sexual life, emphasizing the fact that sexual health is part of reproductive health. She also looked at the different models of health care, comparing western models with homeopathic and traditional natural approaches to health care.

Warning them about the danger of investing the state with total responsibility for health care, Clara pointed out that reproductive and sexual rights are a recent historical construction. They are rights that manifest themselves (*concretan*) in the female body and include the rights: to know, to love, to decide about one's own body; to physical integrity; to individuality; to equality; to respect for diversity. It is important to remember, she cautioned them, that these rights are not a given. What was new about the definition of reproduction in Cairo, she explained, was its assertion that reproductive health also included women's freedom from procreation and the separation of sexuality

from reproduction. In Beijing, Clara explained, these two elements were brought back together transforming the demand for free and voluntary motherhood (*maternidad libre y voluntaria*) into one for reproductive rights. But even the Beijing document does not call for the decriminalization (*depenalización*) or legalization of abortion.

With that introduction, Clara opened the floor. Marielos responded by raising a series of practical questions and points. She emphasized that the struggle for reproductive rights had to be part of a struggle for the basic right to healthcare. It was important for the Dignas to consider which model of healthcare they were going to promote, she insisted, because of the popularity of methods of contraception like those which are administered by injection and “which are not healthy.” But, she noted, these are the only option for women who must hide the fact that they are using birth control from their husbands because they object. She also raised the question of who gets to decide about having children within a couple. Finally she asked about the role of the state: is it the only one responsible or should the responsibility for health care be shared with other social organizations? She indicated that the latter was the only choice for the Dignas in the short and medium run, but that their services should demonstrate that there are alternatives. Their goal, she claimed, should be that the state should eventually take responsibility for providing healthcare but that the community should retain control. Gina Morataya, a literacy promoter from Berlin with an extensive background in community health, raised the issue of how the Dignas would “*conscientize*” women and prepare them to demand and intervene in the politics of healthcare.

But Gina's comment was lost in the discussion which followed. The debate centered upon the theoretical question of who in a couple should decide whether or not to have a child. Different views were expressed and then a show of hands indicated that the majority felt that the woman should always make the decision. When I asked if this extended to a case where a man did not want to have a child and a woman tricked him into fathering one, several women said yes. A man had the option of using a condom if he really didn't want a child. Ideally, several of the women argued, the decision should be shared but others disagreed arguing that should be limited only to cases where there was no power difference, otherwise the decision should be of the women.

Clara then put on the board the statement "*Aborto o interrupción voluntaria de un embarazo no deseado?*" (Abortion or voluntary interruption of an unwanted pregnancy?) She pointed out that these were two distinct views. The first emphasized the "*muerte de un embrión*" (death of an embryo) while the second emphasized the life and needs of the woman. Then she asked "From the feminist point of view, what is abortion?" and listed the following options on the board:

<i>Derechos reproductivos y sexuales</i>	Reproductive and sexual rights
<i>Salud reproductiva</i>	Reproductive health
<i>Salud pública</i>	Public health
<i>Convicción religiosa/moral</i>	Moral/religious conviction
<i>Leyes</i>	Laws
<i>Políticas</i>	Politic issues

She then asked, “From where should the Dignas fight for abortion rights, who should lead the struggle, and define what it will be? The range of possibilities suggested included: denouncing the crackdown on back alley (*clandestinas*) abortion clinics, calling for an investigation of abortion, providing services, and organizing networks to help women to find abortion. “What should the institutional involvement of the Dignas be and to what point?” Clara asked and once again opened the topic for discussion asking that the women respond to three questions: from what position should the Dignas struggle for abortion rights, who in the organization should take it up, and with whom?

The debate focussed on whether their strategy should be to approach the question as a public health issue or whether it should be argued on the basis of reproductive and sexual rights. Various *equipos* were mentioned as the potential institutional *responsable*: Reproductive Health, Violence, Mental Health, Education, Institutional Projection, and Education. Clara ended the session by suggesting that for the next meeting that each persons who had advocated a position should elaborate a proposal about how they would implement their strategy. She also asked them to think about how Dignas who are personally opposed to abortion would be affected.

But by the time the debate resumed, the situation had changed dramatically. The elections had been held, and the FMLN had won significant numbers of mayorships and made tremendous gains in the legislative assembly. But before relinquishing its absolute majority in the Assembly in late April, the ARENA party led an effort to purge Article 137 from the revised Penal. They enlisted the support of the Catholic church and *Sí a la*

Vida (Yes to Life, a pro-life organization) and stirred up emotions over the legalization of abortion. Catholic school students were mobilized to take to the streets and several anti-abortion demonstrations followed. Emotions were fanned with claims that abortion was being legalized when in fact the changes proposed were to eliminate the cases under which abortions were permitted. The nature of Article 137 was severely distorted in the public imagination. Women from MAM later told me that they saw members of their own organization participating in the anti-abortion marches but when they questioned them later, the women seemed to be confused about what they were marching for. The hysteria whipped up extended to the gallery of the Assembly, where tremendous pressure was generated on the legislators during the debate and vote. The FMLN failed to take a stand to preserve Article 137; rather than vote, three of their representatives walked out of the legislative chambers just before the final vote was taken.⁶⁵ Morena was the only person to speak against the legislature before the Assembly. On the final day of the Legislative Assembly, the revised penal code was passed making abortion illegal with no exceptions.

In the aftermath of the vote, the Dignas finally reconvened their “debate” on abortion almost a month after their discussion on reproductive rights. Facilitated this time by Norma Vázquez, a Mexican feminist who had previously worked with the organization,⁶⁶ the meeting started forty minutes late with thirteen women including a

⁶⁵ Members of the Women’s Secretariat of the FMLN claimed that they walked out in protest, but in an interview, Ileana Rogel, a FMLN *Diputada*, admitted that they left the floor because they did not know how to vote.

⁶⁶ Clara, the original facilitator, had reputedly resigned in frustration a few weeks earlier after the debate had been canceled at the last moment after already being rescheduled a couple of

North American employee and myself, and only four of the eleven coordinators. Three of the other participants were all from the Mental Health *equipo*. A fifth coordinator came in late. There was no one from the *Violencia* or *Cuotas equipos* and several of the individuals who had strongly advocated particular strategies at the previous meeting were absent. The idea with which the previous debate concluded, that individuals would return with specific proposals about how to implement particular strategies, was never reintroduced.

This time Morena provided the context. She characterized the approval of the new Penal Code with the elimination of Article 137 as a “historical legal step backward of more than fifty years as well as a silencing of opposition (*sanción de opiniones*).” While she blamed the conservative sectors of the Catholic Church for initiating the campaign, she was critical of the women’s movement for its failure to respond effectively and had called a meeting of women’s organizations the previous week to discuss what had occurred. The response had been positive as more women’s organizations had attended the meeting than had come together in more than a year, including the COM, the Coordinating Committee of Women’s Organizations (*Coordinadora de Organizaciones de Mujeres*), a body made up of women’s groups associated with the FMLN, as well as representatives of women who had been disabled in the war. She reported that the meeting had concluded that the lack of a unified position (*postura única*) on abortion in the women’s movement had made it impossible for them to mobilize in response to the

times.

events. It was recognized that the problem was not just that there were debates about various positions toward abortion but that a double standard (*doble moral*), existed within the movement. While women in the movement have abortions, they are unwilling to take it on as a political struggle. Morena summed up by insisting that it was imperative for the Dignas to establish an institutional position on abortion in order to develop a political strategy.

The responses following Morena's comments focussed on the potential reaction of other institutional powers if the Dignas' took a stronger stance in favor of abortion. The silence of the medical community during the debate was noted. Fears about the risks of losing funding were raised and quickly dismissed with assurances that support for abortion was not a problem with any of their funders. Someone else pointed to the role played by the media of making it into a question of being for or against abortion, and portraying Article 137 as being about the legalization of abortion. Morena assured them that the Dignas were not alone in this process and that other women's organizations were also initiating internal debates on the topics.

While a reproductive rights framework had resonated with their own experiences and politics, it was agreed that in the current context, it would be useless to base their struggle for abortion on that framework. They recognized that rights are not intrinsic social values that can be tapped at will but norms that must be constructed politically and socially. As a result they strategized about how to begin to that process of construction. A list of tactics was generated: getting more women talk about having abortions, promote

investigations and interchanges, working with issue of guilt, “*la culpa*,” both individual and collective. But the question of how to confront the problem legally remained unanswered.

As the discussion went on around the table, Morena got up and drew a diagram on the board. She put the word abortion on one side with lines going to the words: Public Health (*Salud Pública*), Law (*Derecho*), Social Justice (*Justicia Social*), Ethics (*Etica*), Morality (*Moral*). From these came other lines. A line went between Public Health and Maternal morbidity-mortality (*Morbi-mortalidad materna*); between Law and Criminalization (*Penalización*), Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy (*IVE, Interrupción Voluntaria de Embarazo*), Women (*Mujeres*); Social Justice was linked to Poor Women; Ethics and Morality led to Guilt (*Culpa*), Religion, abortion. When she spoke again she used the drawing to outline a multifaceted approach to advocating for abortion rights. In terms of public health, she proposed, we can argue in terms of maternal mortality. Legally, we can advocate for it in terms of women’s rights, reproductive rights, and the problems of incarcerating women. The particular problems of poor women make abortion an issue of social justice, and the moral or ethical issues are related to guilt, religion, and abortion.

By the end of the debate, it was decided that abortion was a theme that had to be addressed in all the workshops given by the organization. A strategy that argued for the decriminalization of abortion from public health stance was adopted. That strategy was publicly implemented within a few weeks. On May 28, “the Women’s Movement,” as it

was indicated on a flyer, organized a rally (*sentada*) at the Ministry of Health in honor of the International Day of Action for Women's Health, an event that was commemorated by women's groups throughout Latin America. About thirty women from various women's organization including the Dignas, MAM, AMD, *Flor de Piedra*, a prostitutes' organization; *Comité 25 de Noviembre*, a coalition of groups working to end violence against women; and two men from *Entre Amigos*, a male homosexuals' group. The demonstrators gathered outside the Ministry of Health and in front of one of the most imposing cathedrals in San Salvador, *Iglesia Sagrado Corazón*. Women from MAM wore masks of a woman screaming and carried posters outlining their demands and complaints. The group quickly took over the block in front of the Ministry by unfurling the banners of *Flor de Piedra* and *Las Madres Demandantes* across the street. Gradually they directed the stopped vehicles to the corner so that traffic could be diverted, and the demonstrators would not to be faced with any irate bus drivers or motorists. A woman from the *Comité 25 de Noviembre* had a megaphone and as the group assumed control over the street, she encouraged them to put their posters on the walls of the Ministry. Meanwhile she began to shout demands to the Minister of Health through the megaphone with the crowd repeated them after her. The chants included: "Free health care for women;" "Free and voluntary motherhood with respect for our decisions;" "In defense of our lives, therapeutic abortions; an adequate budget for health care;" "The minister of health wants women to shut up and die;" "Stop the bad treatment and neglect of the health system;" "We pay taxes, we want healthcare;" "We demand unbiased sex education." While

abortion was not the only focus of the demonstration, it was certainly a central one and it was the first time it had been made as a demand in a public demonstration, though notably, the demand was for therapeutic abortions.

The demonstrators milled about in the street, responding to the chants of the woman at the megaphone. After about a half an hour, the employees of the Ministry, who appeared to be mostly male, rigged one of the Ministry vehicles so that it could be used as a speaker. One of the employees spoke in favor of the women's demands and talked about the problems they were having negotiating with the Minister. The woman who had been on the megaphone took the microphone, thanked him for their support, and resumed the chants. For about an hour women from the various organizations took turns making statements in support of the demands and leading chants. After about an hour, the women piled in a couple of MAM's vehicles and headed off.

The demonstration rerouted traffic on one of the major downtown thoroughfares for a couple of hours. But no media representatives attended nor did the Minister of Health make an appearance or even issue a statement. While the Dignas had been instrumental in organizing the action, only a few of them participated. These were mostly members of the Reproductive and Sexual Health *equipo* whose job it was to advocate for reproductive rights. Others within the Dignas did not interrupt their programmed activities to participate.

This lack of concern with generating some kind of response to the demonstration and the low-key participation of the Dignas left me wondering about the target of the

action. A paper by Josh Gamson (1994) on the organization, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, better known as ACT UP, suggests a way of analyzing these dynamics. Gamson noted that the targeted audience of ACT UP's actions were often unclear. He suggested that in many of these cases the targeted audience is actually the group itself. This occurs when "identity formation becomes a key part of the struggle" (51). This demonstration marked the first time that the Salvadoran women's movement had publicly taken up the issue of abortion. As such it reflected a new, and tentative, element in their identity that was still in the process of construction. While the Ministry of Health was the ostensible target of the action, the fact that a broad range of women's organizations in the movement were willing to publicly demand the right to abortion contributed to the construction of the pro-abortion position of the movement. Along with the internal debates within the organizations, and meetings of the movements leadership, this street action was an additional step in solidifying resistance to the attacks on abortion that had culminated in the elimination of Article 137.

This strategy, however, deviated sharply from the approach that was taken in the workshop with the health promoters in Suchitoto. The workshops used the daily experiences and local understandings of the participants to encourage them to think about abortion in different ways. These debates and protests were attempts to construct feminist discourse on abortion. The role played by international feminists and feminist theory was central: the funding for the panel-forums of the *Red*, the facilitation by Norma and Clara, and the theories on reproductive rights which emerged from UN conferences and

international feminism. It is not that these theories are inappropriate to the context that women face in El Salvador but I question whether they are sufficient to confront the social forces and institutions which are opposed to women achieving legal access to abortion. As a result, I also wonder whether legalizing abortion is the best strategy for making abortion more accessible.

Legal or not, women will die

Two interviews which I did with men who were in powerful positions to influence the debates around abortions illustrate the complex matrix of social forces and institutions that the Dignas confront in advocating for greater access. The first was my interview with Dr. Burgos,⁶⁷ the Director of the Maternity Hospital, and took place three months after the new Penal Code had been approved. When I asked him how he thought the change would affect his work when it came into effect, he told me he thought that it was already in effect. The hospital, which is the only state run maternity facility in the country, had not been informed about changes in the law nor had its lawyer made any inquiries into its implications for the hospital's practice. But they had seen the news and the discussions about the penal code, he assured me. I asked him what they would do if a pregnant woman arrived at the hospital that day with clear indications that continuing the pregnancy would put her life at risk.

I don't know what we are going to do. I just hope that no patient like that shows up because I don't know what we would do. As I told you, there is

⁶⁷ Interview July 4, 1997, San Salvador.

the process that we followed before of having a group of doctors analyze the case and if it merited, we did the abortion. But now with this discussion that has been going on for two, three, four months in the newspapers, and criticisms and the Archbishop, and movements and strikes and marches and threats, a series of things. I am uninformed. I only know that the Assembly said no more abortions. I don't know from when. You tell me it is starting next year. I don't know if it is in effect. I don't know. Truthfully, if a patient came in that condition, I don't know what we'd do. The problem would be that probably no doctor would be willing to perform any abortion . . . What doctor is going to do it here? Knowing the rumors and that they could be penalized by the law or if they aren't penalized by the law, they'll be dragged into the newspapers saying that they do abortions in the Maternity Hospital, Dr. So and so. You know how the newspapers are. They give the news and wait until the end to put in small letters that the patient would have died without an abortion. But ooh, the hospital, the director, the doctor, the committee of doctors, all of them would come out in the newspaper. So I don't know what the situation would be. And so I'm telling you, God help us, that none of these patients come in anytime soon in this condition.

Despite the infrequency with which abortions were practiced within the hospital, Dr. Burgos answered affirmatively when I asked him if he felt that the change in the law would affect women adversely. When I asked if he thought more women would die, he paused, then sighed. "I believe . . ." he hesitated. "I don't know if more women are going to die but I believe it is going to be a problem for everyone. It's going to be a problem. I don't know."

The second interview was with Walter Araujo,⁶⁸ the head of the ARENA party. We had been talking about the role of women in ARENA so that when I asked him about the removal of Article 137 from the Penal Code he insisted that the action "did not go against the rights of women because we don't consider that the life from the moment of

⁶⁸ Interview July 28, 1997, San Salvador

conception is an extension of her body.” When I asked him if he knew how many abortions had been performed under these exceptions to the law, he replied that the issue was not one of statistics. “This has been approached as an issue of principles and morals,” he claimed. But when I asked him specifically about cases where the option was either to perform an abortion or to risk a woman’s life, he began to equivocate:

This has to be regulated because it’s different. I think we consider it obvious that this is not the intent of the law. When the mother is in danger and the life of the child is in danger, the factors must be looked at in the first place, and this is in the right to self defense [*excusas absolutorias*] in the very penal code, in which in the doctors are empowered to make the best decision.

“But wasn’t this the reason for the exception in the law before?” I responded. “That’s why I repeated it again,” he replied. “It’s been taken out but that doesn’t make it punishable.”

“But I was told that not one doctor in the National hospital would do an abortion now, under these conditions,” I insisted.

He replied:

That’s just ignorance of the law. But that’s not something the legislators could foresee. The rest of the mechanisms have to go into play. This is a cultural condition. This is where you need to develop healthcare plans that the doctors should have in this country. It is a phase of poor country, underdeveloped, where many things have to be developed and rather than get into a discussion if this is a woman’s right, human life has to be treated as something fundamental, whether it a man or a woman in this case. A woman’s life has value as does something newly produced through conception. A doctor needs to have clear instructions. Here there is a problem in that a diagnosis has to show that the fetus is not viable or that the viability is 80%.

I continued to press him, “But that’s in the case where the fetus was viable but the

woman had cancer, and if she began treatment to save her own life, it was going to kill the fetus.”

“But this is not prosecutable,” he insisted.

“How could that be?” I asked him.

Las excusas absolutorias of the Code include absolute excuses in which this case would have to be proven, that the treatment destroyed the life but the clinic treatment was to save the life of the woman. This is not punishable and there’s no need for an article to say that it is not punishable. And we have studied this, it’s the same in Spain, in Salamanca.

“But this is not known,” I told him. “I spoke with the head doctor in charge of maternity health of women in this country, he doesn’t understand it this way.” His response was

Well, he’s ignorant even though he is the head of the Maternity Hospital. Because if he’s the Director of the Hospital, at least he should understand this, and another thing, the law doesn’t go into effect until next year. The plans for this law still have to be made public.

Somewhat stunned by his position, I pushed on, “So what you are saying is that ARENA is in favor of keeping abortion exempt from punishment . . .” But he cut me off, “It’s not abortion. Then it’s not abortion. We’re no longer talking about abortion. We’re no longer talking about abortion.” He summed it up:

Because this is the great legal difference in which it was attempted to establish through the legislation of abortion this case. The case that you were talking about where a woman had cancer, she had to receive treatment, to receive this treatment was going to destroy this new life, the fruit of the conception, for which this woman is subject to prosecution under the law. No, it is all written in the *excusas absolutorias*.

“But if it is the law, anyway,” I asked. “why did you take out Article 137?”

Because it left a niche. To do it generally, leaves a niche in which, through

legal manipulations and legislating abortions that are not punishable, later they can twist the law and abortions, that in reality don't have therapeutic or medical elements, they could find some legal niche so that women abuse and those that simply do not want the fruit of their conception could get this kind of abortion. If this opportunity is closed, eliminating non-punishable abortions and put them into the general category of impunity, that is that they are not punishable, when the protection of a human life is an act ultimately legal. So in one form or the other, the case that you described to me is legal in El Salvador. This is what ARENA supported and that's why I supported it.

"So," I insisted, "ARENA is in favor of abortion in cases when the life of the mother is in danger?" Continuing to equivocate, he finally acknowledged that ARENA supported the use of abortion in cases where the life of the woman was at risk. He responded to my question by first saying that they would not allow the permission to be codified.

But not that there be legislation which decriminalizes abortion, because this permits an impunity disguised in many cases of abortion which don't have this consequence. But [the situation] which you described, where the risk to the life of a woman causes the destruction of a future life because of treatment to save the life of a woman, this is completely protected and ARENA has supported this.

Despite Araujo's comments, Dr. Burgos was a well spoken individual whose credentials included serving on the board of directors of Planned Parenthood International. While he indicated that he was personally opposed to abortion, he seemed genuinely concerned about the predicament in which women with unwanted pregnancies found themselves, and believed strongly that there should be some flexibility for doctors to decide how to handle individual cases. But his fears about the consequences of performing abortions clearly outweighed his other feelings. This was especially evident in his comments that I quoted earlier concerning women who came to the hospital seeking abortions claiming

that they had been raped. In those cases his worries about opening a “pandora’s box,” or not having the right paperwork, overcame whatever empathy he may have felt for them. During the interview, he told me that the women who were arrested for abortion, and those who were accused of practicing abortion, were usually released quite rapidly. So while legal concerns existed, it seemed that the social consequences were a stronger prohibition.

Which is why Walter Araujo’s claims were so cynical and ARENA’s attack on abortion so obviously ideological and political. According to Dr. Burgos, less than one woman a year was obtaining abortions under these exemptions. But the facts surrounding abortion clearly had little impact on the debate. Neither the ARENA party, the Director of the National Maternity Hospital, nor head of the Department of Reproductive Health of the Ministry of Health seemed concerned that three women had died in the preceding six months from what were assumed to be attempts at illegal abortions and 52 other women had come to the hospital with symptoms that were most likely the result of botched abortion.⁶⁹ This number will likely increase under the new Penal Code. The fact that women could not obtain abortions when they had documented proof that they were raped, suggests that it will be impossible for women, even if they knew it was available, to get abortions based on the *excusas absolutorias*.

