



Women in leftist rebel movements: The Nicaraguan FSLN and Salvadoran FMLN

Solene Mouchel, McGill University

Edited by Gaya Karalasingam and Annie Ding

ABSTRACT

In the late twentieth century, women's significant involvement in leftist rebel movements in Nicaragua and El Salvador challenged traditional gender roles in the male-dominated sphere of guerrilla warfare. This research paper examines the driving forces behind this surge in women's participation in the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) and the Farabundo Marti Front for National Liberation (FMLN). Structural changes, including shifts in land ownership and economic disparities, created opportunities for women to escape traditional domestic roles and engage in revolutionary activities. Decades of repressive dictatorships and increasing inequality further motivated women to join these movements.

Introduction

Leftist ideologies that promoted gender equality and integrated feminist thought into Marxist philosophies played a pivotal role in encouraging women's participation. Strategic interests led to organizational changes within these movements, emphasizing the importance of women's involvement as they transitioned to mass-based political strategies. Additionally, pre-existing social and family networks were critical in mobilizing women and reinforcing identity-based participation. This research underscores the complex interplay of structural, political, ideological, strategic, and individual factors that contributed to women's remarkable participation in these leftist rebel movements, shedding light on the broader implications of women's involvement in revolutionary struggles.

In the late twentieth century, women represented thirty percent of armed combatants in leftist rebel movements in Nicaragua and El Salvador. This influx of women's contributions to armed struggles is surprising, as guerilla warfare in Latin America was, until recently, exclusively in the male domain of political action. This was because women faced greater organizational barriers to participating in guerilla movements than men due to longstanding patriarchal attitudes that reinforced their subordination to the domestic sphere (Reif 1986, 148). Therefore, women's participation in the public sphere through revolutionary activism challenged traditional gender relations and roles in these regions. The study of leftist revolutionary organizations must be analyzed through gender relations to understand their in-

corporation. In the 20th century, Latin America was arguably considered the region of revolutions. New leftist insurgencies entailed guerilla warfare to overthrow capitalist and dictatorial states. In El Salvador, the Farabundo Marti Front for National Liberation (FMLN) was a revolutionary coalition composed of four leftist political-military organizations (160). In 1980, it was broadened by its alliance with the Democratic Revolutionary Front (FDR).

On the other hand, during the 1960s and 1970s, the rebel group in Nicaragua fighting against the Somoza dictatorship was called the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). In both leftist rebel movements, women had a crucial role in domestic guerillas at all levels of the organization. They were involved in a wide variety of roles within the groups, ranging from support operations to active command warfare troops, medics, and leaders. The cases of the FSLN in Nicaragua and the FMLN in El Salvador encounter many similarities in the causal factors leading to increased women's participation in guerilla warfare. However, a comparison must be made regarding the differences in the nature of each country's dictatorship and the rebel's goals as they impact women's participation. This essay will explain the extent of women's participation in the FSLN and FMLN leftist rebel movements as a response to widespread repression in authoritarian regimes, structural changes in the rural crisis, appealing universalistic leftist goals, new guerilla recruitment strategies, and pre-existing social networks. First, structural crises emerged as a chain of events in the twentieth century, beginning with shifts in land ownership, causing

inequality between large landowners and peasants. It resulted in increased rural unemployment, urban migration, and family disruption. Ultimately, it culminated in women entering the workforce and revolutionary movements. This is heightened by the decades of repressive dictatorships and extreme inequality, which set the stage for women's involvement. There are also similarities in social and feminist ideologies that motivated women's participation in revolution as a means of emancipation. The new strategy of leftist guerillas further promoted the recruitment of women, as pre-existing networks played an important role in preconditioning some women to join revolutionary groups.

Structural change and Socioeconomic Crisis

In both Nicaragua and El Salvador, structural changes from the middle of the twentieth century allowed many women to escape the constraints of their traditional domestic roles and thus increased their potential for revolutionary mobilization by choice or due to external pressures (Kampwirth 2002, 1). Like most Latin American countries, Nicaragua and El Salvador were integrated into the world economy since the nineteenth century as primary product exporters — exporting cotton, beef, tobacco, sugar, and bananas (Midlarsky and Roberts 1985, 168; Reif 1986, 158). The expansion of export-oriented agriculture starting in the 1950s resulted in changes in landholding patterns, which in both countries increased the unequal distribution of land between large landowners and peasant smallholders (Midlarsky and Roberts, 166). Thus, in less than a decade,

many small farmers lost their land, while large plantations of more than 350 hectares gained control over more land. In 1961, small farms in Nicaragua represented 51 percent of all farms compared to 43.8 percent in 1971 (Kampwirth 2002, 24). In El Salvador, the abolishment of communal lands also shifted land from the food production of the peasantry to export-crop farmers (49). The promotion of agro exports deeply harmed the rural economy. Among the effects of rising land concentration, the dispossession of small farmers lowered wages as limited jobs were available, increased rural unemployment, and lowered standards of living and life expectancy (Reif 1986, 158).

