Sí, YO SOY REVOLUCIONARIA: PEASANT WOMEN’S ROLES, PARTICIPATION, IDENTITY AND EMPOWERMENT IN EL SALVADOR’S REVOLUTION

By

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To my mother who taught me to fight fearlessly in life/Para mi madre quien me enseño a luchar sin miedo en la vida.
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Peasant women participated in the Salvadoran revolutionary war that took place from 1980 to 1992. However, their participation has often been unacknowledged and undervalued. This research examines the participation of guerrilla women from two rural communities located in the Department of Chalatenango and the Department of Cabañas. The fieldwork techniques implemented in this study are in-depth interviews and participant observation informed by feminist and oral history methods and theory. A total of seventeen women, who identified themselves as guerrilla or guerrilla supporters during the revolution, were interviewed in both communities through a snowball sample. The study analyzes peasant women’s roles and participation in the Salvadoran revolution by focusing on the following themes: (1) Motivations for joining the guerrilla movement; (2) Roles and gender relations within the guerrilla structure; (3) Revolutionary identity; and (4) Extent of personal empowerment.

This study contributes to the larger body of scholarship on revolutionary women in El Salvador by shedding new light on peasant women’s motivations to join the FMLN guerrilla, the roles performed, identities adopted, and empowerment acquired through their participation in the revolution. This research provides evidence of peasant
women’s increased political and social consciousness, gender consciousness and personal empowerment through revolutionary participation regardless of the extent of their participation in the guerrilla. All women from these communities identified themselves as revolutionary agents during the revolution and to the present day, regardless of the role they performed inside the guerrilla structure. These two main findings are significant because they challenge prominent academic scholarship on guerrilla women which assumes that peasant women are apolitical and their participation in the revolution was not empowering at a personal and social level. As a result, this research provides a space for peasant women to explore their revolutionary experiences and to explore their voices and personal stories as an effort to honor their contributions to the revolutionary struggle.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

This study contributes to revolutionary women’s literature in El Salvador by bringing new light to the role of peasant or campesina women through an exploration of their participation and empowerment in the revolutionary process during the civil war in El Salvador (1980-1992). Much of the literature produced on women’s roles and their participation in El Salvador’s revolutionary struggle has been focused mainly on urban women, their relationship to post-war democratic processes, and the emergence of feminism (Luciak 2001, Sajjad 2004, Kampwirth 2002, Gonzales and Kampwirth 2001, Kampwirth 2004, and Shayne 2004). A significant amount of research has also been produced on the motivations of guerrilla women to participate in the armed struggle and their roles within the guerrilla structure (Rief, 1986, Viterna 2006, Kamwirth 2002,). Furthermore, often the literature produced by ex-guerrilla combatants themselves or Latin American authors documenting testimonial accounts has also been led by urban women who worked in leadership positions within the guerrilla structure. The most prominent works in this field are: Nunca Estuve Sola [I Was Never Alone] by Nidia Diaz (1991), Las Cárceles Clandestinas de El Salvador [The Clandestine Jails of El Salvador] by Ana Guadalupe Martinez (1992), and Retazos de Mi Vida: Testimonios de una Revolucionaria Salvadoreña [Parts of my Life: Testimonies of a Salvadoran Revolutionary] by Lorena Peña (2009). There have also been other major gender based works that have explored women’s roles and experiences as active members of the Salvadoran guerrilla movement. These works often explore issues of motherhood and sexuality experienced by guerrilla women (Vazquez, Ibañez, Clara Murguialday 1996, Clara Murguialday 1996).
As a response to the dominant trends mentioned above, the purpose of this study is to further explore peasant women’s participation in the revolution either as guerrilla members or as part of the general population who provided civilian based support in order to highlight their stories and contributions to the struggle. This study aims to offer a more comprehensive understanding of peasant women's revolutionary experiences by exploring their motivations to join the guerrillas, the roles they performed within the structure, their articulation of revolutionary identity, and their levels of empowerment through revolutionary participation. Additionally, this study brings special attention to the importance of peasant women’s contribution, which has been often regarded as traditional female work or “low prestige”, as Karen Kampwirth describes it (Kampwirth, 2004, p. 10). Traditional female work involves domestic activities, such as cooking, cleaning, nurturing, and nursing.

This paper explores peasant women’s traditional and non-traditional female roles within the guerrilla structure to include a more holistic portrayal of their participation. Peasant women’s contributions are analyzed through a feminist framework in which their experiences in the war shape their identities and sense of empowerment as revolutionary agents. Prominent literature has ignored peasant women’s contributions to the guerrilla’s subsistence and success; or in other instances, it has only mentioned their contributions on a superficial level, followed by the argument that peasant women did not gain anything from their participation and support of the revolution (Kampwirth 2004, Viterna 2006).

Departing from this concern about peasant women’s passive portrayal, the broad research questions guiding this analysis are: How did peasant women participate
in the revolution? Why did they decide to join the guerrillas? What did they learn through their guerrilla participation? Were peasant women empowered by their participation and to what extent? Based on these inquiries, the purpose of this study is to further analyze peasant women’s roles and participation by focusing on the following themes: (1) Motivations for joining the guerrilla movement, (2) Roles and gender relations within the guerrilla structure, (3) Revolutionary identity, and (4) Extent of personal empowerment.