Despite his appeals to morals and principles, Araujo’s definition of abortion, like that of the health promoters in Suchitoto, is influenced by the social relations of

⁶⁹ Department of Statistics of *Hospital Nacional de Maternidad “Dr. Raul Argüello Escolán”*

reproduction. For him, when the mother's life is at risk because of a pregnancy, terminating the pregnancy is not abortion. But unlike those women, he occupies a position of power that will enable him to use *las excusas absolutorias* to assist the women he knows to obtain abortions if they cannot simply go to a place where it is practiced legally. For the majority of Salvadoran women who assume that a pregnancy is God's will and an inevitable consequence of their exercise of their sexuality, *las excusas* will not enable them to get an abortion even if a pregnancy endangers their lives.

The reality was that abortions were not available to the majority of women who would have been entitled under Article 137. Most women did not know that abortions were permitted under these circumstances and if they did, they had little knowledge about how to access them. Even when they did attempt to exercise these rights, they were denied them through bureaucratic red tape. The question now is whether its elimination from the Penal Code will motivate Salvadoran activists to organize to make it more available and if they do, how will they go about it. Will they adopt a strategy which uses a "Western" type of advocacy based on the assertion of rights or will their struggle take a distinctly different form that will be more successful than we in the United States⁷⁰ have been in ensuring that all women have a choice about whether to terminate an unwanted pregnancy? Whether the Dignas can construct a discourse that will reshape the way abortion is viewed in El Salvador is still to be seen.

⁷⁰ While access to birth control is limited, the most commonly used method is injections which created a considerably different condition than that which existed in the US at the time of Roe vs. Wade.

Since the emergence of the second wave of feminism in the 1960s, most North America and European feminist organizations have included abortion rights as part of their demands. But in the United States, it was groups consisting largely of women of color that recognized the need to link the demand for abortion to a broader agenda which addressed the sterilization abuse among low income women and women of color.

Nonetheless, legalization of abortion in the United States was the result a Supreme Court decision, not a legislative victory. Considering how Congress has successfully whittled down the access to abortion in the intervening years, it is questionable how effective the strategy of North American feminists is at preserving the right to safe and legal abortions.

In an examination of pro-life activists in Fargo, North Dakota, Faye Ginsberg describes the movement as one which is situated in a context that was dramatically changed by the legalization of abortion in 1973. Pointing out that the struggle was not simply one between between pro-life and pro-choice forces, but one which extended to social service agencies, NGOs, and state institutions as well as the divided constituencies in each of sectors. This is what she defines as “a political economy of gender in which power and resources are being negotiated constantly in relationship to changing attitudes toward pregnant women” (1997: 147). A political economic approach illuminates the importance of not limiting an analysis of the forces restricting access to abortion to the state. For instance, the fact that so many of the doctors who are doing abortions are close to retirement age is perhaps a greater threat to the access to abortion for women in the United States than legal challenges to abortion rights.

But a recognition that the state is not the only domain of power does not imply that it is an unimportant one. The Dignas' Local Development program was the end result of a process elaborated to empower women to make their demands in the political arena. In the next chapter, I examine that process and the results it generated on local and national levels.

Chapter 5: Political Assailants

Lorena Peña, a former FMLN *comandante* (known then as Rebeca Palacio), was reelected for a second time to her seat in Legislative Assembly in March of 1997. Later that month, in a public forum sponsored by the *Red de Mujeres por la Unidad y el Desarrollo* (the Women's Network for Unity and Development), Peña complained that she had been cubby holed as the legislator who knows about women's issues, specifically violence and child support. As the president of MAM, Peña is a leading advocate of women's issues in the Assembly. But with her twenty years of political experience, she did not want her work in the Legislature to be limited to women's issues, and was fighting to be named by the FMLN to the budget commission.

Elsa Chaney coined the term *supermadres* to describe Latin American women politicians in the 1970s who had to legitimize their involvement in public office by exercising a maternal force in the municipality or nation where they served complaint. The traditional images of women's proper activity were still so strong, Chaney argued, that when women entered government, they consistently portrayed their involvement as an extension of their family roles in the arena of public affairs (1979). But Peña was challenging her party's attempt to limit her legislative responsibilities to those which related to women's and children's issues. Her desire to increase her field of influence reflects the changes in women's activism in Latin America since Chaney identified the *supermadre* complex. Latin American women have not only expanded their involvement in politics in the past twenty years, but in the process the women's social movements

have redefined what it means to do politics in Latin America. They have reshaped the struggle for human rights, citizenship and democracy; they have politicized areas of daily and private life that were not considered political; and they have developed feminist practices which integrate struggles for economic and social justice. In 1997, the Salvadoran press portrayed this as “women’s assault” on politics (see Appendix E).

According to Chaney, the *supermadre* image prevented Latin American women from “joining the vanguards of movement advocating political or social reform” (1979: 20). This belief, that Latin American women were more conservative politically than men, was widely accepted, according to Jacquette. She attributed the enfranchisement of women during a conservative regime in Colombia, and populist ones in Argentina and Peru, to the perceived conservatism of women. But she also pointed to evidence that such generalizations were overstated; Latin American women have a long tradition of radical political activity including peasant revolts, labor struggles, and urban guerrilla movements (1980: 228-229).

The assumption that Latin American women were conservative made it difficult for North American and European researchers to understand Latin American women’s political participation. Stereotypes such as this, as well as social science models which ignored the female population, distorted conceptualizations of, and developmental policy toward, Latin American women (Nash 1980). Another problem, highlighted by Jacquette, was the use of voting as a measure of political participation. Cautioning that extensive participation in elections may indicate well organized “‘clientele’ networks rather than

functional interests groups” (1980: 221), Jacquette noted that voting may reflect class interests rather than the will of the electorate. Emphasizing electoral participation may fail to identify class bias, she claimed.

In addition to recognizing that elections are only one arena in which participation occurs, Jacquette also warned that North American and European feminist sensitivity to sex-role differentiation may blind these researcher to the importance of “female power” (ibid.: 222) in Latin America. She cautioned about the danger of using paradigms that are “biased by North American cultural and methodological perspectives and by a feminist bias (also a product of North American ideology) that evaluates sex role differentiation negatively . . . (1974: 8). Chaney, on the other hand, challenged claims that women held power behind the throne. Indirect influence, she pointed out, is not equivalent to direct power (1979: 5).

Attempts to differentiate between the cultural differences of Latin American women’s struggle for political power and the cultural hegemony of the traditional feminine roles, specifically motherhood, has proven particularly troublesome for North American and European feminist social scientists. As discussed in Chapter 3, generalizations about the reinscriptive nature of maternalist politics failed to acknowledge the counter-hegemonic potential of Latin America motherhood. The use of the ideologies of motherhood to resist oppression, from both gender relations and other forms of subordination, can lead women to challenge gender hierarchies, though it does not necessarily do so. These practices can generate new forms identity and collective

movements which may embrace feminism, or they may reject feminism. Whether or not such struggles reinforce gender roles is one question; whether women use those gender roles to collectively empower themselves, and if so, how, are separate issues.

This is not to deny that some Latin American women achieve power by playing the *supermadre* in ways that would not be acceptable in the United States. For instance, the Salvadoran President's wife, *la primera dama*, is automatically designated the head of the Department of the Family. In this role, she is also the president of the Institute for Women's Development, ISDEMU.

The debate about whether or not maternalist politics can empower women shifted as women's movements gathered strength in the late seventies and early eighties in South America and Mexico. This era in Latin America is seen by some as "lost decade," while others emphasize that this is the period of democratic transition (León 1994: 9). The former point to the levels of growth, or lack thereof, while the latter note the decline of military dictatorships and the corresponding expansion of civil society. The democratic change occurred alongside the implementation of neoliberal economic policies that called for "structural adjustment," the reduction in national budgets through reductions in social services and privatization of nationally owned utilities and industries. It was in this contradictory context of increasing political democracy accompanied by decreasing social democracy that Latin American feminisms emerged as part of a surge in women's mobilizations across the region (Alvarez 1990, Chuchryk 1984, Jacquette 1989, Jelin 1990, León 1994).

The authoritarian regimes in Latin America severely limited political activity. As a result, areas of life which had previously be considered non-political, such as the relationship between mother and child, were politicized. Women organized themselves, often on the basis of their identity as women, in ways that challenged the traditional manner of doing politics. The epitome of this type of organization is the Argentinean Mothers of Plaza de Mayo. Their mobilizations denouncing the disappearance of their children not only redefined the struggle for human rights but “shattered the myth that women are incapable of uniting and showing solidarity among themselves”(Jelin 1990: 205). In El Salvador, the CoMadres were the most visible of three committees of “the disappeared.” During the height of the repression in the early eighties, they were the first group to publicly challenge the government by holding street demonstrations. As discussed in Chapter 3, they used the ideology of motherhood to open political space and oppose the U.S.-backed Salvadoran government.

Women’s human rights groups expanded the arena of women’s public actions and the definitions of traditional roles, but they were not the only vehicle through which women’s participation in the public sector grew. Latin American women also mobilized to defend the declining living conditions which made it increasingly difficult for them, particularly poor and working class women, to fulfill their responsibilities as mothers and wives (Blondet 1990, Lind 1992, Schmuckler 1992a). Mobilizing within their communities, often organized by the Catholic Church (Alvarez 1989, 1990), and supported “by international agencies concerned with the community development and

foundations newly concerned with improving the status of women” (Barrig 1989), women organized communal kitchens, “mothers’ clubs,” housewives’ organizations, and municipal milk program committees. In El Salvador, women were the backbone of the Christian Base Communities where many became conscious of their particular problems as women and as poor people. By the mid-eighties, women’s committees were forming in trade unions, refugee communities, the popular movement, and in the revolutionary organizations of the FMLN.

The emergence of feminism was a third form of women’s organizing during this period. Usually, though not exclusively, from the middle and upper classes, Latin American feminists were generally better educated than women in the “popular mobilizations” discussed above, and younger than women in the human rights movements. The first Latin American feminist activists came out of the revolutionary political movements. This connection shaped their commitment to integrate their struggle against women’s subordination with struggles against economic exploitation and political repression. As a result, the relationship between gender and class oppression was integrated in their feminist politics. The nature of this politics, as Virginia Vargas pointed out, was manifested “in its ability to show how in the concrete situations of [women’s] lives, women are united in their sexual oppression to other forms of oppression” (quoted in Jacquette 1989: 190).

But the close relationship between the left and the women’s movement began to widen as women started to recognize and resist gender oppression within the ranks of the

left political organizations. In most of the early women's groups, women were willing to accept that women's issue should be subsumed within the class struggle, but the internal dynamics of gender relations eventually led many to consider feminist ideas. In Brazil, Sonia Alvarez has documented how the political opposition's "insistence that gender struggle must be subordinated to the class struggle" (Alvarez 1989 :81) alienated women critical of the male dominance and sexism of the left. The marginalization of these critics encouraged them to further explore what feminism had to offer. In El Salvador, the process through which the Dignas separated from the *Resistencia Nacional* was extremely painful and divisive (Mujeres por la Dignidad y la Vida 1993a).

The fact that many Latin American feminists came out of revolutionary movements definitely shaped their early strategies. Their confidence that feminist ideology carried the key to undoing women's subordination led them to adopt a feminist vanguardism that mirrored the Marxist-Leninist perspective of the political parties in which they had been schooled. A Brazilian activist recalled how that confidence shaped their feminist practice in the beginning:

our role was to reflect upon why they, [working-class women], were involved in that type of struggle . . . we saw ourselves as the vanguard . . . we were the ones with the information, the ones who could reflect and theorize, and our role was to support women's organizations wherever they emerged and help women develop an analysis about why it was women who were engaged in those day-to-day survival struggles (quoted in Alvarez 1989: 31).

Such an attitude created a type of feminism which "focused on the struggles of poor and work-class women rather than reflecting on [the feminists'] own lives or on the gender-

specific issues they have shared with working-class women” (ibid.).

The Dignas still struggle with their vanguardism. There is a gap between their attitudes and those of many of the women with whom they work particularly in terms of their attitudes toward sexuality and the family. As Jacquette noted, “The feminist perception of the family as an arena of conflict between men and women directly contradicts how women in urban poor neighborhoods understand and justify their politicization--*for* the family” (1989: 193). This contradiction is even more true for rural women and, as we have seen in Chapter 3, presents an on-going dilemma for the AMD.

The processes of establishing autonomous women organizations occurred throughout Latin America in the eighties, including El Salvador as documented in Chapter 1. The conflicts between the political parties and the feminist movement led to increasing debate in feminist circles about the need for autonomy, on the part of the movement and its activists, from left political parties. This has been a recurring theme in the Latin American and Caribbean Feminist *Encuentros* since the first meeting in 1981 in Bogotá (see Saporta Sternbach et al. 1992 for discussion of relationship between feminists and the left in Latin America, and a history of the *Encuentros*).

In the meeting that took place at the Encuentro in Chile in 1997, the question of autonomy once again occupied center stage. But this time the debates went beyond challenging feminists’ ties with political parties. Women identified as *Las Autónomas* (the autonomous ones) questioned the legitimacy of feminists who were designated *Las Institucionalizadas* (the institutionalized ones). *Las Institucionalizadas* were women with

ties to, representatives of, or employed by state institutions, transnational bodies like the United Nations, or international funding agencies. While most of the women identified as “*ni las unas, ni las otras*” (neither one or the other), the tensions represented a new stage in Latin American feminism; feminists have achieved a sufficient level of recognition by and representation in national and international bodies that the nature of their relationships to those institutions can be questioned.

The debate reflects what León has identified as Latin American feminists’ vacillation between a liberal theory of the state and a marxist interpretation. The former sees the state as an “instrument for betterment and transformation of the status of women” without acknowledging “the patriarchal state” while the latter paints the state as the “enemy or an instrument for women’s domination, forgetting that the State can also be an arena of struggle” (León 1994: 16). While the Dignas originated in the latter camp, as this chapter further demonstrates, they have clearly come to see the state as a critical arena in which they can confront *machismo* and struggle to defend women’s interests.

The Dignas’ relationship with the FMLN remains ambivalent. They maintain their organizational, ideological, and financial independence autonomy from the party but they also remain fiercely loyal to the FMLN’s political project. The Dignas were deeply involved with the 1999 proposed presidential candidacy of a Victoria de Avilés, the former Omnsbudsperson of Human Rights. The failure of the FMLN to accept her as their candidate reinforced the distance between the party and the Dignas, but one must wonder what that relationship would look like had de Avilés been selected as the candidate,

especially if she had won.

The life history of Ofelia López which follows provides insight into the experiences which have generated the antagonism between feminists and the political parties out of which they emerged. Her life history is followed by a description of the Dignas' Local Development program (*Desarrollo Local* or DL) in Suchitoto where Ofelia was eventually accepted onto the FMLN's slate of candidates for local office in 1997. Her family's lack of land, their constant migration in search for work, her lack of education, her experiences working as a domestic, and her political history are recurrent themes in the lives of many of the Dignas' rural supporters. Ofelia's story is also one which reflects many of the sources of ambivalence between the FMLN and the women who participated in the *Frente* during the war but have gone on to work within the women's movement in post-war El Salvador. Her experience growing up as a peasant in a highly politicized region of the country and vivid description of coming of age under fire illustrates how a generation of rural women were impacted by the conflict. The time she spent in prison, as well as her emigration to Australia, provide her with a unique perspective on the situation in El Salvador and the role the Dignas' play. She is one of the women in the Dignas who personally straddle the gap between the feminist organizers and the women they are attempting to organize, particularly in the rural areas of El Salvador.

As the coordinator of the Dignas' DL program in Suchitoto, Ofelia was part of an effort that dated back to 1991 to bring together women from various organizations and localities in the municipality to identify and defend their interests as women. I will

describe the process through which the Dignas set the groundwork that led to the elaboration of the women's political platform by breaking down sectarian barriers and unifying women across party lines. While the Dignas' and other women's organizations had mounted similar efforts in other parts of the country, the methodology developed by the women's movement in Suchitoto (*movimiento de mujeres de Suchitoto* or MMS) was uniquely successful in achieving the participation of women in municipal political institutions.

In 1996 the MMS held a "Municipal Women's Convention" and identified potential women candidates for a local election, one of whom was Ofelia. She was eventually elected to city council on the FMLN slate. The MMS also succeeded in elaborating a local women's electoral platform and, as soon as the FMLN mayor was elected, he began implementing it by establishing a Women's Commission to the City (*Comisión de la Mujer Ajunta al Alcaldía* or CMAA) with input from the MMS. In this chapter, I will describe the process through which women elaborated the platform in Suchitoto and how that related to Ofelia's election campaign. The development of an active civil society citizenship has been recognized as a requirement for democracy to function. The situation in Suchitoto not only illustrates how that process is unfolding but highlights the conflicts between competing interests within civil society, specifically women's interests and those of the FMLN. As a result, I analyze the conflicting relationships between the Dignas and the FMLN, between potential women candidates and their roles in the Dignas, and, ultimately, between the women whom the Dignas'

have brought together in political coalition. The fact that the Dignas organized women in Suchitoto, and other communities, to articulate their interests into a political platform, to select candidates to represent their interests, and to lobby the political parties to accept their demands illustrates that despite their reservations, they still view the FMLN as an important vehicle through which to change the state.

A Political Education

When I met Ofelia, she was working as a Dignas' promoter in Suchitoto, half time in the Reproductive and Sexual Health program and half time for the DL *equipo*. Like many of the Dignas' promoters in the rural areas, Ofelia came from a large peasant family. She was the second of ten children in a poor family that, for much of her childhood, had no land of its own. As was common for landless peasants, they had to move around frequently in search of work on larger plantations (*haciendas*). One of the effects of this transient lifestyle, which Ofelia still felt that she carried with her, was that it made it extremely difficult for her to attend school regularly. It was not until she was twelve years old, when her family was finally able to purchase a house, that there was enough stability for her to attend classes regularly.

But her lack of formal education did not prevent Ofelia from learning about the conditions that contributed to her family's impoverished situation. Ofelia had a close relationship with her father who she described as "a poor illiterate peasant" who learned to read on his own. Her father also recognized his daughter's intelligence and hoped that

she would one day become a doctor. But with the family's lack of income, he could not afford to pay for her studies. Instead, by having her accompany him in his political activities, he provided her with a different kind of education.

Growing up in the 1960s Ofelia watched her father's increasing involvement with the religious and peasant movements. He began to "become aware of (*concientizarse*) the situation" in the social movements of the mid-sixties and with the agrarian reform of the seventies, "he began to participate in the cooperative movement . . . But he was a cooperativist without land, just an associate."⁷¹ "He took me to the cooperative and took me to the seminars where he went," Ofelia told me ". . . In this way I think he helped me a lot because he brought me into a circle where few girls have the opportunity to go. He took me everywhere and that's how I learned."

Eventually, her father encouraged her to get involved on her own, "He got me into a group of youths that were educating other youths in the community where we lived." Ofelia became a catechist in the liberation theology movement doing what "they said . . . was premarital education. I didn't know what that meant, but I knew what I was supposed to teach. And so for me, through my father's influence, this was my activism in the family."

Ofelia's contribution to the family was not limited to politics. To supplement the family income, she sought employment in one of the few sectors that was available to young rural women; she went to work as a domestic, caring for children and cleaning

⁷¹ Quotes are from an interview with Ofelia López on May 27, 1997 in various sites in Suchitoto.

houses in the cities of Suchitoto and San Salvador. Her concerns and problems illustrate the precarious working conditions that domestic workers face and the lack of recourse available to them. But unlike many of the servant girls who end up in the streets or impregnated by their bosses or their sons, Ofelia applied the lessons she had learned from her father:

Because of what my father had taught me, I never had to let anyone mistreat me. There was a house in Suchitoto where there was a problem. The boy that I cared for was sick. So I was afraid that he would die in my arms and they would throw me in jail. So I said, it's better that I go, and I went back home. Another time, this time in El Salvador, a man wanted to rape me, the husband of the woman. So again, I left the house. Later I went to work at another place, and the same thing happened with another old man, so I once again, I left. When people treat me bad, I don't like it, so I left, even though it meant that they didn't pay me. I left anyway, because I didn't want to be there anymore. And so this was, in some way, what I had learned.

By end of the 1970s, the repression against political movements had increased dramatically throughout El Salvador. Suchitoto, only a little more than an hour away from San Salvador, but situated at the base of the Guazapa volcano, a guerrilla stronghold, was a flashpoint. In 1980, because Ofelia's family became part of the Christian base communities, they became a target of death squads. Most of her family was able to escape, but one of her brothers was still in their house when it was surrounded and her brother killed. His murder and the murder of an uncle convinced the family to flee to San Salvador as did much of the population of Suchitoto in the 1980s.

The war had a particularly devastating impact on this city. Its population was reduced dramatically as people fled the fighting in the countryside and relocated in the

city or San Salvador. The economic base was thoroughly disrupted by the war. This was after the municipality had already suffered a severe blow in 1976 when the Cerrón Grande Dam was built, inundating some of the best farmland of this primarily agricultural region. A major battle was fought over a prison that was located in Suchitoto, damaging much of the city's renowned colonial architecture.