Those transformations created not only an incentive for leftist upheavals against capitalist development but they also shifted gender relations. Temporary migration of men in search of rural work and higher wages was a common solution to the growing agrarian crisis (Kampwirth 2002, 25). However, many ended up abandoning their families, which caused the destabilization of the traditional family structure. Male desertion left many women as the sole providers of their children (Molyneux 1985, 247). In Nicaragua, scholars estimate that one-third of all families in 1978 were female-headed (Reif 1986, 158). Due to fewer economic opportunities for women in rural agriculture and the greater advantages in urban settings, many migrated to the cities to search for work (Kampwirth 2002, 26).

Ultimately, the mass migration of women to cities and their large-scale entrance into labour facilitated their path to join community and guerilla struggle (29). Indeed, working-class

women faced the double disadvantage of gender and class, which increased their potential to develop class consciousness but also their vulnerability to political action. They could acknowledge the pattern of social inequality by comparing themselves to other women from different social classes in their cities. Two out of five Latin American women in the labour force were domestic servants; hence, they shared the inequalities of their low socioeconomic class, such as low education, low income, and few marketable skills (Reif 1986, 151). Therefore, the perception of the state's role in promulgating inequality motivated women's political activism in insurgencies. Moreover, female heads of working-class households grappled with added inequality and responsibilities as they balanced their traditional reproductive roles and their disadvantaged economic status. Therefore, women were the most vulnerable to the costs of radical political action, which could limit their involvement. However, the daily barriers they faced actually heightened their motivation to perceive participation as an obligation (Kampwirth 2002, 9). This was further aided by the opportunities available in cities, as they serve as prosperous places for collective political organization due to their large populations (7). Thus, the social and economic context in Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s pushed women into new public roles in the labour force, increasing women's contact with issues of inequality outside of the family and consequently enhancing their capacity to organize in revolutionary groups (Viterna 2006, 7). However, the economic crisis was not the only reason for women to join revolutionary movements.

Political Crisis and Women's Discontent

Overall discontent from decades of right-wing dictatorships in Nicaragua and El Salvador reinforced social and gender inequalities and drove women to join leftist rebel movements. However, the difference in the nature of each dictatorship shaped the social classes involved in rebel coalitions, and thus, the extent of women's participation differed.

On the one hand, the FSLN in Nicaragua carried on a multiclass and dual-gender revolutionary coalition against the Somoza dictatorship during the 1960s and 1970s. The Somoza dynasty, which ruled in Nicaragua since the 1930s, is characterized as an autonomous personalist dictatorship, a regime in which all power lies in the hands of the leader and a small elite of collaborators (Midlarsky & Roberts 1985, 183). Because the hegemonic and repressive dictatorship alienated most of the population, opposition to the regime was not only constituted by the lower classes but also by the upper and middle-upper classes, who were excluded from economic and political power (Kampwirth 2002, 22). Consequently, women from diverse social and economic backgrounds participated in the generalized character of the opposition to Somoza. The FSLN united everyone against the dictatorship regardless of class, age, or gender (Molyneux 1985, 228). Therefore, large numbers of women from all social classes joined the leftist coalition (227). Indeed, the FSLN largely recruited women from urban and educated sectors as they were freer to violate their traditional gender roles and thus had more possibilities to join rebel movements (Kampwirth 2002, 43). Women were particularly drawn to leftist

movements because of their discontent with the unaccomplished promises of the state to extend certain rights to women (23).

On the other hand, the Marxist guerilla group FMLN conducted a class-based redistributive revolution against the government of El Salvador and the military. The military dictatorship was an instrumentalist state, which is characterized as impersonal and collective since it serves the interests of the dominant class (Midlarsky & Roberts 1985, 181). The right-wing state was highly unified and implemented even harsher repressive actions than its Nicaraguan counterpart because it greatly benefited from the military support of American President Ronald Reagan. Thus, the higher risks associated with supporting guerillas in El Salvador discouraged many women and men (Kampwirth 2002, 47). Still, the rejection of the state's violence pushed women into radical movements as self-defence (52).