During the war, it was imperative for many Salvadorans who were involved in the political struggle to mask the nature of their involvement. To some, the signing of the Peace Accords ostensibly made that type of dissimulation unnecessary. You can now see people walking the streets wearing FMLN tee shirts and ex-guerrilla *comandantes* use their former roles to campaign for seats in the Legislative Assembly. But I also found many people were still hesitant and/or just in the habit of being vague about the organizations of which they were a part. So I pushed Ofelia a little to see if there was more to her father's involvement by asking specifically if he was involved in any political parties. "I don't know," she replied.

But he wasn't into that stuff. I know that in 79 and 80, a young woman would come to the house at night. A young woman (*muchacha*), Margarita, a neighbor would arrive. She was only seventeen or eighteen, and would come to the house to chat with my dad. I remember that they talked about FAPU, how does it go? The United Popular Action Front.⁷² I think my dad might have had something to do with them but mostly his crime was that he belonged to the cooperative. The cooperative called UTC, the Union of Farm Workers. He was involved in this and it wasn't a party but the point is that he was in the UTC. There was also a federation,

⁷² *Frente de Acción Popular Unificado*, a broad mass revolutionary movement affiliated with the RN.

FECCAS.⁷³ The UTC and the FECCAS were two workers' organizations . . . I do remember that we would stand watch over the corn so that no one would steal it, but I never ever saw him with a gun. During the entire war, whenever we were here together, I never ever saw him take up arms . . . and I'd say it's because he didn't want to commit a sin. Because he was very religious. He worked with the Alas fathers; Father Inocencio Alas and Father Ignacio Alas, who were the local priests from Suchitoto. I think he was too Christian, very religious, and didn't want to, couldn't take up arms . . . He was a pacifist and I think I also share this side of him. I say I'm the same because I never wanted to be a combatant. I was always in the structures, other structures. For example in health, in the clinic as an aid, and like that. I think if I had wanted to I could have gotten into the military structures and I didn't.

Despite all that she admired about her father, Ofelia was critical of his decision to return to Suchitoto after they had fled to San Salvador to escape the death squads. She recalled:

I didn't want to come to the front and join the struggle here. I was really afraid because I knew that they had been looking for me in the school where I was studying and they wanted to kill me, and I was afraid. He brought us back here and I couldn't believe it, I couldn't conceive of the idea of coming back looking for danger. But I couldn't give my opinion, he said we were all coming, the boys and the girls.

We went back to the zone that we knew. I imagine that my dad had some people there that he knew because, yes, there were parties. The RN was there. I didn't know anything about that. Perhaps my father did, I did not.

So in 80, we went back, in December, the 23rd of December. I remember because the following night was the 24th of December and there was nothing, there were no fireworks, there were no tamales⁷⁴ . . . They incorporated us into the structures that were formed there. They were well organized.

Ofelia's comments illustrate the level of secrecy that was maintained among even

⁷³ The Christian Peasant Federation or *Federación Cristiana de Campesinos*.

⁷⁴ Tamales and fireworks are tradition elements of the Christmas Eve celebration.

those close family members who participated together in the support of the guerrilla forces. She did not explain the nature of her father's involvement nor why they came back, probably because she did not know. But her resentment that they did return echos a resignation that I heard from other women, both daughters and wives, who participated, in a large part if not entirely, because of their relationship to a man who was involved in the movement.

It was not that women did not join of their own accord. They did, and it has been estimated that 27 to 34 percent (Luciak 1999: paragraph 15) of the guerrilla forces were female. But many women also found themselves involved by default. Some, like Ofelia, were recruited by their parents, usually fathers, and had little choice but to do what the rest of their family was doing. Many became involved because of their husbands or companions, some voluntarily (see Stephen 1996), others involuntarily. Once they were implicated, it was difficult to leave as Ofelia explains below, and women and girls usually found themselves filling traditionally female roles. Ofelia, for instance, worked first as a cook, then she sewed uniforms, and finally she ended up in healthcare. But it was in a context, as we will see, that challenged those very roles.

Back in the War Zone

When her father brought the family back to Suchitoto, they reestablished themselves in a house in the "low zone," the region below the more inaccessible Guazapa mountain where the guerrillas had a stronghold. The family incorporated themselves into

a political and economic organization that had been built by the guerrillas. Based on communistic principles, it was a structure that attempted to cooperatively provide for the needs of the guerrillas and of the community that was supporting them. A major part of doing so was protecting them from the government forces.

Ofelia described how at first she would work with the guerrillas during the day and return home at night. While her mother and younger siblings stay at the house, Ofelia would go to the guerrillas' kitchen to prepare food. Her father and brothers would "go work in collective production" where they "grew corn and beans for the people. Ofelia explained that for a short time "everyone did this . . . There was another group that went to the lake to fish and they fished and brought fish for the people. Everyone had to grow things around their own house for their own consumption. It worked like that."

But the situation did not last long. Within six months, the military began to carry out "counter-insurgency" operations:

They burned the houses, killed the animals, burned the corn, everything. From there, now it was '81, it was difficult because we could not live in the same houses. We had to eat and sleep all together in one place. But from there, each one would go to work in their different places. There were defense structures, radio structures, 'little camp' structures which went to find cows for meat. They stole the cattle. Some were milk cows, and this milk was shared among the children and pregnant women. This is what went on until it got ugly, really ugly. Because the last time that they came in, they almost killed us all there. Finally they stopped bombing, the planes didn't come anymore. Just trucks full of soldiers and civilians. They brought in children, families, to make us think that the people had come back and if we went down, they killed us. It was like that. It was terrible. Then one day, [the guerrillas] ambushed [the army] and so they stopped coming. It was more calm for a time in '82 but only down here [in the city of Suchitoto], because we lived down here. Up there in the mountain, it was more difficult. They began to bomb and that was difficult to get used

to.

Ofelia knew about the difficulty of surviving in Guazapa because once she was trained as a medic, she had been sent to the guerrilla camp to work in their clinic. In the camp she met a man who was to become the father of her oldest child. While the process which led up to their courtship was “a little dramatic,” as she characterized it, with her father exerting a lot of control over Ofelia’s choice of partners. But he was eventually satisfied with her choice.

For many women in the guerrilla camps negotiating their sexuality was an extremely difficult process (see Vásquez, Ibáñez, and Murguialday 1996). Perhaps because of her family’s presence, it was less so for Ofelia. She was able to defend her own interests in a context where

there were various men that had a woman at home, pregnant and with several children, and were in the camp with another fifteen year old, and this one pregnant, too. I saw it all the time, they would leave one here, and over there they would have another. Because of this, I told [my boyfriend] that the day that I found out that he had other women, I was not going to plead with him, I would end it all. I told him, ‘it will all end . . . because if you are looking for another woman, it’s because she is giving you other things that I’m not giving you.’ . . . I don’t know where I got all that. Now that I am remembering, it makes me wonder. I just know that I learned early.

But it was not the only thing that Ofelia had learned early about sexual relations. A few years earlier, she had also experienced how sex could be used to assert power. I quote her here at length because the story illustrates the enormous responsibility that this young peasant women assumed in her family. It also show how despite her ability to resist sexual assaults in some contexts, in others she could not escape the complex web of

gender and class oppression:

I remember when I was at home, there was a man. And this man was one of the rich ones, he had a lot of money. He was the richest guy in the hamlet, in the village, in the community. More or less, the richest and because of this, he was a real wolf (*gallo*) with women, with young women (*cipotas*), with all the young women. So there was a period when I was working at his house so that I could study. Every Saturday and Sunday, I worked at the house selling ice cones (*minutas*). I was doing this for the household economy, but also so that I could go to school. I was the third in terms of responsibility for the sustenance of the family. There were always needs and I could help. I bought sugar, beans, rice, all of these kinds of things.

There was one time when I went with my brother, my older brother. He was sick, suffering from epilepsy. Because we were so poor, my father couldn't afford the treatment anymore. He hadn't had it for eight years because we didn't have the money. One day, I asked this man a favor. He had a car, land, a nice house, family, work, and he had people working for him. I knew this guy had a angle (*un propósito*), that he liked to undermine (*derrotar*) the *machismo* of the fathers of the girls by sleeping with them and then saying, 'just let that guy say something to me.' Like that.

So this day, I brought my brother to the hospital. He was 18 and I was around 16. But this guy brought us and he waited for us to bring us home. But we didn't all go back. He let my brother off, but he took me to, I think it was the beach at Mahaua. I don't know. Out there by the sea, I knew nothing about these places. He took me and paid for one of those cabins that they have, like a cottage (*ranchito*) that they have at the beach. He locked me in there and there he raped me. He was drunk, really drunk . . . I felt guilty, I felt bad, I felt ashamed. I don't know, I felt dirty, I felt degraded. But at the same time, I said, 'What has changed in me?' I interrogated myself about what could have changed in me. And as they don't teach you anything, not sexuality, nor genitals, nor anything, I didn't know what had happened.

What I remember is that the man told me, the drunk was laughing as he said it, 'Ha, ha, ha, you're not a virgin,' just like that he said it. 'As the Chinese say, you're not vil, vilgin,' he said. I said to him, 'What did you say?' I felt so bad, physically it was very violent, everything was very violent. This was, let's say, my first sexual experience. It was a very ugly thing . . . I remember that his son was in love with me, and he told him not to pay any attention to me because I was garbage. That's what he told the boy. He knew that he had done it but he never said that to the kid.

Working to help support her family, to continue to study, and to help her brother with his disability, Ofelia found herself betrayed by a man much richer and more powerful than she. She understood his attack as part of a complex exercise of *machismo* that included undermining other men by raping their women and discarding them so that they were 'garbage' no longer worthy of even his son's desire. The story also reveals the extent of her lack of knowledge about sexuality emphasized by her attacker's gratuitous racism.

But within the schema of *machismo*, the fact of the experience threatened Ofelia's relationship with her boyfriend because, as she explained, "here men demand virginity and if I didn't say anything to him about it, it was going to be a disaster. Who knows what he would have thought, so it was better to tell." Her boyfriend did not reject her and in December of 1981, she went to live with him.

Despite the fact that Ofelia did not want to have a child, her boyfriend, like most Salvadoran men, refused to use birth control. "I got pregnant against my will," she recalled. "But it was what he wanted." During this time they did not see each other often as her work in the clinic kept them apart but by January, she was pregnant. She retreated from the guerrilla camp in August of 1982 to give birth to a daughter at her mother's house. Because he was a guerrilla, it was too dangerous for her *compañero* to come see them. By November, her husband was dead. Like many women who joined or supported the guerrillas, Ofelia was left a widow and a young single mother.

Motherhood in the War Zone

After she gave birth, Ofelia continued collaborating with the guerrillas but she stayed in “a low zone” rather than returning to the camps in Guazapa. A group of women were organizing an association of women named in honor of a woman from the FMLN who had been disappeared in 1976, Lil Milagros Ramírez, and they asked Ofelia to head the project. Her description of their activities illustrates the multiple levels on which support for the guerrillas took place as well as the diverse strategies widows, like Ofelia, had to employ in order to survive. “That was how they got me working with women,” she explained.

It was to farm and to make candies, and so on, and to have the responsibility for food . . . It was for support. We made sweets from sugar cane. We were really well organized, planting beans, planting squashes. We had a store. I would go to buy things, like that. It was good because we liked it a lot, because we were well organized and good workers. We gave them good food and they liked it a lot. The store was in the house of one of the members of the group. It was like, it was basic. It was just to sell things among ourselves, because, in reality, we didn't have very much money.

Some of that money came from Ofelia herself. After the father of her daughter died, Ofelia began receiving a stipend of 50 colones per month (\$4 at 1997 exchange rates) from the FMLN. She explained to me that this came about because

at this time there weren't many [widows], so for a while they gave me money for the girl. I really appreciated it. They started doing it because there was a Mexican guy there who was pushing the idea, but he eventually had to leave because he was going to be killed. It was a great idea . . . to support, the women who had children with those who died, at the time when was it hardest for them . . . But after some time, six months, a year, after the baby was a year and a half, they stopped giving me money, they didn't want to give it to me. So it was a lot more difficult.

As the number of children began to rise in the camps, the policy on children suddenly changed. It was a change that devastated many of the mothers who had been collaborating with the FMLN. Ofelia described its effect on her:

Then they told me that I had to send the child away, that I had to get her out of there because the situation was so difficult. There were really fierce military operations happening, lots of soldiers and bombing in '83, so it was really complicated. We were being forced to move around with the children that were there, fleeing [military operations], taking care of others' children as well as one's own . . . In the end, I got my daughter out of there. At fifteen months old, I got her out. It was very difficult, hard. This was very difficult. It was an emotional game, because when they took the children, I remember the first time they told me that they were going to take them on one day. Then they said no, some time passed, and they began saying again that they were going to take them, and we came crying with them. But they told us to go on and get prepared to let them go. Then all of a sudden, they said no. That's how they had us . . . It was very difficult. I remember feeling like I wanted the earth to open up and swallow me. I didn't feel like I had any reason for going on, I did not feel like going on.

Ofelia's description of the painful situation that she found herself in illustrates the dilemma of women who bore children while collaborating with the guerrillas. The guerrillas, especially in the zones of control, or areas where they operated without the government's presence, needed the support of women. Women's contributions were critical in areas which traditional gender roles assigned to women such as cooking, healthcare, or emotional and sexual relations with male soldiers. It was also essential in new areas such as maintaining relationships within the community, bringing supplies across government checkpoints, and participating in military combat. But guerrilla life was extremely unsafe for the children that accompanied, or were born to, these women, and was made more unsafe by their presence. The flexibility necessary to sustain a

guerrilla army was compromised by the presence of children who needed supervision and help, particularly when the guerrillas and their supporters were fleeing military operation and bombing raids. Yet the guerrillas did not want to lose the women who had joined their ranks or who had proven themselves to be valuable supporters. Thus when the number of children became a critical enough mass to be a problem, the solution was to send them away without their mothers.

I asked Ofelia if she ever considered leaving herself in order to stay with her child.

That was not possible, she explained, especially after her daughter had been sent away:

They never proposed that we could leave . . . It was dangerous to leave on your own because if something happened [i.e., you were picked up by the military], that would have been it. Besides, I didn't know where my daughter was, no one knew. Because what happened was that we took them down to the road, at the road some other people took them, and then at some other location, they met up with other people who took them to where they went. There were like four different people. It was for security purposes . . . It was difficult. I suffered a lot. It was hard when I got to the house and my daughter wasn't there. This was really hard for me, very difficult. Even worse was the idea that I didn't know if I was going to see her again. So it was a permanent psychological torture for all of us that had sent our daughters and sons. It wasn't easy.

Having sent her daughter away, Ofelia threw herself into the work more intensely but that had its own consequence.

One way to get used [to the loss of her daughter] was to get involved in new work, so there's no time to think about it. They assigned me a new job, to work in expansion. 'To walk the belt' (*andar de cinturón*), they called it, the belt of the enemy, mixing with the population where there were soldiers. So they selected me to go here and there on this side. I left for San Salvador. I began to bring things from San Salvador: food, clothes and other things, necessities. And I was captured there. Doing this work, they captured me . . . It was in January of '85 because I remember that I worked at this for a year after they took my daughter, leaving, entering,

leaving, and like that.

I had just had my 23rd birthday when they captured me and I spent two years in jail. It was difficult because while in jail, the torture continued. Eight days they had me and they didn't let you sleep nor sit, they wouldn't let you rest. They asked questions and more question, men that interrogated you roughly, others would be gentle, others, damn bastards, there were all kinds. They told me that they had a guy who knew me and that he was my boyfriend, this kind of stuff. I told them 'that you are inventing it, it's not possible, I don't know him.' And they told me that the guy said that he knew me. 'He may say that he knows me but I don't know who he is. I don't know him, I don't know him, and I don't know him.'

I was charged with being a communist guerrilla. As you had to sign the confessions there, they put whatever they wanted and they accused me of carrying the things that they found on the bus. I never said that I was carrying anything, nothing, but they always put what they want. A typewriter was all that I was carrying, nothing more.

Fighting on the "Fifth Front"

During the period that Ofelia was incarcerated, the FMLN had opened what was referred to as the "fifth front" in the prisons. COPPES, the Committee of Political Prisoners in El Salvador, in both the women's prison, Illopango, and the men's, Mariona, controlled and operated a wing of their own, separate from the "common" prisoners, where the guards were not permitted to enter. They had their own kitchen and did all their own cooking and cleaning. They had established a structure to maintain order and discipline among their ranks. Ofelia described how she was inserted into that structure when she arrived:

A directiva had been formed earlier in '81 by the women who had been in before. It cost them a lot to do, and when I arrived, these women were still there but they were really tired. They had been there three years and they couldn't take it anymore. I remember that one of them told me that I had to

assume the responsibility that I had, but I knew nothing about how things functioned there. So what happened was that this woman was a militant of the RN, and in so much as someone else from the RN had arrived, she said that I had to take her place. So it was left to me and I took her place so that when she left, I stayed.

The prisoners' autonomy did not go unchallenged. Every couple of months, the guards would carry out a search. Bursting in, usually at night, the guards would beat up and rape the prisoners and take everything they could get their hands on: money, watches, the knives from the kitchen, and whatever personal items the women had managed to accumulate. The woman that Ofelia replaced suffered from back problems from a beating she had sustained during one of the searches.

Ofelia came into jail with a new cohort of prisoners. Unlike those they were replacing, they had not yet been worn down by the constant struggle with the prison administration. She described the attitude with which they approached their incarcerations:

Those of us who were just arriving were there. Several of us were new, really new. So we were like, really angry, ready for anything, because we were going from the worse situation to even worse, or the least worst. At the beginning we felt that it was nothing. Compared to where we had come from, it was nothing.

But this attitude eventually led to a confrontation that would change Ofelia's life significantly. COPPES' control over their wing of the prison was challenged when the administration began to reassert their control over the political prisoners. Ofelia recalled her negotiations with the warden:

At first when they advised us that there was going to be a search, we told them, 'We're not going to allow even one more search.'

The warden told us, ‘Don’t be like that. Let them search you. That’s what has always been done.’

‘Just because they’ve always done it doesn’t mean that they’re going to do it now.’

‘Don’t make more problems for yourselves.’

‘We already have problems,’ we told them. ‘No,’ we said, ‘no.’

There was no way we were going to allow it. We guarded the entrance so that they couldn’t get in. We guarded it at night, all the time. At first they thought they could get in. But they tried and couldn’t . . . Because, damn, we made a big fuss. We denounced what they were doing on the radio, using the warden’s telephone! She didn’t want to let us but we made her let us use it, and we called them from the warden’s office! We were really something. We were terrible! They eventually got in, but not without injuries. They used the Air Force. It was terrible! And I was wounded.

The conflict over women’s refusal to allow the guards at Illopango to search their wing escalated until guards from the men’s prison and, finally, the military were brought in to break their resistance. The political prisoners’ wing of the prison was bombed by the Air Force, and the assault was accompanied by beatings and rapes. Several prisoners were seriously injured, including Ofelia:

They broke the bone [in my leg]. They wanted to hide me and lose me, but they couldn’t. They couldn’t because when I saw that they were going to take me out of there, after having injured me, they wanted to take me, and throw me where ‘don’t go near there because . . .’ and at this point there were no other *compañeras* there because they had all run. I looked around to see if there were any rocks, and there wasn’t a single rock. I dragged myself away. Who knows what kind of face I made, but they didn’t dare come close to me.

Wounded at nine o’clock in the morning, Ofelia was not taken to the hospital by the International Red Cross until three thirty in the afternoon. On top of being wounded, Ofelia was also pregnant at the time, impregnated by “another shameless man,” the result of another rape. She spent the next three months under guard in the hospital, with massive

injuries to her leg, and then was returned to prison.

It was a complicated life, wounded, pregnant, without any family who could visit me because they were all [in the mountains] and they couldn't come. It was terrible, a disaster. But the thing is that, I don't know how or why, but my spirit and strength never failed. Well, there was one period, toward the end of when I was a prisoner there. My daughter had been born, she was born in the Maternity Hospital but afterwards they sent me back [to the prison]. I had been there a year. I was really sick during this time. The tension and pressure were affecting me badly. I was suffering from migraines to the point of vomiting, half of my body felt like it was asleep. I had fevers. I was sick all the time and my daughter was sick as well.

They had operated on me when I was pregnant putting four screws in my leg and they performed surgery to graft some skin because I didn't have any. And all this while I was pregnant. At that point I felt like I couldn't bare it anymore. Two years had passed, and I couldn't take it, I couldn't put up with it. I was so sick and I didn't know what to do, I didn't know.

It was the very last time that I felt like I was giving up, and there was no one to support me because they were all in bad shape, others even worse than I. And as I was the one in charge, I had to deal with these other cases too, on top of mine and my family. Then one day my mother came to visit me and said, "My daughter, they have killed your father." Then she came again, "My daughter, they have killed your brother." So I didn't know what to do. I had no idea, and what was worse, I had to help others in whatever way I could. It was a really difficult situation.

After three years in prison, Ofelia was released. The FMLN had negotiated the freedom of a number of political prisoners in exchange for the release of a colonel they had kidnaped. She was received by a variety of humanitarian and human rights organizations including the Human Rights Commission, the CoMadres, and the Catholic Church's legal service, *Tutela Legal*. From the prison, she went to a refugee camp, *San José de Calle Real*, run by the Catholic archdiocese, where she was reunited with her mother.

And, after more than three years of being separated, Ofelia was also rejoined with

her oldest daughter. She had been fifteen months when they had taken her way, and now she was three and a half. Ofelia had only been able to see her once during that time and her daughter had not remembered her, an experience that Ofelia described as “really horrible.” But despite her freedom and reunions with her family, Ofelia lived with a daily painful reminder of experience in the prison:

I couldn't walk at all. If I started to lose my balance, I would fall. I had lost much of my tendons and muscles so I couldn't walk. I fell really easily and so one time I was carrying my daughter and I fell and it broke her teeth and her mouth. I couldn't walk.

Her continuing health problems made Ofelia consider doing something she had never in her “wildest dreams” imagined doing, leaving El Salvador.

Emigrating to Australia

Ofelia was offered political asylum in Australia through the “Special Humanitarian Program,” and like hundreds of thousands of Salvadorans in the 1980s, she left El Salvador. But unlike the situation of most refugees, the program which sponsored Ofelia and her two daughters provided them with visas, transportation, housing, education, and, most important, medical treatment for Ofelia's leg. She knew no one in Australia when she arrived except a man named Daniel, one of many international solidarity activists who had visited the prisons to hear the testimony of political prisoners like her. Ofelia did not recall that visit, nor who he was, when Daniel first began writing her while she was in prison but they had established a friendship through their correspondence. While Daniel and Ofelia did eventually marry, she was adamant that she

did not go to Australia for that relationship

After her arrival in Australia, Ofelia faced three major challenges: overcoming her culture shock, enduring another operation, and learning English. The surgery was performed in June and she spent the next three months recuperating. When she was finally able to walk, she began studying English intensively. Within a year, she had mastered the language well enough to move into other activities. She volunteered at a health center in the Hispanic community helping those who did not speak English to acculturate to their new surroundings. She started working on a research project on the Hispanic refugee community in the sociology department of a university and began preparing so that she could go on to get a degree in social work. At the same time, she was active in the solidarity movement in Australia representing the CoMadres, the Committee of Mothers of Political Prisoners, the Disappeared, and Assassinated of El Salvador.

Ofelia had not worked with the CoMadres before she was incarcerated but her experience in prison made her sympathize with this women's group. She explained:

By the time I left the country, I felt like I had been abandoned, so I felt like I didn't want to know anything. And they said to me that they wanted to be in contact with me and I told them that I didn't want to know anything about anything to do with political parties. 'I am here by my own personal efforts. The contacts were mine. I didn't have to ask anyone's permission nor their support. You left me alone and I don't want you to ask me for anything. Nothing!' But to the mothers, the Committee of Mothers, yes, I supported them. Because when I was in jail, they were the only ones that supported me. They gave me total support. I didn't have anything when my daughter was born. Not a diaper or a rag, and it was they who helped me. They helped me with milk, sugar, well, the essentials like clothes for my daughter. So I felt that I had a moral commitment to them. But not with

any party! Because of this I did what I could to represent them. We sent money all the time and established a very nice network [of supporters]. It was really nice one.

Ofelia's resistance to working with a party made her somewhat of a maverick once again. In Australia as in the U.S., Europe, and Latin America, the various parties within the FMLN, like the RN, had support networks which usually included Salvadorans in key positions. Some of these Salvadorans were refugees who emigrated because they were sent by their parties or organizations; others were abroad independently but had come to sympathize with the FMLN. For security reasons, most of the organizations denied their ties to the FMLN but the party deeply influenced the positions advocated by the groups and the kinds of activities that they undertook. For most of them, building opposition to U.S. policy, and raising money for their own survival and to send to their home organizations were their top priorities. However, what happened to those funds once they were sent back was not always exactly what had been proposed. Ofelia found this out when she returned to El Salvador for the first time.

When I came in 1991, there was no sign of any of the projects which we had supported. There were ten houses for mothers who had been widowed. Not one house had been built. I was not willing to work for women who were supporting themselves on someone else's sacrifice from over there. So I told them no that I was not going to continue. Just like that I told them because I told them, 'I'm sorry, but if you cannot demonstrate where this money we've sent has been invested, what am I going to say to the people who have been supporting us? That have been sending monthly checks? What am I going to say to them? They are going to think that I have stolen the money and I am not going to permit this. I am going to explain it to them.' They couldn't show me a single house, knowing that this was a project specifically for that. They had at least \$500 per house and they hadn't built a single one.

So I didn't do it. I went back to Australia and there were a lot of

people really angry at me. They thought it was a party question, a party decision. Others thought it was a personal issue. I told them. 'It's neither personal nor partisan. I consider it a matter of honor the solidarity work, a question of respect for the people [who supported them]. I am not in agreement with continuing to work and support people who like to steal. No way. That's how we came to represent the Dignas. We began to support the projects that were with the Dignas.

Ofelia knew several of the women involved with the Dignas; some from her previous political work and one, who also had worked with the CoMadres, was someone she had known from her childhood. With her valuable ties to organizations in Australia, there were numerous women's groups in El Salvador at that point with whom Ofelia could have chosen to work. She chose the Dignas above all because "they had cut their ties to the party."

Joining the Dignas

Working with the Dignas was, however, the first experience that Ofelia had with feminists. Her forceful personality, her perspective as a *campesina*, and her experience in the struggle shape her involvement in the organization. It was not an easy process:

I remember that I debated with them, and I fought. Afterwards they would joke about me. They made fun of me because at one point I argued that men could also be feminists. I argued this point furiously. What I can say is that perhaps this stuff about feminism, neither the word nor the content had affected me as much as the process in the Dignas where each of us has reconstructed our own histories of what we've gone through. With the mental health workshops, the self-help, the groups of self-help, etc., I feel that these have really helped us a lot. Because feminism can be good and it can be everything but if one has not gone through a process of reconstructing your own personal history, it's impossible. There's no feminism . . . If you don't do it with a feminist perspective, it doesn't have the same impact nor does it help as much. For example, people who don't

have this focus, this perspective, they can't talk about motherhood. They don't talk about it from the same angle. They don't approach it in the same way. And even less when talking about relations between a couple. They're never going to talk about it! They're not going too deeply into the experiences of the young women in the war. I think this is a specific way in which they have helped a lot of women. They haven't just created a space where women could talk and cry and all that, but they have recognized them as persons, what they have been and all that.

I think this has helped a lot. I have always been very radical in various things. It hasn't mattered who is seated in front of me. I think that's very much my personality so it wasn't necessary to go through feminist workshops. That's how I am, in truth.

For example, their methods, I haven't always agreed with their methods and strategies . . . I've questioned things . . . I believe, for example, that one of their methods that doesn't work very well, at least in terms of how I see things as a *campesina*. I could have been in space, living in outer space, in another planet, but you couldn't have changed this [being a *campesina*] about me. So I see things that they don't see. For example, when they initiate the work they want to impose it on people, the women in the communities, without taking them into account. I've always said, 'Look, I'm not in agreement with this decision. The people have to make it for themselves. We have to listen and consult them.' This has always been my position, we can't go to the women in the communities saying, 'Well then, this was the decision that we took in the Dignas and we are going to do this and you have to say yes.' 'No,' I tell them, 'It's not like that.' While the Dignas may have been the ones to raise the money, those who have earned the money, because it was raised in their name, are the women. They are the owners of the projects and we can't just decide ourselves.'

I was one of the few who could speak up about these things in the assemblies. All the rest of them were silent, totally silent. They were afraid . . . I think its because of my origins and also my socialization. From the time I was just a little girl, I was a rebel. But despite this, I like working with the Dignas because I like, at least, to know and I've learned to go through a process. And this is why I respect the institution, because we always reevaluate, we are always reevaluating, and improving things between us up to the level of reevaluating and self-reevaluating. This is important.

This has helped me a lot because I remember when I didn't have this ability or at least I hadn't discovered that I had it. And this desire to develop people, the personal capabilities of each woman who works there. It's fundamental. So much so that it was more or less a law, or a norm of

the organization, that each woman who was working there was required to participate in the feminist debates. That she had to grab a few hours to study, to elevate her educational level as a form of personal development. It's important so that you understand what you are talking about. I really like that everything doesn't stay on a theoretical level, not for the others, or for us and for the others, it's very valuable. I don't believe that other organizations have it, I don't think so.

For me, despite the fact that I studied some in Australia, I left here with very little education, a very low level. I scarcely finished seventh grade. With what I did there, I could go to high school, and if I had continued, I could have gone to the university. I was very close to getting there but at the time, I preferred to come here, and I came.

Her description highlights the strengths and weakness of the organization from the point of view of one of the rural promoters: the rigid criteria for defining feminism, the value of consciousness-raising and self-help groups, the insight gained through a feminist analysis of issues such as motherhood and the experience of women in the war, the recognition that the personal is political, the tendency of the urban leadership to impose their perspective on women in the rural communities, the issue of funding, the inability of many of the Dignas to challenge the organization's leadership, the organization's process of ongoing reevaluation, and its commitment to promoting a feminist perspective through the development of its members' capacity to understand feminist theory and apply it to their work.

At the time I interviewed Ofelia, she had been working with the Dignas for four years. When she first returned from Australia, Ofelia worked on a project to train grassroots midwives so that they could be certified by the state. Working with other health-oriented NGOs, the program not only succeeded in getting 23 midwives accredited but initiated organizing midwives to advocate for themselves. With the restructuring that

occurred in the Dignas in 1996, Ofelia began working in Suchitoto, half-time in the Reproductive and Sexual Health team and half-time for Local Development. By the time I left in August of 1997, she had been elected to the municipal council. During the interim, she and the Dignas had jointly come to the realization that if she were to be effective in her work in Local Development and on the council, someone else was going to have to take over the responsibility for the work in the other *equipo*. Ofelia was then left with the difficult task of balancing her roles within the Dignas with that of the Municipal Council and of the FMLN which had gotten her elected.

Ofelia's life history illustrates several of the dynamics which have shaped how the Dignas have approached the question of organizing women's political involvement. Ofelia was raised to be a political activist. This is not to say that she could have not chosen to walk away from it, but like many of the activists in the Dignas, political commitment was something she learned in her family and which was fueled by her life experience. The war shaped her formative years; she began her first serious relationship in the context of a guerrilla camp. Her experience as a mother, and the FMLN's response to the situation of women with children, in general, and her situation, in particular, generated a dissatisfaction which led her to seek support in unexpected places. Her decision to seek asylum abroad generated new opportunities for her personally and politically. These, in turn, provided her with a new basis for evaluating the work done in her country, criteria which were becoming increasingly salient as international funders made new demands for verification of the expenditures of their funds. As a result,

through a very slightly different route than those women who founded the Dignas, Ofelia returned to El Salvador with a similar perspective; one which was skeptical of the FMLN though deeply committed to many of the same principles of the party, sympathetic to a feminist perspective if not totally knowledgeable of its theoretical underpinnings, and willing to devote much of her life to pursuing a vision of change inspired by both. I now look at the ways that vision shaped how the Dignas elaborated and implemented the work of the Local Development team in Suchitoto.

Setting the Precedent

Because Suchitoto was located both so close to San Salvador and Guazapa, it was an extremely strategic location. As a result, there was a concentration of political organizations in the municipality which, even before the Peace Accords were officially signed, began to organize women. According to Clara Murguialday these groups shared certain similarities: “they were all created and/or oriented by FMLN organizations with the objective of responding to the needs related to the living conditions of women in rural communities; they organized women to work in productive projects or projects that provided basic community services; and they accorded a certain importance to reflecting upon women’s rights” (1997: 10). Women from these organizations, which included the Dignas, came together in 1991 at the initiative of several foreign nuns that had been working in Suchitoto to form a coalition to advocate for women’s interests called the

Coalition of Cuscatlán Women (*Concertación de Mujeres de Cuscatlán* or CMC).⁷⁰

These groups existed in a large part because of the women's relationship to the FMLN. At the same time that very relationship made it extremely difficult for the CMC to organize women in the region as women. The vertical ties of each women's group or project led through the local organizations to their party affiliations and from there to national offices with headquarters in San Salvador. The political sectarianism and the "culture of political authoritarianism" (ibid.: 11) that has characterized Salvadoran politics undermined these efforts to bring together women from diverse tendencies by encouraging intolerance toward political enemies and discouraging alliances. In the post war period, competition for funds available for reconstruction projects heightened these divisions. In addition, the male leaders of political parties were worried about keeping their affiliated women's organizations under their control. Alliances with other women's groups, in particular the Dignas with their radical claims of being both autonomous and feminist, were viewed with suspicion by party leaders and the heads of the popular organizations. Organizing "from a gendered perspective" was seen by mixed groups as being contrary to "grassroots work with the bases" (*trabajo integral con las bases*) and was often discouraged.

In addition, in the period following the signing of the Peace Accord, some of the Salvadorans who had made tremendous sacrifices "in the struggle" were acutely disappointed by the situation in which they found themselves. Many ex-combatants and

⁷⁰ Cuscatlán is the department in which Suchitoto is located.

collaborators were completely unsatisfied with the compensation they received. Support from international solidarity groups dried up and numerous popular organizations disappeared, sometimes along with the resources they had generated. In other cases, the dispersment of these organizations' resources led to disputes. While some of the leaders of the FMLN and the popular organizations clearly and publicly fared well after the war,⁷¹ those who did not were often resentful and despairing. Many of the social and economic problems that the war was supposedly waged to end still existed, and for many FMLN supporters, especially women, conditions were worse because of all that they had lost. This situation generated a hopelessness that made it extremely difficult to motivate people to organize again for radical change.

Despite these obstacles, in the first few years the CMC established three working committees. Through their "Land Commission," the CMC organized to challenge the discrimination against women in the program that was redistributing land that had been set aside to comply with the requirements of the Peace Accords. The "Defense Committee" (*El Comité de Defensa*) directed their efforts at building support for women who were the victims of domestic abuse and rape, and the "Literacy Program" addressed the problem of high levels of illiteracy among rural and older women. The organization met periodically in assemblies, where approximately one hundred rural women would gather to publicly discuss the CMC's projects. But the support and direction of the Suchitoto nuns, other women that worked in the San Salvador Archdiocese, the Dignas,

⁷¹ Joaquín Villalobos, a FMLN *comandante*, went to England to study at Oxford. Other commandantes were elected to the Legislative Assembly.

and CRIPDES (the Christian Committee of the Displaced of El Salvador) were critical:

“These women, in their own name or representing their respective organizations, were the ones that called together the women from the communities, conducted their assemblies, brought material resources to their collective space, guided the reflections on gender, and put the CMC in contact with women’s organizations in El Salvador” (ibid.: 13).

The 1994 elections found the CMC renamed as the Cuscatlán’s Women’s Movement (*Movimiento de Mujeres de Cuscatlán* or MMC). The Land Committee had ceased to function after finding itself unable to redress the discrimination that women faced in securing land, and several of the other organization which had been supporting the CMC had become defunct or ceased to function in Suchitoto. The potential posed by the 1994 elections captured the attention of women in Suchitoto as it did with many FMLN supporters (and ex-supporters) around the country, and many of the women in the MMC (as well as other women) put their other work aside to work for the election of their party.

In San Salvador, leaders of the national women’s organizations, including the Dignas, saw the election as an opportunity to promote women’s rights. The 1994 elections were designated by the media as “the elections of the century,” because it was the first time following the signing of the peace accords that the FMLN was allowed to campaign as a legal political party. In addition, local, state, and national elections were being held simultaneously that year, an event which only occurs every fifteen years as the length of each of these offices’ terms are staggered. The Dignas joined an effort to

develop a women's political platform, known as *Mujeres 94*, to pressure the candidates for national office to respond to women's needs.

The process of carving out the platform was an extremely divisive process, the mention of which is guaranteed to bring groans to the lips of any of its participants. In part this was because it occurred concurrently with the organizing of the Seventh Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Conference or *Encuentro*. These *Encuentros*, which have taken place roughly every three years since 1981, have been described as "critical forums for movement debates about evolving feminist politics and the movements' relationship to the overall struggle for social justice in Latin America" (Saporta Sternbach et al. 1992). Central Americans only began to participate in significant numbers in 1987 when the *Encuentro* was held in Mexico. But the meeting in San Bernardo, Argentina, in 1990 recognized the importance of the growth of the feminist movement in Central America by designating it as the regional site of the next *Encuentro*, and in 1992 at a regional meeting in Montelimar, Nicaragua, El Salvador was selected as the specific location for the conference. Mobilizing the resources and expertise to host an international feminist conference was a challenging effort for the Salvadoran women's movement, particularly as it occurred at the same time as *Mujeres 94*. Both efforts drew from the same population resulting in considerable overlapping participation.

While the *Encuentro* connected the Salvadoran women's movement more closely to the Latin American movement, *Mujeres 94* brought the movement into a dialogue with national political parties. Over the course of eight months, through a series of public

debates, forums, and working committees, more than thirty-two women's organizations participated in elaborating their platform. It included demands which challenged the boundaries of the gender system in El Salvador. The platform called for women's inclusion in development, drastic improvement in working conditions in both the formal and informal sectors as well as for campesinas, educational reform, programs to prevent violence against women, improvements in the health system, reproductive rights, and gay rights. Changes needed to eliminate sexism from the legal code generally were called for as well reforms addressing issues of domestic violence and discrimination in labor laws and agrarian reform. Finally the platform demanded the establishment of quotas for the number of women in political office and political parties (see Appendix F).

Despite the coincidence of many of their demands and participants, these two efforts highlighted the contradictory perspectives that existed within the Salvadoran women's movement. These differences emerged in a workshop at the *Encuentro* organized for Salvadoran women who were not directly involved in the process of organizing the conference. A number of women articulated their perception that Salvadoran feminism was taking a direction in which they felt excluded from participating. In a reversal of the situation where Salvadoran feminists had felt drummed out of party organizations, these women, who were mainly party activists including two ex-military commanders from the FMLN, talked about feeling judged for remaining in the parties and continuing their double allegiance (*doble militancia*). Feminist "vanguardism" had led them to feel that a feminist id card (*carnet feminista*) was required

before they would be allowed to participate. But most seriously of all, they criticized the organizers for failing to take measures that ensured the participation of poor Salvadoran women in the conference, an absence that was notable in a movement whose national roots were based in a popular struggle.⁷²

On the other hand, the final organizing for the *Encuentro* had occurred precisely at the moment when *Mujeres 94* began negotiating over their platform with the political parties. The women who were more committed to the *Encuentro* tended to be more independent and critical of the political parties. But their attention was diverted by increasing attacks on the *Encuentro*. In the month before the conference took place, the Salvadoran right-wing launched a campaign to prevent the *Encuentro* from happening in El Salvador. Articles began to appear in the press accusing the conference of being a front for the FMLN, an ironic accusation as the majority of the Salvadoran organizers of the conference were dramatically estranged from the FMLN at the time. When the right-wing got their hands on a copy of a brochure from a North American solidarity organization recruiting participants for a lesbian, gay, bisexual/queer delegation that would support a Salvadoran lesbian-feminist collective, attend the *Encuentro*, and meet with members of the FMLN, pressures to cancel the conference mounted. The local organizers of the *Encuentro* received death threats and several hotels canceled their reservations after

⁷² It is important to add that Salvadorans were not the only ones critical of this oversight. The lack of participation by a representative number of Black women, women from "*comunidades originarias*," and *campesinas* was declaimed in specially organized workshops on racism and class and in the larger forums designed to evaluate the conference process. These complaints echo charges that have occurred at each of the preceding five *Encuentros* (Saporta Sternbach et al. 1992).

receiving similar threats. As the news spread throughout the region and the continent, part of the planning committee began questioning whether the security of the conference participants could be assured under the conditions existing in El Salvador. While the *Encuentro* took place as planned without any incidents, the women who supported the most controversial parts of *Mujeres 94* were occupied with the *Encuentro*'s public relations. Consequently, the negotiations with the political parties around the platform were primarily carried out by women who were more involved with those parties. As a result, only a revised version of the platform was endorsed by the FMLN. The revisions excluded the demands for reproductive rights, sex education, gay rights, and 50 percent representation by women (Murguialday and Herrera 1994). Despite these capitulations, *Mujeres 94* was seen as an important first step for the Salvadoran women's movement. It not only hammered out a platform but was able to put it forward as a coordinated defense of women's interests on a national level (ibid.).

Mujeres 94 not only defined a national agenda for women but established a methodological precedent for elaborating women's political demands. It introduced the practice of using political platforms as tools to articulate women's demands into the political arena and as vehicles to encourage women's participation in the political process. In Suchitoto, the Dignas' recognition of the potential of these methods for motivating women's political action was translated into an effort to develop a women's municipal political platform in early 1994.

Making Protagonists

Pati Otero,⁷³ the coordinator of the DL *equipo*, described to me how the Dignas began the process of developing women's municipal platforms. They started by doing what they call a *diagnóstico*, a type of preliminary research into an issue around which they were interested in organizing. Dignas' promoters visited the communities where they had already been working, and met with women in the community to describe what they were attempting to do. They then selected three different types of women to interview in each community: a woman who had a husband and children, a single mother, and a younger unmarried woman. Using the results of these interviews, the Dignas developed a set of proposals and reconvened the MMC to transform these proposals into "*Cambios Para Todas: Demandas de las mujeres del Municipio de Suchitoto*" ("Changes for All: The Demands of Women from the Municipality of Suchitoto"), a booklet written in very simple Spanish and illustrated with cartoons (see Appendix G).

But the process did not unfold fast enough to enable the MMC to present their demands to the parties before the elections nor were they able to maintain sufficient interest of women in the communities to carry out effective follow up with the FMLN, which won the election in Suchitoto. In October, more than 150 women came together to discuss the participation of the MMC in a Follow-up Commission (*Comisión de Seguimiento*) formed by the city council to elaborate a "general *diagnóstico* and a development plan for the municipality through the year 2010" (Murguialday 1997: 14).