El Salvador had greater land scarcity and inequalities than Nicaragua due to the systematic impoverishment of the peasant majority for the empowerment of a small elite. Therefore, leftist rebel movements emphasized issues related to the unequal distribution of land, conditions of scarcity, and rural poverty (Midlarsky and Roberts, 180). The focus on class struggle implied a limited coalition composed only of the low and middle classes. Thus, women's organizations in leftist movements focused almost exclusively on issues related to mothers living in poverty (Vázquez 1997, 139). In El Salvador, the great majority of women involved in the guerilla war were from the most marginalized social class, rural women, as it

was their only way out (Tazreena 2004, 6). It is also important to underline the difficulty of any opposition force to mobilize masses against an impersonal target with neither a name nor a face (Kampwirth 2002, 46). Despite the overall rise of women in guerilla warfare due to equally long-lived repressive dictatorships, Nicaraguan leftist rebel movements have higher numbers of women involved than in El Salvador due to their openness to all social classes. Overall, the economic and political crisis in both countries increased the appeal for women to unite with leftist rebel movements.

Leftist Ideology and Gender

Marginalized women in the realms of socioeconomics and politics viewed the social goals of revolutionary groups as being in line with their feminist values. This convergence of objectives was particularly evident in the leftist movements in Nicaragua and El Salvador, which drew on the Marxist philosophies of class struggle and underscored the imperative for a social revolution to overthrow the capitalist system. At that time, the dynamics of capitalism had exacerbated the tensions between the privileged bourgeoisie and the labouring masses, intensifying the need for radical change. Thus, it paved the way to be overthrown by socialism, which would reach its end in a socialist revolution. In both countries, the focus of rebellions to 'liberate' the population influenced their attitudes towards patriarchy and gender hierarchies (Wood & Thomas, 34). Marx's theory had already argued that women were systematically oppressed by the patriarchy and suggested that women's liberation was

a crucial step in the social revolution. Therefore, women's struggle was seen as part of the class struggle (33). The social revolution must fight against patriarchy and capitalism as they jointly reinforce economic exploitation and gender oppression.

While the correlation between class and gender has been explored since Marx, the women's liberation movement from the late 1960s is the one that familiarized activists with feminist issues (Lobao, 214). Indeed, the upsurge of "new feminism," which promoted radical upheaval for change, preceded the Nicaraguan revolution (Molyneux 1985, 236). The diffusion of feminist thought sensitized the guerilla movements to the inequities in the sexual division of labour and the traditional patterns of women's subjugation to the domestic sphere (Lobao, 217). Therefore, from the 1970s onward, modern leftist rebel movements in Latin America increasingly integrated ideas and policies for gender egalitarianism and encouraged women's incorporation into their movement (Wood & Thomas, 33). The dedication of leftist ideologies to egalitarianism and deep structural transformation of the traditional society justifies their incentive to welcome women into their rebellions and offer non-traditional roles such as joining the militia. Conversely, ultra-conservative and reactionary political ideologies support the traditional gender-based division of labour, thus dissuading rightist rebel movements from employing women (34). There is a widespread belief that women in Latin America are more likely to support conservative politics and that they are controlled by the conservative Catholic Church. Historically, women and peasants

have been more likely to support a stable dictatorship. However, the Somoza dictatorship demonstrated that clientelism, such as supporting the family's legitimacy in politics, failed to mobilize women. Instead, many women sided with the opposition, the FSLN (Kampwirth 2002, 23). The revolutionary values of the FSLN and FLMN motivated many women to become members.

Women's initiation into political life is rooted in the liberation theology movement of the 1960s. The Vatican was reformed to deepen its commitment to resolve worldly injustice and thus was often called to political action. In 1968, the Vatican's reformist thought was applied to Latin America. The progressivist transformation of the church enabled women to participate in religious groups directly and extend egalitarian values, which promoted the feminist idea that men and women were equal in the eyes of God (Kampwirth 2002,179). Women were mostly motivated by the functionality of achieving universalistic goals, such as social welfare, social equality, and development, as preconditions for their emancipation (Molyneux 1985, 245). Welfare provisions from the left would bring substantial improvements to women's liberation within the socialist society. In Nicaragua, Sandinistas would implement legal reforms in the family, such as making men responsible for the welfare of their families by sharing the domestic work among members of the family and attempting to challenge gender stereotyping by giving positions of responsibility to women in the militia (249). The FMLN and FSLN both promoted women's incorporation into the struggle by establishing wo-