⁷³ Interview held October 28, 1996, San Salvador.

While two women were elected to the committee, one participated only until the middle of 1995 and the other never showed up.

After coming together only sporadically for a couple of years, the group began to meet regularly again in October of 1996 to revise their political platform and design a strategy for ensuring that it had a political impact. During this period, recognizing their increased involvement with the city administration, and the reality of where their supported was actually concentrated, the group decided to once again change its name; this time to the Coordinating Committee of Suchitoto Women (*Coordinación de Mujeres de Suchitoto* or CMS).

While I did not have an opportunity to participate in the initial meetings where the group in Suchitoto was formed, I did get a chance to observe the Dignas at a more preliminary stage of organizing a local development committee in Tierra Blanca, a small community in Usulután. In November of 1996, I went with one of the members of the DL *equipo*, Marta Bernabé de Cracamo, and Sonia Cansino, a woman who had been hired temporarily to work on the elections with the Public Relations *equipo*. Sonia was to give a presentation on women and politics to a group of women who the Dignas were hoping would consolidate into a committee that would develop a women's platform in their municipality. Tierra Blanca, at that time of year, is a dusty residential settlement off the Littoral, the highway that runs down El Salvador's Pacific coast as a legacy of the cotton boom and bust of the 1950's. About twenty women from the municipality gathered in the Dignas' office. The participants ranged in age from approximately 16 to 70, and were

mostly peasants.

While the women (and I) sat in plastic chairs, Sonia stood up in front and began her presentation by pointing out that only nine of the 42 members of the Legislative Assembly are women.⁷⁴ She talked about gender roles, asking what it meant to be a woman. They responded by calling out words which she wrote down on sheets of paper she had brought with her and taped to the wall (although many of the women were not literate). The distance between the daily lives of these women and the Dignas' goal of motivating them to become active in local politics was illustrated by their responses to Sonia's questions. For these women, their gender required them "to grind corn," "wash clothes," "make tortillas," and "do chores." To be a woman was to be "a mother," "a wife," or "a secretary," and "obedient." During the discussion, Sonia asked what they had to do to come to the meeting. "Did you have to ask permission?" she queried. Several of the women indicated that they had. She told them that "that's because while women are supposed to be the "queen of the house" (*reina de la casa*), men are the "kings of the streets" (*reyes de las calles*). She explained that that had to do with distinction between the "public and private spaces." "Private space" she explained "is violence within the household" while political spaces such as "boards of directors (*juntas directivas*) dominated by men" were public.

Sonia did not have to wait long for an example of what she was talking about to walk into the office. During a break in the presentation, the local mayor came into the

⁷⁴ In the United States, women only hold 10 percent of equivalent positions. (Luciak 1999: paragraph 36).

office looking for Marta. When he left, he went around the room shaking everyone's hands, a gesture to which the women enthusiastically responded. But the group had already reconvened so that in doing so, he was disrupting Sonia's presentation. Sonia made it clear that she was not impressed, rolling her eyes as she stood behind him in front of the room. After he left, she used his behavior to reinforce her point about the differences between men and women. "A woman would never do that," she claimed.

After the break, Sonia showed a video (we had brought the VCR and monitor with us from the San Salvador office), entitled, "*Sin Pedir Permiso*" about women's political participation in Uruguay. The women had a lively discussion which reflected their experiences during the war. At the end of the meeting I asked if any of them were criticized for their involvement with the Dignas. Several women said that they were. People said that they didn't do anything at the meetings, they told me. They were criticized for not taking care of their houses or their children. Even the women without children said that they were criticized.

On the way home, Marta talked about what had been accomplished at the meeting. For several of these women, to get out of the house was a major accomplishment. She knew that at least one of them definitely risked being beaten by her husband each time she mustered the courage to attend one of the Dignas' meetings. But all of them had to get up even earlier than usual to grind corn, cook tortillas, and prepare the other food that their family would need for the day. Without refrigerators, these tasks had to be done on a daily basis. Few of the communities where these women came from had running water, so

ensuring that there was enough water on hand was another task that had to be done before they could feel that they had left their homes sufficiently provisioned that the criticism that would be leveled against them would not be justified.

Once their tasks were finished, many of the women still had a substantial walk before they got to the road where they could catch a bus to Tierra Blanca. As in most of their other meetings, the Dignas provided bus fare to each of the participants and provided them with a morning snack (usually *pupusas* and coffee), and a midday meal before they set out to return home. But usually there was no other financial compensation for the participants, a fact that was often used by their husbands or parents to criticize their participation. Because these women's daily activities were so critical to the maintenance of their households, their absence was felt by other family members and, in most cases, needed to be justified. Increasing women's participation in politics was not a particularly compelling rationale to most men. Therefore, building women's self esteem and introducing them to a feminist critique of gender roles, as Sonia did, was seen as a first step in empowering these women to challenge those roles. It was a delicate balance since women's work was important to the families and the Dignas were not paying them for their time. What was required for these women to become involved in the Dignas' activities was that the women themselves either compensated for their absence, or they got other family members to do so, often their daughters. While the discourse of the Dignas encouraged the women to get their men to assume some of the responsibility, from the women's comments it seemed likely that whatever needed to be done what done

by them before or after the woman attended or by other women in the household. But the presence and active participation on the part of this group of women was seen by Marta as an encouraging step toward building a group of women in Jiquilisco (the state or department in which Tierra Blanca was located) that would develop a women's political platform and advocated for a response to their demands.

The DL *equipo* envisioned three stages to the work they were doing and Tierra Blanca was at the first stage. The three approaches ("*lineas del trabajo*") were described to me by Pati Otero, the coordinator, in an interview about the *equipo's* work about a month after I had arrived in San Salvador. The first stage was "organizational," identifying the women who could play a leadership role, providing them with support to develop their leadership abilities, and working with them to identify issues which would resonate with women's needs in their communities so as to be effective tools with which they could organize women as a political force (*luchas reivindicadas*). Once a group is organized, the Dignas, she explained, help in the group's formation by providing guidance and support for "political participation; the study of the laws of the municipality and other local power structures; elections; and reflections on women's work, citizenship, sex, violence, and literacy." Ultimately the Dignas' goal is that these women "become protagonists" in the political arena. The work in Tierra Blanca was at the beginning of this first stage.

The second stage, Pati continued, attempted to incorporate women's perspective into local politics. This focus on local politics, she explained, came from the Dignas

recognition that with the increased decentralization of the state resulting from structural adjustment policies, local governments are "assuming more administrative functions." The Dignas' goal was to ensure that "that these changes are beneficial, or at least, that they take women into account." She pointed to an example in Villa Victoria where the NGOs and the city council wrote a development plan for the municipality. The Dignas' promoter in the town got a hold of the proposal and immediately saw that they had failed to disaggregate the information in terms of sex. Recognizing that this would impact the way that projects would be written and implemented, the Dignas pulled out the data that would be needed and made sure that it was included in the plan.

Finally their third strategy was to motivate powerful women to move into positions of political power. One way they did this was by working with local women to develop mechanisms to guarantee that the existing laws would be implemented. In one site, she told me, they had convened a commission of women to review the municipal code. But a much more visible aspect of this work was the committee that the DL had organized in Suchitoto, and was in the process of organizing in Nombre de Jesús, Villa Victoria, and Tierra Blanca. These committees were promoting women candidates, and supporting those like Ofelia who were running on the FMLN platform. Their goals were to bring women who are in power together with women in the community, and to convince other mixed social movements to support women's demands and candidates. In the process, Pati concluded, it was critical that the women retained their autonomy.

While Tierra Blanca was in the first stage of organizing, the work of the DL

equipo in Nombre de Jesús had gotten to the second level by November of 1996. At that point, a committee organized by the DL *equipo*, the Coordinating Committee of the Women of Nombre de Jesús (*Coordinación de Mujeres de Nombre de Jesús* or *Coordinación*), had developed a women's political platform. On November 29 (the day before Mama Tina's wedding, see chapter 2) they had scheduled an "interchange" between themselves and the local mayoral candidates from the FMLN and the ARENA parties. The committee was going to present the candidates with the list of their demands.

I went up to Nombre de Jesús early that morning in the Dignas' four-wheel drive truck with a number of women from the San Salvador office. Nora Hernández, the coordinator of human relations, was driving that day, as none of the regular drivers were available. Marielos Romualdo, the coordinator of the Reproductive and Sexual Health *equipo*, was coming up to meet a contractor who had been doing renovations to the Dignas' house to complain about numerous problems with his work. Dolores Avelar, a resident of Nombre de Jesús, and the administrator of the house, was coming back from meeting she had in the San Salvador office. Along the highway on the other side of the city, we picked up Marta Barnabé de Carcamo, whose impending resignation from the DL *equipo* had been the topic of some long painful discussions in the last coordinators meeting. Having been with her a few days before in Jiquilisco for a workshop on violence against women and seeing the quality of her work, I understood why there had been such distress about the possibility of her departure.

As usual we got a late start but Nora, who had overslept, made up for it by tearing

up the roads both dirt and paved. We arrived in Nombre de Jesus around 9:30, after picking up Mama Tina and two huge baskets of rolls in Ilobasco, the city where the paved road ended. Many women had already arrived and were sitting around on the balcony of the building's "*corredor*," the veranda-like porch in the front of the building overlooking Nombre de Jesús' main square. Two women and their various helpers were already bustling about the small kitchen preparing chicken and salad to be stuffed in the rolls Mama Tina had brought for lunch. One of the cooks was Loli's sister, Carmen Avelar; the other, Lupe Rivera, was her sister-in-law. Such multiple family member involvement was not uncommon with the Dignas. Former promoters for the Dignas, these two had withdrawn from most the organization's activities after they were laid off in one of the Dignas' many restructurings but stayed connected to the Dignas by cooking, a job for which they were paid.

The workshop area was decorated with purple streamers, purple women's symbols, and posters of the various Dignas' programs: education, non-traditional labor practices, violence against women, AMD. But after we moved all the chairs and benches into the room including some from the church across the plaza, there were still not nearly enough seating for the more than 100 women, and twice that many children, some of whom had walked as much as four hours from their villages through the mountains to attend the event. So we moved the women, children and benches out to the corridor in hopes that more people could participate. Unfortunately the sound system that Marta had brought would not function, so on top of the crying of children and the noise from the one

construction project in town that happened to be going on around the corner, hearing was difficult.

After Esperanza Urbina, the local promoter for the DL *equipo*, and other members of the *Coordinación* read the demands included in the women's platform, the candidates were asked to respond. While the women were presenting their platform, I tried to guess which candidate was from the FMLN and which from ARENA. One was more slight with straight dark hair. He wore wire rimmed glasses and a button down shirt. The other was a larger man, both in height and in girth, wearing a striped polo shirt that stretched across his belly. But to my surprise when the guy with the glasses started to speak, it turned out that he was from ARENA. This did not become clear until he was most of the way through his soft spoken speech. In response to the women's list of demands, he described one by one all the projects that he had proposed to do but had not been able to get funded. The other candidate had a booming voice, and while he was no better than the incumbent mayor at responding to the demands of the women's platform, he emphasized that Esperanza, the local promoter of the DL *equipo* and a member of the *Coordinación de Mujeres de Nombre de Jesús*, was a candidate for city council on the FMLN slate. He insisted that it was not just because she "had a nice figure. She is being asked to run because of for her capacity," a protest that suggested that, perhaps the fact that Esperanza's was an attractive woman had, indeed, been one of the criteria. After a brief question and answer period in which both candidates avoided making any concrete promises, lunch was served.

After the event, I asked Marta about the candidates. There were two points of view within the Dignas in terms of electoral politics. On one side, for many of them, the idea of supporting a candidate who was not an FMLN candidate, even if it was a woman, was untenable. Others, like Marta, felt that all candidates should be considered but that women candidates, and whoever was willing to support women's demands, should be supported irrespective of their party affiliation. This was a particularly delicate issue in Nombre de Jesús, she told me, because ARENA had suggested that they might include two women from the *Coordinación* in their platform.

When I admitted my mistaken assumption about which candidate was from which party, she told me that she had originally made the same mistake. The current mayor was "humble and shy," she told me and she did not think he was a bad man. On the other hand, Mechu, as the FMLN candidate is known (and no, she told me, it was not a *nom de guerre*. He had lived in the United States during the war), is one of the wealthier men in the town. He owned a big house, was building another, and had his own business, a shop that makes doors, one of the very few industries in Nombre de Jesús.

That night Martita and I stayed over in Nombre de Jesús for Mama Tina's wedding the next day. As Mechu was Mama Tina's marriage *compadre*, he stopped by the house where the preparations were going on. After he offered us a drink from a bottle of the local brew that he had brought over, he began to talk about the importance of involving more women in the political process. I asked him why if he thought it was so important for there to be women candidates there were not more women in the FMLN's

slate for city council. When he let it slip that even Esperanza was only an alternate (*suplente*), Marta began to question him more intensely. Mechu insisted that it was very difficult. Women would not take a more active role because their husbands would let them, he insisted, relating an example of a woman had been asked to run but had been prevented from doing so by her husband. When I pushed him, insisting that the men had to work with the other men, he raised the issue of who was going to take care of the children. We suggested that the men could take care of the children as well as the women, and urged them to support women in their efforts to get men to do so. Faced with such a proposition, he seemed much less adamant in his objections that women could not be recruited because of their responsibilities though not exactly clear about why. Again he mentioned Esperanza's nice figure and how that was not why she had been selected to run on the FMLN's slate.

Mechu's description of the FMLN's attempts to bring women into the political process, and his repeated references to Esperanza's physical attractiveness, suggest that those efforts were little more than token gestures aimed at securing women's support. His analysis of the failure of the FMLN in Suchitoto to recruit more women onto their slate indicates that either they are unable, because they do not understand, or unwilling, because they do, to challenge the gender roles that make it difficult for women to participate in electoral politics.

While the *Coordinación* in Nombre de Jesús had developed a political platform, they had not organized in time to promote women community leaders as the women's

candidates. This, in part, reflected the dissatisfaction in the San Salvador office about the organizing in Nombre de Jesús, the inability of the Dignas to get local women to take “leadership” roles mirrors Ofelia’s complaints that some promoters were in the jobs primarily for the salaries. While some of the women who were recognized as committed leaders, like Mama Tina, had been pushed aside by the women in San Salvador, few of the more recently hired promoters had assumed levels of responsibility that generated their confidence.

The differences between the ARENA party and the FMLN in Nombre de Jesús, in terms of their support for the women’s platform, were not made clear in the *intercambio*. Many of the improvements that the women were demanding were among the unrealized projects that the mayor had listed in his speech. ARENA’s suggestion that they would consider putting two women from the *Coordinación* indicates that there was a potential for the women to extract more from the right-wing party than they were inclined to explore. The historic ties between the FMLN and the women in Nombre de Jesús made considering such an option untenable.

“United by Our Interests in Suchitoto”⁷⁵

The political platform of the CMS was not presented to the local political parties in Suchitoto until more than three months after it was done in Nombre de Jesús.

Nonetheless, Ofelia claimed that the process in Suchitoto represented women’s interests

⁷⁵ *En Suchitoto Unidas por Nuestras Intereses* was the slogan imprinted on the Dignas’ campaign materials.

more legitimately than the process in either Nombre de Jesús and Villa Victoria. She was not the only one who felt this way. The level of support that the Dignas extended to women campaigning for election to city council in Suchitoto was dramatically different from that given to the two other Dignas promoters who were running for office.

According to Ofelia, what made her situation so different from the others were the ways that the women were selected to be part of the FMLN's slates. "The difference between those two and I is that the party went looking for them," she told me.

With those two, the party said that they wanted them to be candidates and they elected them. One of them, Rosa, they elected her in an assembly where she wasn't even present. In part, it was because she had lived there a long time and on top of that she had been working with the Dignas . . . The other one they came looking for because another woman didn't accept, so they came looking for her because the other woman couldn't do it. She didn't accept and so they looked for her.

Ofelia argued that the process in Suchitoto resulted in the selection of women who had a more genuine mandate from those they represented,

In our case, here in Suchitoto, what we did was hold a women's election. Here we held a meeting, an assembly where there were around 100 women and between them, they nominated women, and the women elected them. These women were then proposed to the party in order for them to accept these women as part of their slate. It was negotiated and in some ways it was more legitimate because the women said, 'Yes, considering that they've never taken us into consideration, let's see if they hear us when we are say want these women.' It was a process of negotiation with the party.

The Municipal Women's Convention (MMC) took place one day before the FMLN held its municipal convention in July of 1996 and selected six women as their representatives. The FMLN was furious. The Dignas had met with them earlier that year to discuss their interests in including women in the local slate. The mayor and local party

leaders had expressed their support but argued that their hands were tied by the mechanism handed down by the party. These mechanisms were intended to ensure the legitimate representation of all social sectors. But the Dignas did not trust the process which, they suspected, would prevent the participation of women who were likely to challenge the party's policies. Instead they opted to hold their own convention and generate a list of women to represent the women of Suchitoto independent of the party apparatus. While at the FMLN convention, each social sector was supposed to present its candidates to be voted upon; what occurred was that a list of candidates who had been preselected by the local branch of the party was presented for ratification. But the pressure created by the MMC forced them to consider the candidates that the women had proposed (Murguialday 1997: 38-39).

During that consideration, Ofelia confronted the legacy of the Dignas' contentious relationships with the party. She recalled that it was not an easy process:

It was . . . a different dynamic, and it was very difficult. Very difficult because they really didn't want me. They said that I was going to create problems. I was going to create problems with the men because I was like that, and that being from the Dignas, I was going to cause them conflicts. That kind of stuff. They had a mountain of pretexts: that I wasn't a leader, that they didn't know me, that no one knew me. They said all this kind of stuff . . . It was a different and difficult process, very difficult and it wasn't because they didn't recognize our leadership. It was because of *machismo* and, how can I say it? Closed, a closed position . . . They said that since I was not part of a party, how was it possible for them to integrate me into the structure. Worse than that I was from the Dignas, and if the Dignas are anti-party, and all this.

We made it very clear. I told them that I didn't need to be a party member, the important thing is that I represented a population that had never been taken into account. It was very difficult, very difficult. It got to the point where they told me that I had to make a speech that was written

by another person and that I had to give this speech to an assembly of party activists . . . I didn't do it, no. But it was difficult, very difficult. There was a guy who said that if they let me in, he was going to resign and in the end, he resigned.

The party only accepted one of the six women who had been proposed by the MMC, Ofelia. Two other women who had been preselected by the party were also included in the FMLN slate. One was a woman who was from the local market and the other was the party's coordinator in the communities of Cerro Guazapa.

Ofelia's candidacy received concrete support from the Dignas. The Public Relations *equipo* had initiated a publicity campaign to encourage women's participation in the elections. This campaign, designated the "*A-saltando el Político*," included several large, professionally designed, glossy black posters (see Appendix H), coffee cups, and tote bags imprinted with dramatic images and a play on words; *saltar* means to leap while *asaltar* refers to an assault. It also included the production and distribution of tee-shirts, baseball caps, and notebooks with a photo of the three women running for office in Suchitoto, a women's symbol, and the words "*En Suchitoto Unidas por nuestras intereses. Danos tu voto*" (United by our interests in Suchitoto. Give us your vote).

The day that the FMLN launched their campaign in Suchitoto, I went to the election rally with two truckloads of Dignas from San Salvador, all proudly wearing the tee-shirts and caps imprinted with the slogan. After the speeches of the party officials and local candidates, a dance was held in the central plaza. From their truck on the other side of the plaza, the Dignas began to hand out their campaign paraphrenia. But as word spread through the crowd of several hundred that something was being given out for free,

bedlam broke out. There was such desperation to get what was being distributed that adolescent boys pushed in front of women with young children. Despite our efforts to maintain some kind of order, the situation rapidly generated into such an unruly mob that the distribution had to be suspended. Those who had not received anything were encouraged to come to the local Dignas' office to pick up the items, or assured that the women candidates would bring them something when they visited their villages.

The failure of the Dignas to anticipate the response of the crowd illustrates the gulf between the Dignas from San Salvador and the women they seek to organize. While the tee-shirts and caps were freely distributed in the San Salvador office and to the promoters in the satellite offices, these items were not just wanted but sorely needed by those in the villages. The intensity of the efforts made by those in the crowd completely overshadowed the message of women's unity that they were attempting to promote. On the contrary, there were audible complaints among those who were turned away which made me wonder if the effort to generate support had, indeed, backfired.

Notwithstanding how these efforts to support the women candidates in Suchitoto fared, there were no corresponding gestures made toward the candidates in the two other municipalities. In fact one of these candidates had been discouraged from running at all. Ofelia attributed this to the fact that Rosa Lainez, the DL promotor from Villa Victoria, had vacillated in her decision to accept the candidacy. But Rosa explained it somewhat differently. While Suchitoto was a municipality with a lot of FMLN support and many communities repopulated with ex-guerrillera and refugees, the area around Villa Victoria

where Rosa was running for office was much more of a checkerboard with communities that had historically been affiliated with the FMLN being interspersed with communities which had supported the government. The Dignas had started out working in communities repopulated with FMLN supporters, like Santa Marta, but had recently begun to make inroads into communities which had supplied the foot soldiers for ORDEN, the paramilitary civilian patrols that the government had used to police the rural population prior to and during the early stages of the war. As the war progressed, it was not common for these communities to send boys to join the army. Rosa explained to me that the Dignas' *Coordinadora* feared that if she was known to be an FMLN candidate, it would scare women in those communities off from working with the Dignas (accusations that the Dignas were going to turn women from these communities into communists were used by the men to discourage women from participating in Dignas' events or accepting their offers of services). Even though she knew it might mean her job, Rosa accepted the candidacy. But she insisted that she would only accept a position as *regidor propietario* (a town councilor) rather than an alternate position like that which Esperanza was offered. I asked Rosa if she felt bad about the *Coordinadora's* position and she said yes. She could understand that they might feel that Ofelia was more capable and advanced (*más capaz, más avanzada*) in her development as a feminist, but she did not think that justified her not being supported at all and discouraged from running, particularly after the Dignas had been working to get women included in political participation. This conversation Rosa took place a few months after she had been elected and assumed

office. At that point she concluded with confidence that her FMLN candidacy had had no negative impact on her work with the communities.

However, Ofelia did rapidly assume a privileged position in the city council that neither Rosa nor Esperanza achieved. Ofelia claimed that, "I don't have problems. What's more, the problem I have is that the others get angry because Isaias [the mayor] only want to give me responsibilities. 'Ah, yes, Ofelia can do it, she's good.' I know that he feels a lot of support, that's how it is, and the others get like, very, like they're not happy, jealous." While Ofelia might claim that her position resulted from her support by the Municipal Women's Convention, the possibility that it might equally be because she was more advanced and capable, as Rosa put it, is suggested by the process that led to development of the new Municipal Women's Platform in Suchitoto.

Changes for All⁷⁶

According to Murguialday (1997: 15) several important events led to the reinitiation of the process of elaborating a new women's political platform in Suchitoto. In December of 1995, IMU had invited the Dignas to participate in a forum on human rights and rural women that took place in Suchitoto. This interchange resulted in the two organizations' decision to join forces and pool their contacts so as to unify the efforts of Suchitoto women. In the first half of 1996, the woman who represented the women's movement in the *Comisión de Seguimiento* (see above) invited women's groups to

⁷⁶ The title of the 1994 popular version of the demands of the women from the municipality of Suchitoto.

develop a collective proposal for the municipal development plan. The subsequent meetings were attended by women from the Association of Literacy Teachers, the Defense Committee, the Midwives Associations, IMU, the Dignas, the Women's Radio Program, the Committee of Cuscatlán Repopulators, PROGRESO (*Progestora de Repoblaciones y Comunidades Solidarias*, an umbrella organization for repopulated communities), and representatives from individual community boards (*directivas comunales*). In October, these same groups came together again and decided to begin the process of developing a new municipal women's platform and to design a strategy to encourage women's participation in the elections.

In November, thirteen women, including Pati and Ofelia and two IMU promoters, met at the Dignas' office in Suchitoto to review the platform that had been developed in 1994 and identify issues that had been previously overlooked or unrecognized. I arrived at the meeting late. The women were reconvening after having broken down into small topic groups. The groups began reporting back on the issues which they had identified as needing to be included in the revised platform. They included:

- increased health care, particularly in the area of mental health for problems coming out of the war, and increased recreational opportunities.
- that "popular" teachers should be recognized and paid for both informal and formal teaching.
- increased access to higher education.
- better roads.
- increased job opportunities and the creation of childcare centers.

- more education about violence with couples and workshops on *machismo* for men.
- telephones in the communities.
- the implementation of educational reform.
- the establishment of a Women's Committee to the Municipality (*Ajunta de las Mujeres de las Municipalidades*). This demand was suggested by Ofelia not by a committee but adopted with the others.
- outlawing bars (as they contributed to violence against women).

After all the groups had presented their proposals, Ofelia tried unsuccessfully to recruit some of the women to synthesize the results for the next meeting. But when it became apparent that all those who could take on the task (several of the women were illiterate) were either unwilling to do so or uncomfortable with the prospect, Pati and Ofelia agreed to clean it up. Ofelia then outlined the rest of the process. After she and Pati incorporated the changes that had been suggested, Ofelia told the women, the list of demands would then be reviewed and revised by the group, and finally reviewed and approved by an assembly of women. Afterwards, it would be presented to the institutions and parties of the municipality as a basis for negotiating with them. Finally a mechanism would be developed for monitoring the compliance of the institutions and parties with the agreements they have made.

The list of demands generated in this meeting illustrates the tensions the Dignas faced in trying to establish a mechanism for rural women to articulate their needs in a way that can be transformed into an effective political tool for changing women's status. The new demands reflected the very diverse perspectives of the women involved in the

process. The demand for telephones is a result of the lack of basic infrastructures in many of the communities where the Dignas worked and which increased the burden for women. The call for the recognition of popular teachers reflects both the need for expanded educational opportunities but also the self-consciousness of women organized in groups like the Association of Literacy Teachers. The recognition of the need for education on domestic violence and *machismo* demonstrate the impact of the *concientizaciones* (consciousness-raising groups) on gender relations that had been held by the Dignas and other women's groups. This list cannot be effectively divided into categories of "practical" or "strategic" needs. Rather these demands, added together with those in the platform of 1994, reflected women's needs not just as wives and mothers,⁷⁷ but also as health care providers, students, educators, workers, community leaders, and citizens.

While each of these demands represents very real needs, they also reflect the diverse forms of political organization from which the group was drawn. Most, if not all, had been involved with the FMLN during the war. Since then, many had been involved with one or more of the national mixed NGOs that operated in Suchitoto. Several had been extensively involved with the Dignas, IMU, or other national women's organizations, or in one of the women's projects such as the Midwives' Association. Others had been part of women's committees created in their communities to carry out projects initiated by national groups. The structure of these political initiatives had, in

⁷⁷ The demands, however, were often couched in maternalist terms. For instance, a primary justification for the need for telephones was to summon help for sick children or women giving birth.

turn, generated a kind of vertical dependency. Local women tended to look toward the national headquarters of the organization with which they worked for support and guidance rather than to other women in their own municipality. It was what Murguialday described as:

a hierarchization that goes across (*que atraviesan*) the women's movement at a national level: between the users of the services and the promoters, educators, or professionals; between the members of a group and those hired to direct them; between groups which had abundant resources and those which had little more than the desire on the part of the women to do something; etc., but above all, the hierarchy established between the "external agents" and the rural women involved in the women's movement. (1997: 16 citing *Pensando a sí mismas. Movimiento de Mujeres en Centroamérica, La Corriente*, 1997: 325).

The dynamics of this meeting illustrate the contradiction within the Dignas' efforts to mobilize rural community women to generate a women's political platform. The initiative came from the Dignas and IMU. They provided a space to meet, reminded the women to attend, reimbursed them for transportation costs, and provided them with food. The most institutional demand, that the city council form a women's committee, was suggested by Ofelia. None of the women outside of the two institutions was willing or able to do the addition work of synthesizing what had occurred in the meeting. The initiative and skills necessary to channel these diverse needs into political demands came from the promoters. While developing the capacity of women in the communities to assume these roles was part of the Dignas' agenda, developing a platform that could be presented to the political parties before the 1997 election was a higher priority.

In December of 1996, an assembly was convened where 154 women from 27

communities, the Dignas, IMU, and one other NGO finalized the draft of the platform and elected a committee, which took the name *Coordinadora de Mujeres de Suchitoto* (CMS). Consisting of women from each of the organizations and communities referred to above, the CMS' task was to present the platform to the political parties and to negotiate their adoption of it.

The CMS met eight times between January and March of 1997. At one of meetings I attended in February, the women began to work on how they were going to present the platform's demands to the candidates. One of the promoters from IMU began the meeting by defining their objective as "building up our self-esteem by familiarizing ourselves with the contents of the platform and the possible scenarios that we'll encounter during the negotiation process." She continued by summing up their activities up to that point:

- They had elaborated a tool which brought together the needs and demands of the women of Suchitoto.
- They had committed themselves to work together to guarantee that the platform would be realized by the process of negotiating.
- They were going to have a public presentation of the platform to candidates of the FMLN, ARENA, PD, and PRSC (*Partido de Renovación Social Cristiana*).
- They would establish a mechanism to review the commitments of the parties.
- They would end up with a document written and signed by the parties, other institutions, and women's organizations.

She concluded by restating that they would be demanding the creation of a women's committee by the city council.

Ofelia then provided what was supposed to be a history of the various political parties but instead she gave more of an update on the status of each party's campaign in Suchitoto. She went over the names and symbols of each of the six parties and emphasized that it was important that all of the parties adopt policies which reflect the women's demands. ARENA's convention in Suchitoto had been badly attended, she reported. And, she added, they had not been actively campaigning. As the FMLN had won the city council in the last election, the competition was not between them and ARENA. Rather the FMLN's biggest rival in Suchitoto was the Democratic Party (*Partido Democrático* or the PD), the party resulting from a split in the FMLN after the signing of the Peace Accords. The PD has the most graffiti (*pintas*) painted around the city and in the outlying area. Ofelia told them, even though it is illegal. The PD slate was entered late, she continued, concluding by reminding them that the FMLN was going to open their campaign in Suchitoto on the following Saturday while the PD was going to open their national campaign in Suchitoto on Sunday.

It was impossible to tell whether or not Ofelia was intentionally trying to promote the party on whose slate she was running. But the question of conflict of interest on her part (or of that of the DL promoters in Nombre de Jesús and Villa Victoria who were also running for office as candidates for the FMLN), as the primary force behind the platform never arose directly. But, as we see, it may have impacted the response of the other parties to the process.

Following Ofelia's presentation, the eight women who had come to the meeting

broke down into two groups to role play the presentation of the platform. One group prepared to present the platform while the other group played the roles of candidates of the political parties. The first time around, the first group presented their various demands and then asked for the candidates' support. All of the candidates boldly promised to support whatever demands they had if the women agreed to vote for them.

Following the role play, the women did a self critique. They discussed how boring it was to read the platform and agreed that practice was necessary to make them feel more comfortable with the material. The fact that few of the women had looked directly at the candidates while making their presentations was noted and the importance of doing so emphasized. One of the women reflected that they needed to think about what they were asking for so as not to get caught up in something that they did not want such as agreeing to endorse a candidate just because they promised to support the platform. After the critique, the participants switched roles and did a second role play which went much more smoothly. As the meeting wound down, they made plans to work through it again at the next meeting, trying to figure out who could do which part best considering that some of the women could not read, and that others had particular interests. For instance, one young woman who recently had given birth was selected to present the issues to do with health care since she had just gone through an experience in the hospital.

Ofelia and the promoter from IMU asked the women to evaluate the meeting. While they all expressed their satisfaction with the role plays, one woman commented on a broader political point that had become clearer to her through the process. It had

clarified for her what the commitment to support the party that won implied. Support does not necessarily mean voting for them, she noted. Ofelia agreed insisting that they should look at the platform as a support for whichever party wins. It was something that any party could use as a guide to respond to women's needs. While the women were learning new skills in preparing to present the platform, this remark demonstrated that Dignas were promoting a new model of how to do politics based on a conceptualization of the interaction between the electorate and the parties as one of representation and accountability rather than patron-client relationships.

After five months of meeting on March 9, eighty women gathered in the Monseñor Romero Center in Suchitoto to support what was then being called the Autonomous Women of Suchitoto in their presentation of the platform to the candidates. Unfortunately representatives from only two parties showed up: one from the Unity Party and the incumbent FMLN. The mayor arrived an hour and a half late only after Ofelia went out and retrieved him. Despite the poor showing, the women presented their demands with enthusiasm and confidence that reflected the effort that they had put into it.

Rubidia Martínez, a local college student who had begun working for the Dignas a few months before, acted as mistress of ceremonies. She began by pointing out that the platform would serve the next mayor, the city council, other state institutions as well as other ONGs. She then introduced the six women who presented excerpts of the platform and put the demands into context. In terms of health, another young woman discussed the need for an ambulance, the burden of the requirement of an exam before a pap smear, the

need for timely lab results, and the problem of caesarians being done without prior consultation. Another woman called for increased regulation of liquor because of its contribution to domestic violence, the introduction of schools with a special emphasis on health (*escuelas saludables*) in the villages, greater availability of levels of study, and childcare for those studying literacy. Housing issues were addressed by a third woman. Basic services such as improved highways, and increased telephone and mail services were presented by a fourth woman. A representative from a group of those who had lost their children or parents in the war spoke about their continuing struggles. Other demands included training programs for both women and men in productive projects, that titles to land distributed through the peace accords include the name of both individuals in a couple, and that women be granted equal opportunity for credit. Finally, they demanded a local women's commission.

The two candidates were then asked to respond. The incumbent FMLN mayor was supportive, acknowledging the vital role the platform played in pushing forward women's demands. But he also pointed that many of the changes that they were asking for required changes in laws that could only come from the National Assembly. You need to have power to change things and you need to struggle, he emphasized. He then related a story from the village of Comalapa. There was a project there that required the residents to volunteer their time and labor, but the men refused to cooperate. But the women decided that they would do it, and with their participation, the project was completed. This, he suggested, showed how important the participation of women can be. He concluded by

committing to establishing a women's commission. As for the rest, he said that it was not just the town that was involved nor were they things that he could honestly promise to accomplish in the three years but he did commit himself to do what he could.

The representative from the Unity Movement Party (*Partido Movement Unidad*) was also enthusiastic in his praise for the platform and thanked for the women for their work. He called the platform a challenge and congratulated them for doing it. The candidates' speeches were followed by questions and comments from the audience who endorsed and reinforced the points that had been made by the women. The event ended with a meal of tamales and the distribution of funds for the participants' transportation.

Later when I asked about the poor response on the part of the parties, I was told that another group, the Social Initiative for Democracy, had a similar event the day before where they were presenting the platforms of other social sectors. They had a similar lack of turnout so it seemed that the alignment of political forces in Suchitoto itself may have been a determinant factor. ARENA had given up campaigning several months before and the PD, the other significant party, would probably have seen the event as too heavily stacked in favor of the FMLN to participate. In addition, the presentation was scheduled approximately a week before the elections, significantly diluting its potential impact.

Thus, despite the commitment to preparing the platform in order that it be presented to the candidates before the elections, the most visible impact was, in the end, not on shaping the party politics, but on the women who participated in the process of elaborating the platform and presenting it publicly. During the months of preparing the

document, they were able to articulate the needs of women in their communities into demands that were then transformed into a political platform for debate and development. Here, as in the demonstration referred to in the end of the last chapter, the impact of these activities may be felt more profoundly by the participants than the supposed targets. As Gamson (1994) suggested, when the goal is to establish a sense of identity the most important audience may be the group itself. For a woman's organization that is trying to make poor rural women into political protagonists, the women themselves may be the most important target of their own actions.

After the Elections are Done

The FMLN won the local elections in Suchitoto. After a few months of recuperation, the CMS began meeting again. In June 1997, I attended a meeting where committees (*comisiones*) that had been working on specific topics came back together to share their work and discuss the formation and definition of the role of the City Women's Commission (*Comisión de la Mujer Ajunta al Alcaldía* or CAA). At the beginning of the meeting, a Canadian student who has been working with the CMS as part of her internship with IMU, announced that the IMU promoters would no longer be participating in the committees. While that ended the collaboration between the promoters from the two organizations, the women from Suchitoto associated with IMU seemed to be committed to continuing to work with the CMS overcoming the partisanship that had made it so difficult to create a unified women's committee in

Suchitoto previously.

Numerous concerns were brought up, some new, most continuing. Issues about land were discussed extensively. One woman from another NGO announced a plan for which would divide some cooperatively held lands with financing from the U.S. Agency for International Development or AID. She stressed the need for pressure to be generated to ensure that women were included in the titling of the land so that they would be able to hold onto it in the case of a divorce or separation. There were lots of questions about the transference of land and the condemnation of the loans that those who got land also acquired. There was a lot of confusion about the need for those who got land to get a new document from the bank.

Another woman raised the issue of “indemnization” for those senior citizens who had lost children as well as for those children who had lost parents. “Those who struggled the most have nothing and those who struggled the least have the most,” complained an older woman sitting beside me.

Next there was a report from the health committee. Rubi reported on a meeting with the Director of the Hospital in Suchitoto where she presented him with their demands. She proposed that they go back as the whole group.

Since none of the other committee had progressed, it was decided to try to define the role of a CAA and to set it up before breaking for lunch. They selected three women to serve on the committee along with three alternates. The meeting concluded after the defined the primary functions of the CAA as negotiating with the Municipal council;

supporting the work of other commissions; coordinate with other groups, commissions, and the council; and channel proposals to the Municipal Council, watching over their progress, and doing necessary follow up.

The formation of the CAA represented the success of a strategy promoted by Dignas' *DL equipo* in collaboration with other groups, especially IMU. They were able to mobilize women in the municipality to get Ofelia added to the FMLN's slate as a candidate, to bring together women leaders of the community to elaborate and promote a women's political platform, and to convince the municipal government to recognize the need for a formal commission to advocate for women's issues in local decisions.

In doing so the Dignas surmounted the serious obstacles to women's mobilization which they faced at the outset. They were able to inspire enough confidence and trust in the women that they were able to overcome the hopelessness and despair that many faced in the post-war epoch. They prevailed over the verticalism and sectarianism that threatened to keep women in Suchitoto divided into their own special interest groups with ties to national organizations or political parties. However despite these achievements, the group's dependency on resources and direction from "external agents" is still strong.

The differences between the priorities of those two poles remains an important issue. The Dignas' commitment to political autonomy and the candidates' need for political alliances put women like Ofelia who need party support to run for office, or Rosa whose political alliances might have jeopardized the delicate balance between the Dignas' current work and their history, in difficult situations. While validity of the

Dignas' mistrust of the FMLN was demonstrated by the party's maneuvers in Suchitoto and the mayoral candidate's attitude in Nombre de Jesús, the shared history and local realities make it difficult, if not impossible to imagine that the women will shift political allegiances. Despite their rhetoric, the Dignas overwhelmingly though critically remain "*efemelistas*," supporters, if not members, of the FMLN.

The Dignas' recognition that the decentralization of the administration of the state called for an intensive refocussing on organizing women in the non-metropolitan areas of El Salvador represents a forward looking strategy. At the same time, the extent of the demands that the women have fashioned into their platforms necessitate, as pointed out by both the incumbent ARENA mayor in Nombre de Jesús as well the incumbent FMLN mayor in Suchitoto, that they continue to expand their field of struggle from the local to the global. The challenge is doing so without widening the gap between the women that make up the base of the organization and the group which oversees and finds funding for the "external agents" that bring the Dignas message to local communities.

Chapter 6: Politicizing Strategic Interests

Since June Nash and Helen Safa published their ground breaking work on women in Latin America (1976), social scientists have increasingly written about women's movements in that region. But as I found through people's reactions to my dissertation topic, Latin American women, in the North American popular imagination, are still conceived of as passive, subservient victims of *machismo*. The possibility that a women's movement exists below the US-Mexican border, much less thrives (albeit amid much struggle), as it is doing in El Salvador, is largely unrecognized. Even when such movements are acknowledged in the social sciences, the significance of their presence is at times downplayed by characterizations which represent feminism as the exclusive province of educated middle-class or upper-class elite women in Latin America.

What this case study of the Dignas illustrates is that feminist analysis or, as it is referred to in Central America, *la perspectiva de género*, can and does play a powerful role in mobilizing women in El Salvador across class lines to advocate for their interests. Organizations like the Dignas have adopted and transformed feminism in order to

construct an organized force of women to carry out feminist political action which will affect the national reality, and to elaborate proposals that will contribute to the expansion of peace, justice and democracy in society through the articulation of the struggle for the more immediate demands of women without separating them from the strategic necessity of transforming the material and ideological basis of [Salvadoran women's] gender subordination" (*Mujeres por la Dignidad y la Vida* n.d.).

The leadership of the Dignas has used the practical/strategic interest dichotomy to develop tactics which will attract women who do not necessarily share the Dignas'

feminist perspective into their organization. This approach is based on the recognition that women's struggles for day-to-day survival, particularly those of *campesinas* and poor urban women, are also gendered and must be part of the Dignas' feminist agenda. This is a recognition that has often eluded mainstream feminists organizations in the United States. The inability of groups like the National Organization of Women to mobilize its members to challenge policies which disproportionately affect low income women such as the 1998 Personal Responsibility Act (Davis 1998) is the most recent example of the failure of North American feminist groups to address issues of social and economic injustice, and its constant companion in the United States, racism. American feminist have much to learn from their Salvadoran sisters in this regard. Sonia Alvarez reiterates this point:

We in the United States have much to learn about how to promote and reinforce the process of empowerment and gender consciousness among low-income and minority women who are involved in welfare rights struggles, in our own growing numbers of *comedores populares*, in our own government make-work programs, permanent "emergency" relief programs, and so on (1996: 142).

The practical/strategic dichotomy has also been used by feminists theorists to generalize more broadly about women's movements, specifically to classify women's groups as either feminist or women's organizations. This dichotomy does describe significant differences in the goals of different kinds of women's mobilizations. The fact that women are mobilized in a groups does not ensure that their actions will challenge gender roles. For instance, an example of a political mobilization of women that did not

challenge gender stereotypes is the mobilization of Chilean housewives⁷⁸ in opposition to the Allende administration. But the case of the Dignas suggests that attempting to generalize about the nature of women's groups based on these categories takes the concept to an inappropriate level of analysis.