man-focused organizations seeking feminine support (Shayne, 98). In 1977, a leader of the FSLN even founded the Association of Women Confronting the National Problem (AMPRO-NAC) to recruit more women into the Sandinista army (Gonzalez-Perez 2006, 320). It was later transformed into the Luisa Amanda Espinosa Association of Nicaraguan Women (AMNLAE) (Molyneux 1985, 237). In Nicaragua, no directly associated women's organization to the FMLN existed, but independent collective actions sharing a leftist ideology arose, such as the Association of Salvadoran Women (AMES). Therefore, feminist movements prioritized economic development over their gendered interests, and they depended upon the political agenda of leftist rebel movements. In Nicaragua, the AMNLAE stated that it prioritized the social revolution, which would reinforce the link between the latter and gender equality and would bring women's emancipation (250). Even though it would not directly satisfy the feminist's strategic gender interest of attaining gender equality, practical interests such as women's politicization would be increased (233). Thus, the implementation of feminist struggle in recent Marxist ideologies in Central America can explain the high prevalence of female combatants in the FMLN and FSLN (Wood & Thomas 2017, 33). Further, the leaders' political interests must also be considered to understand the recruitment of women in rebel movements.

Strategic Interests and Guerilla Methods

Leftist revolutionary movements in Latin America underwent several organizational changes to encourage women's involvement

as new and significant forces in their political agenda (Vázquez 1997, 139). Before, Latin American guerillas followed the 'foquista model', a doctrine of revolution drawn from the Cuban revolution and popularized by Che Guevara (Kampwirth 2002, 33). The guerilla force is a small group of revolutionaries operating military action (Lobao, 213). After the military failure of Che Guevara in Bolivia, revolutionary movements gradually shifted toward mass-based political organizations.

The FSLN was the first coalition in Latin America to drop foquismo and implement a new political strategy focused on extensive popular support (Kampwirth 2002, 32). It was in line with the Maoist revolutionary strategy of the 'prolonged people's war' in which popular support is sustained for a protracted war against an enemy (Reif 1986, 213). Therefore, guerillas were strongly incentivized to overcome their sexism to attract female recruits and thus overthrow the state. Given the need for much larger numbers of supporters, all individuals interested ought to feel welcome to join. They could not afford to ignore the importance of women's participation, which was an essential part of the productive forces and citizenry, as women represented roughly 50% of the population (Kampwirth 2002, 9).

Women played a crucial role in the social, economic, and political transformation of revolutionary movements through political mobilization, active labour force, and legal reform. Their participation in political groups would increase their sensitivity to class struggle and, consequently, make them crucial agents in the radicalized leftist change. Their mobilization

was also part of the overall economic strategy to increase the size and quality of the active labour force by educating and giving opportunities for women to enter the workforce. Lastly, women are perceived as important agents of socialization in the pre-revolutionary legal reform and into the next generation. As previously said, women play a critical role in the family, which is the basic unit of society and a strong force for social cohesion. The family introduces a child to moral values and norms which shape their identity in the community. Because women teach their families what society expects of them, they can restructure it to make it compatible with revolutionary values (Molyneux 1985, 240). Thus, women's great potential to develop and spread class consciousness into the family structure increases the desire for leftist organizations to mobilize women. In the FMLN, women were seen as revolutionary bridges between the revolutionary movement and the civilian base. They could strengthen the coalition and increase mass support because they seemed less violent and more trustworthy to newer or unincorporated members than their male counterparts. Therefore, women had strategically significant roles as individuals and collectives that men could not replicate (Shayne, 86).

The leaders' strategic objectives led to the politicization of women's protective role in the family as mothers with whom they are traditionally associated but did not dissolve them. Even the women's organization AMPRONAC in Nicaragua encouraged the transition to 'combative motherhood' (Molyneux 1985, 228). Therefore, in both the FSLN and the FMLN,

women were mainly appointed secondary roles in military efforts, such as logistical and backup support. Even though women were rarely recognized, they performed crucial work, without which military action could not have happened. For example, armed interventions depended on women's transportation of weapons (Shayne, 94). Thus, the participation of women in political activity was part of the wider strategic process of popular mobilization.

Social Networks and Identity-Based Participation

Lastly, political, religious, and family networks are critical factors that increased women's mobilization into leftist guerilla movements in Nicaragua and El Salvador. Some personal aspects, such as their biography, their involvement within networks, and the situational context, predisposed some women to follow paths to political activism (Viterna 2006, 2). The most important pre-existing network was the history of resistance in the family that girls were born into. The family is an important agent of socialization, which extensively shaped children's values, such as fairness, justice, and responsibility, and thus set them on the path toward leftist revolutionary activism. Families with traditions to resist authority and join rebel movements increased the probability of women being socialized into resistance, even in a male-dominated sphere. Further, individuals widely consider family loyalties more important and trustworthy than political ones. Thus, their reliance on family networks supporting leftist values provided many recruitment opportunities for the FSLN and the FMLN.