For example in her discussion of Peruvian women's neighborhood collective kitchens, Barrig claims that women's participation in these activities does little to challenge the dominant gender ideology or women's restrictions to the domestic sphere. She sees the women's involvement as actually hindering the possibility for change. "By accentuating the division of labor by sex," Barrig argues that women's participation in the collective kitchens "weakens or obstructs the alternative possibilities for constructing a different self image" (1989: 139). Thus Barrig suggests that by organizing women around the demands that reflect women's daily concerns, the dominant gender ideology is reinforced and, along with it, women's restriction to the traditional domestic sphere.

But as the work of the Dignas illustrates, the two strategies are often used simultaneously. The AMD uses the discourse of motherhood to organize women to challenge the irresponsible fatherhood of both the fathers of their children and the state; the Local Development *equipo* mobilizes women to articulate their day to day needs in order to channel those demands into a political platform that is used by the women to lobby political parties, and the midwives' needs are transformed into a strategy to develop

⁷⁸ The irony of these protests were that many of the women in the "pots and pans" demonstrations challenging Allende's redistributive programs were maids sent out by their employers.

a model of health care that will pressure the state to recognize their labor and improve the delivery of health care services to women. While organizing women around the so-called practical interests does not necessarily challenge gender hierarchies, as these examples illustrates, it certainly does not necessarily reinforce gender ideologies.

Generalizations about the need for women's movements to eschew appeals to traditional roles become ideological if not based in a broad analysis of the meaning of those roles in their own context. It is not that the categories of practical and strategic, or public and private, are useless for understanding the changes that are occurring in the contexts which have given rise to women's movements in Latin America. Helen Icken Safa (1990) explores the ways that movements focussing on women's traditional domestic roles in terms of human rights and collective consumption issues are expanding the consciousness of gender subordination among women in Latin America, and are increasing their legitimacy in the public sphere. But she does so by elaborating the factors which have increased women's participation in social movements such as the decline in fertility, the rise in level of education, and the increased participation in the labor force. Lynn Stephen's study of women's activism in Latin America (1997) refutes the notion that these movements can be divided into those which address basic survival issues and those which challenge women's gender subordination. By exploring the relations among women's demands in the areas of production, reproduction, sexuality, and politics she succeeds in avoiding the dualistic trap of dichotomizing the women's demands into public/private, production/reproduction or strategic/practical.

The temptation to use Molyneux's formulation to typologize is not the only problem with the construct. Her claim that it is "the politicization of these practical interests and its transformation into strategic interests which constitute a central aspect of feminist practice" (Molyneux 1985: 236-237) privileges the recognition of strategic interests in distinctly evolutionary overtones. In the introduction to their edited collection, Westwood and Radcliffe critique this weakness. They point out that the practical/strategic dichotomy "has a universalizing quality which is located with a linear view of progress Such a meta-narrative suggests a hierarchical relationship between practical and strategic gender interests such that women, in order to progress, must move from one to the other" (1993: 20). As a result, the formulation goes beyond distinguishing characteristics which differentiate between distinct organizing strategies to create a typology that masks differences based on class inequalities.

The practical/strategic dichotomy fails to recognize that the "politicization" of strategic interests may also be necessary, particularly if feminist practice is to be relevant to women across classes and ethnicities. The Dignas' feminism is deeply interlaced with a recognition that gender subordination is not the only, or even the most pressing, issue that Salvadoran women face. In order to address the structural conditions that led to the civil war, and the continued dire economic situation that the vast majority of Salvadoran women face, the Dignas "politicize" their formulations of strategic needs. Their reproductive health issues are conceived of in terms of the improved delivery of basic services and education about the need for primary care such as pap tests. Demands listed

on their political platforms include the construction of roads. Organizing mothers seeking child support is a high priority. As their statement quoted above illustrates, the Dignas' interpretation of feminism recognizes that these issues are also feminist issues.

International Funding and Stratification

This is not to say that class is not a problematic issue for the Salvadoran women's movement. In the relationships between the Dignas from the central office in San Salvador and those who work in the rural outlying areas, there are echoes of the dynamic which first was described by Robert Redfield as a contrast between great traditions of the urban areas and the little traditions of peasant villages (1956). The Dignas see themselves as equipped with the insight provided by feminist ideology which they must disseminate to women who have not been exposed to their useful analytical tools. Their attempts to share their vision has not always been welcomed or smooth as illustrated in the accounts of Mama Tina, Rosa Imelda, and Ofelia.

But in line with criticisms of Redfield's community studies, these relationships are conditioned by how these cities and towns are situated in national politics and global economies. In the aftermath of the signing of the Peace Accords, the Salvadoran state is undergoing a process of "modernization" (Umaña 1996). This is unlike many countries in Latin America where the role of the state in providing social service is dramatically declining (Barrig 1996). Nonetheless neoliberal policies, which call for reductions in health care costs and social service provisioning, limit the alternatives for both the

midwives in Nombre de Jesús and the *madres demandantes*. What Alvarez (1996:141) characterizes as the “municipalization,” the policies which shift public administration from the state to local and regional levels, is another consequence of neoliberal decentralization of the state with which the Dignas must contend.

Exactly how this will affect the work of the Dignas is yet to be seen. But it will undoubtedly be a gendered process. The potential for influence by women who have been effectively organized was suggested in chapter 3. The concern of the mayor of Nombre de Jesús’ that the number of children being birthed at the hospital out of the city would cause a decline in revenue points to the potential role the midwives’ organization could have in negotiating an outcome. The *Casa de las Parteras* also suggests that one response to the impact of neoliberal policies may be that women’s organizations and other NGOs will assume the burden of providing services that the state is casting off.

A very different global process threatens to exacerbated the tensions that already exist between women employed by the Dignas and with those whom they work. The international funding agencies which are the source of the Dignas’ resources have tremendous influence on what projects the Dignas do and how they do them. While the cases that I have discussed, particularly the AMD, illustrate how the recipients of funds attempt to redirect resources to areas that they feel are necessary, the requirements of the funders are taken seriously and rigorously complied with. But considering the differences in how feminism is interpreted and implemented, there is a real danger in international funders prioritizing activities or projects which emphasize a feminist perspective that

mirrors their own analysis of women's subordinations over those which reflect the concern with poverty that characterizes Salvadoran feminism.

There are two dangers here. If, as I have argued, the critical difference between strategic interests and practical interests centers upon issues of class, this may encourage groups like the Dignas to move away from using a class-based analysis and practice. Based on the premise that promoting struggles for strategic interests develops a more rigorous critique of gender inequalities, international funding agencies may favor projects which emphasize this approach over projects which are seen as just addressing practical interests.

The other danger is that the increasing administrative requirements of international funders will contribute to the stratification of women in the movement. As the case of Mama Tina showed, the talents, skills, and characteristics needed by the organizations changed over time. Mama Tina's willingness and ability to mobilize women from the villages and towns in the hills surrounding Nombre de Jesús were critical attributes during the stage of the organization when it was initially being formed. But once the Dignas' became more institutionalized, the organization required different skills from its employees. During the period of my fieldwork, the coordinators of the various programs and their staff spent almost two months evaluating their achievements and developing plans for the next year. To a large degree this was in order to satisfy the requirements of the funding they had received. These tasks required not only the ability to read and write but the capacity to use a computer.

At the same time, many of their sources of funding would not provide any funding for transportation or meals for the participants in the Dignas meetings and workshops. Resistance to subsidizing the costs of participation may come from the concern that women would come to events primarily to collect the stipends. But for many of the participants in the programs, their income is so low that without the stipends, they cannot afford the time or the labor to attend. Providing funds for these basic necessities could help to offset the other factors that are widening the gaps between the women who work full-time for the Dignas and those whose participation is unpaid.⁷⁹

With the proliferation of NGOs in El Salvador (and elsewhere), a lack of transparency has become a problem. NGOs may not be accountable for their use of funds to either their *usuarias* or the funding agencies. Often those in whose name the funds are raised neither know about nor have the skills to monitor the use of the funds. Larger funding agencies often do oversee the projects they fund or require documentation about the use of monies upon the risk of losing access to future funding. But in the case of smaller agencies, particularly grassroots funding initiatives, it may be impossible for them to monitor the use of the monies sent abroad. As in cases such as that of the AMD, and the CoMadres, as described by Ofelia in chapter 5, when NGOs raise money for a project there are few mechanisms to ensure that the money is spent as designated. While in some cases, proposing a project which they have no intention of implementing, may be a way

⁷⁹ When I presented my conclusions to the Dignas in June of 1999, they emphasized that the policies of international agencies were not the only factor contributing to stratification within the organization. They pointed to “vanguardism,” arrogance, and the desire for power on the part of wome women as the internal causes.

for organizations with few resources to obtain the money they need to function, doing can also be a source of corruption. Accusations of such activities are rampant with the Salvadoran NGO community.

This may be due in part to the fact that during the war, funds sent to popular organizations were often siphoned off to support the guerrillas. This history creates a particular need for transparency in El Salvador. But I do not want to suggest that funders should contribute to the further “professionalization” of the field by imposing more onerous reporting requirements upon NGOs. Nor do I want to suggest government regulation; this seems like a case of asking the wolf to guard the lambs. Funders need to consider how the use of monies sent to support NGOs will be monitored. Mechanisms need to be developed that will allow for the identification, especially by those in whose name the funds are being raised, of the improper use of funds. In addition, the funding process needs to become more of a dialogue where those who are seeking support can influence the nature of the funding process, particularly what kinds of activities get funded, so that the need for unauthorized diversions of funds is minimized. As NGOs proliferate as an international response to the neoliberal attack on government services, we need to find ways to make those who are seeking funds, as well as those who are distributing them, accountable to those who are the supposed recipients of the funds.

Autonomy in the Nick of Time

While it may still be too early to conclude with certainty, the Salvadoran women’s

movement may be an exception to a pattern of women's mobilization in Latin American. Friedman describes this "troubling paradox" as one where "women mobilize politically under even the most repressive forms of authoritarian rule, but in the transition to democracy, they demobilize" (1999: 87). The reason for this, she argues, is that "the institutionalization of politics during the transition impedes the forms of organization that women developed under the previous regimes and their subsequent political incorporation into democracy" (ibid.: 88). Looking at the case of Venezuelan women in the 1950s, she claims that under repressive conditions many activities become too dangerous for men to carry out. But women, who are assumed not to be political, are able to take on political activities precisely because of that assumption. When democracy is restored, the opportunities which made women's participation necessary dissipate. Ironically, she points out that the "political parties, the most widely accepted channels for democratic representation, often present gendered barriers to women's full incorporation" (ibid.: 89).

Friedman's description of the experiences of Venezuelan women mirrors that of the Dignas in critical ways, with the exception of one element. The Dignas and other women's organizations in El Salvador began to consolidate their own organizations before the war had terminated. The Dignas were founded in 1990 and began to struggle with the party almost immediately. By the time the Peace Accords were signed and the FMLN could begin its legal struggle toward consolidation in 1992, the Dignas had already gone through a process of establishing their autonomy from the RN.

Using a gendered version of the political opportunity perspective Friedman analyzes the profoundly gendered ways in which social movements interact with their political environments and how that process changes depending upon the stage of democratization. She explores the role played by political parties in both the mobilization and subsequent demobilizations of women during the transition to democracy through the experience of Venezuelan women.

The relative success of the Salvadoran women's movement in surviving the transition to democracy can also be explained through a gendered political opportunity perspective. This approach focusses on how the presence or absence of particular opportunities can influence the shape of social movements. For instance, the end of the Cold War created pressure on the Salvadoran resistance to look for new sources of support. The growing availability in the late 1980s of funding from international development agencies for women's projects provided an alternative source of funds. As a result, women's committees were created in the various branches of the FMLN. However, in order to obtain financial support it was necessary for women in the party to take an active role in conceptualizing and presenting these projects to potential funders. By placing women, who had already been deeply politicized by their participation in the civil war, in positions to develop and promote projects that specifically addressed women's needs, the party provided the initiative for women to begin to investigate and identify the material basis for their subordination. This process also enabled women to move from working clandestinely to assuming an open and legal role as individuals responsible for

legal, non-military development projects.

As Amy Conger Lind has pointed out in an article on popular women's organizations in Ecuador, "basic needs are not solely tied to survival, but rather to constructions of identity and relations of power" (1992:137). The process of developing programs which would capture the funds designated for women's projects facilitated the emergence of an awareness that women's needs were distinct from those of their *compañeros*. As the Dignas have documented (1993a), when they attempted to use the funds they got in order to address those needs, they discovered the resistance of their superiors to take those needs seriously. Their own gendered subordination within the party structures became more visible.

Two factors contributed to the ability of the women who founded the Dignas to increasingly challenge the gender discrimination within the RN. The first was the existence of the funding that not only permitted but encouraged them to recognize the need for autonomous women's movement. The financial and ideological support they received from feminist movements in other regions of Latin American, Europe, and the United States reinforced their analysis of women's oppression. They were encouraged to focus not only on the structural conditions which oppressed women but to examine the relations of daily life, the conditions within the family, and the dynamics within the party.

During this period, the RN attempted to marginalize the women who acted independently of the party apparatus. But the fact that the women could rely on alternative sources of support enabled them to assert their autonomy when the party

attempt to control their actions. The party leaders continued to block their access to women in the zones controlled by the party. Such actions fueled the Dignas' receptivity to the feminist critiques of political parties that they were beginning to encounter and discuss in groups similar to the women's conscious-raising groups of the United States women's movements. These theories challenged the vertical authoritarian structures of the political parties to which the Dignas belonged and provided them with additional justification to assert their autonomy and develop their own form of organizing.

In addition, during the first two years of the Dignas existence and during a period of intense organizing by them and other women's groups, the party was still operating outside the legal framework. This limited how effective the FMLN could be in disciplining the rebels and put serious restraints on what they could offer in order to entice women's loyalty. The Dignas, on the other hand, were able to operate openly even before the signing of the Peace Accords. Women in Suchitoto came together to discuss their collective interests in 1991, crossing party lines, and developing new institutions and new strategies. The success of *Mujeres 94*, the national women's political platform campaign, led the Dignas to initiate the process elaborating women's platforms on the local level. While these campaigns proceeded with fits and starts, by 1996 in Suchitoto they had succeeded in acquiring sufficient power to pressure the FMLN to accept Ofelia as their candidate for the municipal council.

Unlike the Venezuelan case, as well as others women's movements in Latin America, the Salvadoran women's movement has grown during the democratic transition.

What this suggests is that the timing of support of an independent, autonomous women's movement may be crucial to its success. I strongly agree with Friedman's analysis of the gendered nature of political transitions. What this case suggests is that in situations where women have taken a political role in opposition movements, the existence of an autonomous women's movement may be a critical factor in assuring that women continue to occupy those roles following a democratic transition. Even so, as the campaign to get women elected to the party slate in Suchitoto illustrates, the ability of the Dignas to remain completely outside of those structures has been challenged as the FMLN has consolidated. What this does suggest is that supporting women's groups, as well as other social actors, in establishing their autonomy during the period prior to democratic transitions may be critical to ensuring the future of women's activism and a vital civil society.⁸⁰

Blinded by the State

Along side, or perhaps even looming above, the Dignas' struggle to make the FMLN more responsive to women, is their focus on gendering the Salvadoran state. Their work with the midwives, the *madres demandantes*, as well as much of their other political work focusses on challenging the gendered policies of state institutions. This is not to say that the Dignas' work is exclusively oriented toward the state. Much of the Dignas' work which I have not discussed in this dissertation attempts to affect change through avenues

⁸⁰ In our discussions of my conclusions, the Dignas felt that this analysis put too much emphasis on timing.

other than the state. For instance, the Mental Health *equipo* treated women who were suffering the effect of the war and women's oppression. They have imported and developed innovative feminist therapies directed at raising women's self esteem, improving the image of women in society, and empowering women to change their lives and, with it, Salvadoran society. The aim of the Dignas' non-traditional work program is to challenge gender stereotypes by training women to do work that is considered to be men's work: auto mechanics, carpentry, and construction. By enabling women to learn these occupations and setting up them up in small business enterprises, the Dignas are attempting to increase the opportunities for women in the labor market.

But despite the claims of some theorists that new social movement have little interest in the state, the state is a major focus of the Dignas. However, the Dignas' approach is one that recognizes the "importance of sites of struggle that do not privilege the nation and are not necessarily defined by class consciousness" (Lowe and Lloyd 1997: 2) A slogan, one that Ana Murcia called out during the first AMD's public forum that I attended, and which is popular across Latin American feminist movements, epitomizes this understanding, "Democracy in the streets, in the house, and in the bed." The contradictions that the Dignas face in developing a strategy toward abortion highlights the necessity of such a concept as it does for feminist in the United States.⁸¹

⁸¹ While the U.S. Supreme Court has ensured the legality of abortion for women (for the moment), its availability is extremely restricted for poor women and women in rural areas. The impending retirement of a large percentage of the doctors who perform abortions and the fact that few medical schools are teaching the procedure may do more to limit access than any action by the state. The assassinations of doctor performing abortions is also having an effect.

The Dignas' approach to gender relations is highly social constructionist. But the experience of social movements as well as government efforts have demonstrated that social engineering has its limits. For example, in her essay on lesbian feminism Arlene Stein pointed out that "over the past two decades a host of scholars have argued against [assumptions that sexual desires and behaviors are presocial and unchanging], claiming, for example, that homosexuality is socially constructed" (1997: 380) but lesbian feminists found homophobic attitudes and practices are quite resistant to change. Racial integration was an attempt at social engineering by the U.S. government, but Judith Stein argues that while "integration provided superior opportunities for many blacks and produced a better society for everyone." Yet she claims that "advocates oversold its benefits and discovered the limits of social engineering. Many blacks, especially rural migrants, required additional resources, not simply the access that segregation had denied them. Neither integration nor its Black Power competitor, 'community control,' delivered for them" (1998: 15). Despite the efforts of some socialist governments to address gender subordination by bringing women more fully into waged labor, women often ended up having to do twice as much work, the housework on top of working outside of the home (Croll 1986). How far a social movement like the Dignas can push those limits is yet to be seen. The influence of transnational feminist movements and funding will definitely be a key factor, not only in how far, but in which directions the Dignas push those limits. Whether transnational feminism supports the Dignas' feministic practices which "politicizes" strategic interests, or prioritizes projects that undermined that important

contribution, will be extremely influential.

How Far Will the Gap Widen?

Since 1990, the Dignas have used feminist theory to construct a political discourse and practice that challenge gender subordination in El Salvador. By examining that history and describing some of the organization's projects, this dissertation illustrates that Salvadoran feminism is not part of a modernizing trajectory; it is a complex movement which grew out of a particular history, the responses of Salvadoran women to that history, and the demands made by local and global processes.

The profound poverty which infects Central America, the extreme economic stratification, and the differential experiences between those who live in rural communities and those who live in urban centers are social characteristics which have shaped the way that the Dignas have conceptualized what it means to be a "Salvadoran woman." The Dignas' experiences during the twelve-year civil war taught them both the possibilities and limitation of effecting social change through political action and popular mobilizations. The United Nations-brokered peace process, and the increasing involvement of the transnational funding organizations which encouraged NGOs to adopt a "gendered focus," provided the space for the Dignas to assert their autonomy and grow as an independent women's organization. As the women's movement in El Salvador gained strength, the Dignas, as well as other women's groups, were forced to define their relation to and against the political parties and popular organizations from which most of

them had originally emerged. As I have shown that struggle continues to unfold.

Feminism, as a theoretical construct used to develop strategies to combat gender oppression, contains contradictions. This is true in the United States as well as El Salvador. The most crucial contradiction comes from the key insight of feminism, that is, that women are oppressed as women. The recognition of this shared oppression obscures the factors that differentiate women's identity and experiences such as class, ethnicity, race, and other historically constituted characteristics. The political implications of these contradictions vary with the historic context, shaped to a large degree by the relationship between women's movements and the political opportunities available. Where the differences between women do not lead to differences in their access to resources, influence, or power, it is easier to develop a discourse and practice that emphasize women's common experiences as women. But, as in the case of Salvadoran women in the postwar period, some women were better able to gain access to the opportunities presented by the increase interest in gender issues.

I would argue that when the Dignas emerged, the differences among the women involved in the organization, particularly differences based on class, were minimized by their participation in the war. As part of the political opposition during the war, many of the educated, middle class, urban women who were involved in the women's movement shared the day-to-day experiences of their poor and rural *compañeras*. They lost much of their class privilege while they were guerrillas. Some lived for years under conditions of poverty, marginalization, political repression, and exile from their families, often

including their children. These shared experiences formed the basis upon which the Salvadoran women's movement was built.

But with the signing of the Peace Accords, new political opportunities emerged and the differential ability of various actors to access those resources began to crystallize the class differences.⁸² As I have shown in my discussions of the Dignas' programs, the gap between the women who work as paid staff for the Dignas and the women with whom they work is increasing. For instance, in the case of the *Casa de las Parteras*, the skills and resources of women like Mama Tina are no longer sufficient to sustain the project. Six months after it opened, the *Casa de las Parteras* had closed. When I returned to El Salvador, in June 1999, the Dignas were reopening the *Casa* at the behest of a new cohort of women from the nearby village of El Dique. From my discussions with Rosa Menjivar who had been given responsibility for the project, there had been little change in the conception of how the *Casa* would function. It seems unlikely that the midwives will resume staffing the *Casa* regularly without remuneration. Without additional funding, the survival of the *Casa de las Parteras* is doubtful. What seems ironic is that the Dignas expect the midwives to work at the *Casa* without payment while they decry the government's failure to pay the midwives.

In the AMD, the tension between the founders of the organizations and the *madres demandantes*, which had manifested during my fieldwork, continued to fester. In

⁸² See Schild (1998) for a discussion of a similar process in the women's movement in Chile. Assies (1999) also describes how democratization reshaped relations between the middle class and popular grassroots organizations in Brazil's urban social movements.

August of 1999, the office was shut down. Several of the *demandantes* who had been elected to the *Junta Directiva* had filed formal charges against the founders of the organization accusing them of misappropriating funds. While the issues involved are complex, class differences between the two parties definitely played a role in generating the conflict.

But these kinds of tensions have not prevented the Dignas from moving forward in other areas, particularly in their efforts to promote women's political participation. The DL *equipo* is organizing an *Asociación de Regidoras*, an organization of women town councilors. According to Dilcia Marroquín, a long time Digna who had assumed the coordination of the *equipo*, there were about 500 women who had been elected to the *consejos municipales*. Their new strategy is to "accompany" the women in the *consejos* of certain microregions⁸³ to develop a gender perspective. They are also working with the *Comités de Desarrollo Municipales*, (Municipal Development Committees or CDM). Each municipality is mandated to form a CDM to develop a plan for the development of their community. The committees are made up of representatives of sectors such as the Church, the business community, women, etc. The DL is working with the CDM in the above-mentioned communities to get them to incorporate a gender focus in the development plans which they are supposed to elaborate.

The changes in the DL reflect the gains that Salvadoran women have made both in achieving political office and in gaining recognition of women as a social sector whose

⁸³ According to Dilcia the microregion is a concept adopted from the FMLN. Each one encompasses four municipalities.

concern must be taken into account in planning for the development of their communities. The fact that enough women have been elected to the *consejos municipales* to attempt to form an association marks a new epoch in Salvadoran politics. The Dignas recognize in the CDMs an opportunity to get a gender focus incorporated into community planning. Their ability to provide knowledge and resources enable them to gain standing and influence in these communities.

The question arises as to whom the Dignas are actually representing in these contexts. Their attempts to ensure that gender issues are part of the agenda of these *consejos municipales* may be circumventing the processes through which women in these communities need to go in order to define their own struggles. Verónica Schild has pointed to this issue in Chilean women's politics: "The clientelization of some poor and working class women, is in effect undermining the possibility that poor and working class women will come together to articulate their own needs" (1996: 108). The danger is that the gap that separates the women who work for the Dignas from those who are the targets of their programs, or supposedly represented by their projects, will widen. If this happens, the Dignas risk losing their unique capacity to "politicize" strategic needs.

Lynn Stephen has pointed out that "the complexity of women's grassroots organizing," one must look at the "larger structures of power as well as the topics of groups process and identity building" (1997: 286). What this study suggests is that we also have to look at how those larger structures interact with dynamics within groups and with the ways that identity is constructed. The failure to do so could result in the loss of

feminist practices, like those the Dignas have developed, that challenge gender oppression while seeking to eradicate poverty.

Glossary

ADEMUSA - Association of Salvadoran Women

afiliadas- women who have formally become members of the AMD

AMD - Association of Mother Seeking Child Support (*Asociación de Madres Demandantes*)

AMES - Association of Salvadoran Women

AMIS - Association of Indigenous Women

AMPES - Association of Progressive Women of El Salvador

ANDES - a teachers union

ARENA - *Alianza Republicana Nacionalista* or Republican National Alliance

ASTAC - an artists and cultural workers union

base- grassroots supporters

campesino/campesina - peasant or rural agricultural worker

Casa de las Parteras - the Midwives' House

CeMujer - Women's Studies Institute "Norma Virginia Guirola de Herrera"

COFASTISS - the public hospital workers union

CO-MADRES - Committee of Mothers of Political Prisoners, the Assassinated, and Disappeared of El Salvador

COM - Coordinating Committee of Women's Organizations

Comité 25 de Noviembre - a coalition of groups working against violence against women

compañero/a- a term which is used to refer to a comrade and a partner

CONAMUS - National Coordinating Committee of Salvadoran Women

concientizarse - to become aware, to raise one's consciousness

COPPEs - a committee of political prisoners in El Salvador

Coordinadora - the central decision making body of the Dignas consisting of the coordinators of their eleven programs

cuotas- child support payments

demandados - men who are being sued for child support

demandantes - women who are suing men for child support

DL - Local Development or *Desarrollo Local*

CRIPDES - a committee for the displaced

DIGNAS - Women for Dignity and Life (*Mujeres por la Dignidad y la Vida*)

Entre Amigos - a group for male homosexuals

equipo - the staff of a program

ERP - People's Revolutionary Army (*Ejercito Revolucionario del Pueblo*)

FENASTRAS - National Union Federation of Salvadoran Workers (*Federación Nacional Sindical de Trabajadores Salvadoreños*)

Flor de Piedra - a prostitute's right group

FMLN - Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (*Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional*) made up of the Communist Party, the Central American Workers Revolutionary Party, the FPL, RN, and ERP.

FPL - Popular Forces of Liberation (*Fuerzas Popular para la Liberación*) the first organization to advocate guerrilla warfare and one of the branches of the FMLN.

IMU - Institute for the Investigation, Training, and Development of Women

ISDEMU - Salvadoran Institute for Women's Development (*Instituto Salvadoreño para el Desarrollo de la Mujer*)

MAM- *Movimiento de Mujeres Melida Anaya Montes*. Also known as the Mélicas

MMS-the women's movement in Suchitito (author's abbreviation)

MUES - University of El Salvador Women United

municipio - county

NGOs - Non-governmental organizations

PRG - Attorney General's Office (*Procuraduría General de la República*)

RN - National Resistance (*Resistencia Nacional*)

RSH - Reproductive and Sexual Health program

Procurador - the Attorney General

Procuraduría - Attorney General's Office (*Procuraduría General de la República* or PRG)

promotora - a grassroots organizer, outreach worker, or peer counselor

UNADES - the Union of Earthquake Victims of El Salvador

UNO - a center-left coalition that ran Jose Napoleon Duarte for President in 1972 in an elections which was stolen from him.

Appendices
Appendix A

An Article about Mama Tina in *La Prensa Gráfica*

16A LA PRENSA GRÁFICA

SUCESOS

Jueves 16 de enero de 1995

Testimonio de una víctima

De la amargura a la paz...

Tania Moreno
REDACTORA DE NACIONALES

DURANTE el pasado conflicto armado perdió a sus seis hijos. Hoy, cinco años después de firmada la paz, la vida la ha sorprendido. En noviembre pasado, a sus 72 años, se ha casado por primera vez y continua arraigada a la fe y a la

energía que la mantuvo viva en los momentos más difíciles de su travesía. Tina ha vuelto a sonreír. Es otra. Nació en la tierra de Cabañas, pero su labor trascendió en Chalatenango, en el municipio de Nombre de Jesús, donde desde hace más de 10 años se desempeña como partera, oficio que le ha permitido traer al mundo a más de 200 niños en las condiciones menos imaginables.

Cabezas negras, tez quemada y manos callosas. La algarabía le brota por los poros y su amabilidad es manifiesta en su sonrisa. Su fortaleza la demuestra a cada momento. Así es Valentina, una de las tantas víctimas del conflicto que terminó con la firma de los Acuerdos de Paz.

Su desventura comenzó con la muerte de sus padres en la guerra, hecho que vino a recrudescerse cuando su compañero de vida la abandonó al enterarse que esperaba una niña, la primera de las otras dos que tuvo. Allí entendió que estaba marcada y que el sufrimiento la acompañaría por un largo rato.

En los ojos de Valentina Hernández aún plega el dolor. Con lujo de detalles percibe de los tormentosos recuerdos de su historia como repatrada. Varios años transcurrieron en Mesa Grande, Honduras, lugar al que después de una "granda" en 1981 emigró junto a unas 100 familias campesinas. Vivió en el cantón Los Hernández, "siempre sola, porque ya era huérfana".

Por mucho tiempo, se dedicó a los oficios del hogar. labor que supo combinar perfectamente bien con su trabajo pastoral dentro de la Iglesia Católica brindando charlas bautismales y matrimoniales.

Desde que abandonó su casa, el conflicto la obligó a cruzar la muerte, en más de una veintena de ocasiones: se salvó de las balas del Ejército. A diario sufrió hambre, frío, depresiones, pero sobre todo aprendió a valorar en el mundo, lo poco que le quedaba. Le llegó cada pesuña...

Recorrió sitios peligrosísimos, cerros, montañas y sin poder nadar y con la ayuda de ramas de árboles cruzó varios ríos grandes durante fuertes enfrentamientos.

"Sentí la muerte cerca. Esa vez logré cruzar el Lempa junto con dos compañeras, pero al final un helicóptero bombardeó la zona y las mató... otra vez me salvé de milagro. Después pasó cuatro días sin probar bocado", señaló.

Continuaron los sinsabores

Continuó amarrada a los sinsabores. Sus hijos varones perecieron en combate. El último de ellos murió en Ubasco a la edad de 18 años. Valentina nunca jamás volvió a saber de su hijo Rafael.

Varias veces fue capturada y torturada, pero eso no le impidió ir más allá en sus metas. "Le juro que lucharé por la sangre de mis hijos y por ellos también hubiera dado mi vida", comentó, mientras entresacaba sus fotos preferidas de un montón de recuerdos.

Pero el tiempo pasó y con él llegó lo inesperado. El 16 de enero de 1992 fue una fecha increíble para Valentina. "Lo único que dije fue que ojalá y Dios quiera que esto sea verdad. Lloré de la emoción, creíme bonito que mi vida tenía que cambiar".

Para Valentina, la llegada de la paz al país no solo significó un descanso de malas y feas emociones, sino el principio de una serie de cambios para ella y para la sociedad.

Luego de vivir 32 años sola, "sin tener nada que ver con ningún hombre, uno se deprime más y pierdes cosas. Gracias a Dios conocí a Santiago—quien tiene 32 años— y nos casamos el 30 de noviembre (del año pasado) por la Iglesia", dijo.

El se dedica a la agricultura y "mama Tina"—como todos la conocen— a las actividades eclesiales en el pueblo, continua su labor de partera con la que se ha logrado ganar el cariño de toda la comunidad. También pertenece a una organización de mujeres y allí labora todos los días brindando capacitaciones.

El destino de Valentina ha cambiado

Luego de cinco años apenas comienza a vislumbrar las alegrías de la vida. Con mucha resignación, ronfesa, hoy trata de olvidar cada paso amargo de su historia, sin embargo con gran decisión y coraje se enfrenta a los designios del cada día en una época en la que con dificultades se va puliendo el diamante de la paz.

Aseguro que tantos años de conflicto armado tienen una gran validez, porque con ello se ha logrado crear un país diferente, una nación que clama por la armonía y la tranquilidad, aspectos que hace 10 años eran impensables.

La guerra le trajo angustias, dolor y mucha amargura, pero la paz, explicó, le ha ayudado a sobresalir con dignidad en su comunidad y a hacerse sentir como una verdadera mujer salvadora.



Rafael Hernández, de 19 años.

Foto derecha. Valentina Hernández, de 72 años, muele maíz en su vivienda situada en el municipio Nombre de Jesús, en Chalatenango. La señora compartió el testimonio de su vivencia durante el conflicto armado en el que perdió a sus seis hijos.

Foto inferior derecha. Valentina participa en el 1er. encuentro latinoamericano de mujeres que se realizó en Montelimar, Nicaragua.

FOTOS DE LA PRENSA, POR VALERIA LARA.



Valentina Hernández.



Appendix B
A poster distributed by the the Asociación de Madres Demandantes.

Derechos de la Niñez

PAPA NEESECITO TU AYU
PARA EL BISTUARIO Y
N...

SEÑOR: PROCURADOR -
NOSOTRAS LAS NIÑAS LE PEDIMOS -
QUE LE EXIJA AL PAGADOR -
DE MI PAPA NO ATRAZAR -
LOS PAGOS PUES CON -
LA CUOTA ALIMENTICIA -
QUE APORTA MI PAPA -
NOS VENEFIICIAMOS
EXIJAMOS ESTO Y MÁS -
Los niños
PRIMERO



ALZADO, EDUCACION
SALUD PARA MANTENER
BANO Y FUERTE, PERO M

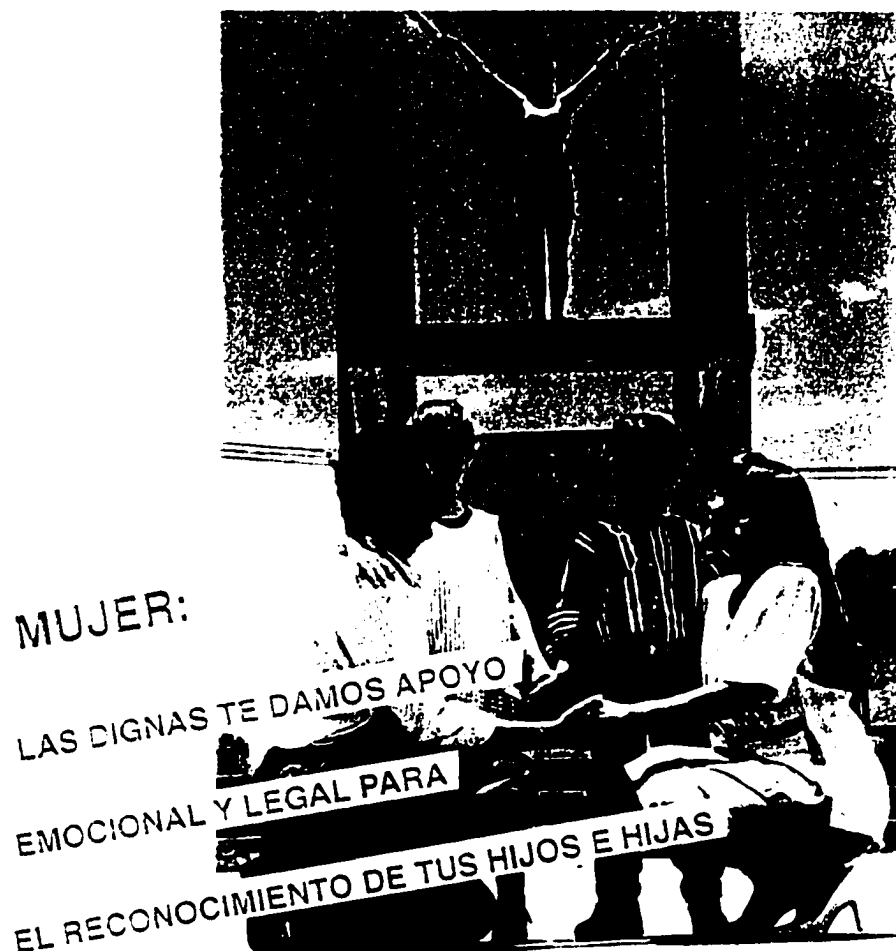
Asociación de Madres Demandantes
Juntas por la cuota alimenticia
15 Calle Poniente, Edificio Federal, 2ª Planta, N° 22, San Salvador, El Salvador, C. A.
Teléfono: 222-3790



Appendix C

A flier distributed by the *Asociación de Madres Demandantes*.

*"La Paternidad Responsable
es un Derecho de Niñas y Niños"*



LAS DIGNAS



CON EL APOYO DEL
GOBIERNO DE CANADA (1996)
PROGRAMA DE RECONSTRUCCION SOCIAL

CALLE GABRIELA MISTRAL No. 224, TELS.: 225-4457, 226-0356

Appendix D

Legislation proposed by the *Asociación de Madres Demandantes* makes front page news.

LA PRENSA GRAFICA

Año LXXXII No. 28,582 San Salvador, El Salvador, jueves 30 de enero de 1997 112 páginas €2.00

Selección
Torres niega detalles de contrato con Inter-Forever

Pág. 75-A

Candidatos deberán estar solventes en Procuraduría

Exigirán solvencia a diputados

12 legisladores tienen problemas con cuotas alimenticias

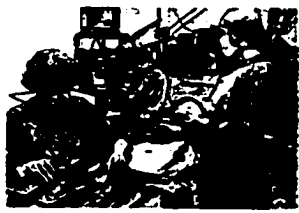
10-A



DECOMISAN MÁS TRAGAMONEDAS. Jesús Adalberto Peñate (izquierda), apoderado legal de las empresas propietarias de un lote de máquinas tragamonedas, abandona un local ubicado en la 1a. Calle Oriente y 3a. Avenida Norte de Santa Tecla, donde se encontraban almacenadas 130 máquinas, las cuales fueron decomisadas por la División de Finanzas de la Policía. Las autoridades guardaron total hermetismo en el caso.

Foto de LA PRENSA.

INVESTIGACIÓN



Ocho casos de mala praxis, negligencia o error en ISSS

Págs. 4-A y 5-A

7 412660 500018

BUSQUE GRATIS Revista ella



Secuestro en Guatemala
Encuentran cadáver de Isabel de Botrán

Pág. 14-A

Appendix E

A Poster of the Demands on Women's Political Platform developed for the 1994 "elections of the century"

PLATAFORMA DE LAS MUJERES SALVADOREÑAS

EL 52% DE LA POBLACION EXIGE:

1. Alto al incesto, la violación y el hostigamiento sexual.
2. Tierra, créditos y asistencia técnica para las mujeres.
3. Vivienda digna y propia para las mujeres.
4. Capacitación laboral, más puestos de trabajo e igualdad de salarios.
5. Alto al aumento del costo de la canasta básica.
6. Igualdad de oportunidades para las niñas en las escuelas.
7. Atención integral para mujeres en más y mejores hospitales.
8. Educación sexual integral y sexualidad sin prejuicios.
9. Maternidad libre y voluntaria.
10. Paternidad responsable, aumento de las cuotas alimenticias.
11. Respeto al medio ambiente y mejor calidad de vida para las mujeres.
12. Políticas de desarrollo que cubran las necesidades de las mujeres.
13. Leyes que no nos discriminen.
14. El 50% de los puestos de poder para las mujeres.

MUJERES 94

31 agosto 93

Appendix F
An article and a political cartoon commenting on Salvadoran women's assault on politics

ELECCIONES 97

Jueves 6 de febrero de 1997

LA PRENSA SA

Mujeres asaltan la política

Victor Pino/Bernardo Valiente
Ilustración: Néstor

El sector femenino de los principales partidos políticos asalta las candidaturas de diputado y pronto le legará en función de la mujer, el niño y la familia.

Las mujeres coinciden en señalar que los espacios no han sido otorgados, sino logrados por méritos en el campo político y profesional. Sostienen también que las bases han pedido que formen parte de las planillas.

Destacan entre las mujeres la presidenta de ARENA y de la Asamblea Legislativa, Gloria Salguero Gross, como candidata a primera suplente por la circunscripción nacional llamada "planilla nacional".

Una de las secretarías de la Junta Directiva de la Asamblea Legislativa y vicepresidente de ARENA, Mirella Calderón de Escalón, hermana del Presidente Armando Calderón Fournier, ha tenido una importante participación en la política al presidir la Comisión de Legislación y Puntos Constitucionales. No fue postulada como candidata por su afin-

dad familiar con Calderón Sol.

La vicepresidente de ese órgano y presidenta del Partido Democrata (PD), Ana Guadalupe Martínez, ocupa la primera diputación por el departamento de Santa Ana.

En la quinta posición por la "planilla nacional" aparece la jefa de Relaciones Públicas de la Asamblea Legislativa y una destacada profesional, Mirella Peña Pinto.

Además de las diputadas Salguero Gross, Calderón de Escalón y Martínez, el partido FMLN ha propuesto a Elvia Violeta Menjivar, María Isabela Morales, María Ofelia Navarrete y María María Valladares como primeras candidatas por San Salvador, Santa Ana, Chalatenango y San Vicente, respectivamente.

La candidata Navarrete, conocida en Chalatenango como María Chichico, destacó en la convención departamental al actual diputado Eduardo Linares.

Destacan también en las planillas Ileana Regal, ex directora del Centro para la Defensa del Consumidor (CDC) y Lorena Peña, ocupa la quinta posición. La diputada Nor-

ma Ofelia Guevara es la segunda por San Salvador y le siguen en la tercera y cuarta posición los diputados Miguel Saenz Varela y el jefe de fracción Manuel Orlando Quintos.

Por el Partido Democrata Cristiano (PDC) destaca la primera candidata por el departamento de Morazan y actual jefa de fracción, Rosa Melida Villatoro. Es presidenta de la Comisión Legislativa de la Familia, la Mujer y el Niño. La primera diputación por Cuscatlán del PDC, es de Margarita de Frutos.

En ese mismo departamento, el Partido Renovación Social Cristiano (PRSC) designó a María Antonia Hernández.

Además de las nominaciones de mujeres a aspirantes a diputadas, los partidos colocan espacios en sus programas municipales como alcaldesas o miembros regidores.

Las candidatas promueven legislar en función de la igualdad de la mujer, la apertura de oportunidades, el acceso a la educación y la salud de la niñez, y otras iniciativas que protegen a la familia.



Gloria Salguero Gross, ARENA. Rosa Melida Villatoro, POC. Elvia Violeta Menjivar, FMLN. Guadalupe Martínez, PD. Lorena Peña, FMLN.

MUNDOS

VIERNES

OPINION



Appendix H
One of the posters for the Dignas' "*A-saltando la Política*" Campaign



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