Sandinistas largely benefited from the strong and widely dispersed family networks. Since the socioeconomic crisis, mass migrations have spread out families with their political cultures across the country. Therefore, Sandinistas could find support in many rural and urban areas (Kampwirth 2002, 38).

The FMLN also illustrates the utility of network analysis to understand the strong causality between pre-existing networks and the probability of women mobilizing. In the 1980s, the interviews of thirty-five women who were previously involved in leftist revolutionary movements in El Salvador demonstrated the importance of pre-existing networks. Twenty-three of them mentioned that members of their families influenced their political views and decision to take part in the revolutionary coalition (61). Other social ties, such as student and religious organizations, promoted leftist activism in both countries. Fourteen of the thirty-five women interviewed were members of student protest activities before becoming revolutionary activists. They shared concerns about economic inequality and political authoritarianism with leftist revolutionary groups. Thus, belonging to one or more pre-existing networks increased women's incentives to later become leftist revolutionary activists. However, the same social network might mobilize some but inhibit high-risk activism for others. The contradictory effects of identity-based mobilization demonstrate that it is not a generalizable path since individuals have competing identities even within a network (Viterna 2006, 2). For example, the interaction between a woman's 'mother' and 'political activist' identities

might limit her probability of mobilizing. Thus, individuals must acquire the 'participation identity' condition to make sure they prioritize their participation above any other aspect of their identity (5).

Conclusion

To conclude, the cases of the FSLN and FMNL leftist guerilla coalitions demonstrate that a combination of structural, political, ideological, strategic, and individual factors led to the mobilization of large numbers of women beginning in the late 1960s. Despite the extremely high price of supporting guerillas, some chose to join the revolutionary coalition. The cumulation of the socioeconomic and political crises generated widespread opposition to both capitalism and long-lasting dictatorships. Indeed, the structural changes caused by globalization and the decades of right-wing repression and widening class and gender inequalities gradually pushed women's entry into the public sphere and paved the way for women to take political action. The convergence of these structural and political factors further amplified women's appeal to unite with leftist rebel movements. These movements, while prioritizing economic and social transformation, also implemented gender issues into their political agenda. Furthermore, at that time, the egalitarian approach was encouraged by the spread of feminism, liberation theology, and the adoption of a new mass mobilization strategy. Lastly, the participation of women in leftist rebel movements was identity-based. Those who were involved in pre-existing social networks had a higher probability of joining revolutionary coa-

litions. While the FSLN and the FMNL had similar gender relations in their fight to overthrow the capitalist state, the divergence of goals and state structure shaped the extent of women's contribution. The Nicaraguan FSLN mobilized higher numbers of women than the Salvadoran FMLN because of its multiclass revolutionary coalition. It also succeeded in taking power when the FMLN failed to overthrow the old regime and never had a revolution. Therefore, it could be interesting to identify if there could be a link between women's participation and the success of leftist rebel movements.

References

- Gonzalez-Perez, Margaret. 2006. "Guerrilleras in Latin America: Domestic and International Roles." *Journal of Peace Research* 43, no. 3. pp. 313–29.
- Kampwirth, Karen. 2002. *Women and Guerrilla Movements: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas, Cuba*. Penn State University Press.
- Midlarsky, Manus I., and Kenneth Roberts. 1985. "Class, State, and Revolution in Central America: Nicaragua and El Salvador Compared." *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 29, no. 2. pp. 163–93.
- Molyneux, Maxine. 1985. "Mobilization without Emancipation? Women's Interests, the State, and Revolution in Nicaragua." *Feminist Studies* 11, no. 2. pp. 227–54.
- Reif, Linda L. 1986. "Women in Latin American Guerrilla Movements: A Comparative Perspective." *Comparative Politics* 18, no. 2. pp. 147–69.
- Tazreena Sajjad. 2004. "Women Guerrillas: Marching toward True Freedom? An Analysis of Women's Experiences in the Frontlines of Guerilla Warfare and in the Post-War Period." *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, no. 59. pp. 4–16.
- Vázquez, Norma. 1997. "Motherhood and Sexuality in Times of War: The Case of Women Militants of the FMLN in El Salvador." *Reproductive Health Matters*, vol. 5, no. 9. pp. 139–46.
- Viterna, Jocelyn S. 2006. "Pushed, Pulled, and Persuaded: Explaining Women's Mobilization into the Salvadoran Guerilla Army" *American Journal of Sociology* Vol.112, No.1.
- Wood, Reed M, and Jakana L Thomas. 2017. "Women on the Frontline: Rebel Group Ideology and Women's Participations in Violent Rebellion." *Journal of Peace Research* 54, no. 1. pp. 31–46.