This research seeks to demonstrate not only that peasant women were crucial to the revolutionary struggle, but also that many peasant women were empowered through their participation in the guerrillas, even if this participation was perceived or categorized as “low prestige” or “providing minimal help”. In addition, this study explores the multiple ways in which peasant women’s empowerment can be identified and understood through a feminist perspective. Most feminist scholars who have studied revolutionary women in Latin America, in this specific case El Salvador, have only focused on women from urban backgrounds who held high leadership positions, as commanders. As a result, it has been theorized that this leadership level is the main reason for the development of feminist consciousness, which later on became the seed for the Salvadoran feminist movement. However, there has been a lack of research and assessment regarding peasant women’s contributions to the revolution, and the development of their gender consciousness. This lack of academic knowledge, has contributed to the silencing of their experiences, and it has perpetrated the image of peasant women as passive and homogeneous.

This study aims to analyze peasant women’s participation, contributions and empowerment through a case study of two similar communities. However, it is important
to point out that this study is not representative of all peasant women in El Salvador. But rather, this study seeks to highlight these women’s political participation, their contributions to the revolutionary effort, and their personal empowerment through such participation. The three main similarities between the two communities included in this study are: (1) Both communities were highly affected by the war, (2) both were destroyed by military forces during the war and were later repopulated by their original inhabitants after the war, (3) and both communities went through community rebuilding and restructuring after the war where women served as the main leaders and participants in this process.

The organization of this thesis is divided into six chapters. Chapter 2 provides a historical background, important theory and terms, and the methodology used in this analysis. This first part provides a historical background about El Salvador’s revolutionary war and a brief background on the two rural communities included in this study. Additionally, it explores significant terminology and concepts relevant to this study, followed by detailed methodological frameworks. Chapter 3 explores women’s motivations to join or support the guerrillas. It provides a description of participants main motivations to either join or support the guerrilla warfare by exploring the major themes and reasons affecting their personal decisions. Chapter 4 analyzes peasant women’s roles, experiences and participation in the guerrilla movement. It illustrates the multiple roles peasant women performed within the guerrilla structure during the revolution. Also, women’s experiences and the kind of work they performed are explored to better understand the importance of their participation. Chapter 5 is a brief discussion of peasant women’s own understanding of their revolutionary identities. This offers a
discussion on women’s claimed revolutionary identity and their reflections about their war experiences and guerrilla participation. Finally, Chapter 6 incorporates a discussion of the participants’ personal empowerment. The concept of women’s empowerment is defined and analyzed in an effort to determine its relevance to revolutionary peasant women’s post-war experiences. Furthermore, this last section seeks to demonstrate how the women interviewed in this study were directly empowered by their participation in the guerrilla movement and by their war experiences. In addition, there will be a brief discussion on how this empowerment is reflected in not only in their personal lives, but also in their communities. To conclude this study, women’s war experiences and empowerment levels shed light on post-war community building, women’s community participation, and personal empowerment through community shared war experiences. Furthermore, the empowerment of peasant women must be understood from its social location and context, rather than being compared to the point of reference provided by urban women’s experiences.

Rural and urban women in the revolution did not share the same resources and empowerment opportunities, such as high levels of education and economic independence. These urban opportunities guaranteed a higher position within the guerrilla structure, and further promoted high levels of gender consciousness, articulation, and activism. Therefore, higher education and higher leadership within the FMLN guerrilla has been associated with Salvadoran women’s revolutionary empowerment and the development of gender consciousness. However, peasant women from these two communities demonstrated high levels of gender consciousness and empowerment through their revolutionary participation as will be shown, even if
these aspects of peasant women’s experiences have not yet been addressed in historical and academic accounts.
CHAPTER 2
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: GOVERNMENT REPRESSSION AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE GUERRILLA MOVEMENT

The civil war in El Salvador took place, as officially dated, from 1980 until 1992. The war resulted from multiple social, economic and political factors at the national and international level. However, one of the most important factors was the cruel repression executed by the military government throughout the course of the Twentieth century. This was a violent period, and there were many peasant revolts demanding land rights, better economic opportunities, and basic human rights. The Salvadoran oligarchy, mostly coffee producers, had accumulated most of the land, economic resources and power in the country. Between 1871 and 1932 the coffee oligarchy gained strength and status as the ruling class in El Salvador. As a result, the oligarchy’s interests were protected above all through their political and military power in the country (White, 2009, p. 65). The Salvadoran oligarchy controlled and used the military as their major repressive instrument against any kind of economic, social or political reform.

One of the earliest and most significant examples of political and economic repression in the country is the unsuccessful peasant uprising popularly known as “La Matanza” [The Slaughter]. In 1932, Farabundo Martí led a peasant revolt against the military dictatorship of Maximiliano Hernández. More than thirty thousand peasants were killed by military forces, under the oligarchy’s order, in this rebellion. This massacre took place in the western region of the country, and less than ten percent of the victims had actually participated in the uprising (Montgomery, 1982 p. 52). This massacre was a major turning point and one of the most unforgettable examples of the repressive conditions people experienced during this period. Political instability, economic disparity, government repression and military abuse continued in the country.
Many other massacres took place in multiple areas of the countryside, especially during the most repressive years, in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Massacres have become part of Salvadoran culture due to the scale of unjustified violence against entire peasant communities.

Another important event that sparked organized resistance against military oppression was the assassination of Monsignor Oscar Arnulfo Romero, the Catholic Archbishop of San Salvador (August 15, 1917 – March 24, 1980). Archbishop Romero was a conservative priest who turned into a peace advocate and liberation theologian. “Father Romero had a history of catering to the interests of the military and the oligarchy until the 1977 assassination by the military death squads of his friend Father Rutilio Grande” (White, 2009, p. 99). In 1980, Monsignor Romero was shot by Salvadoran government soldiers while saying mass in a small hospital chapel in San Salvador. This event triggered many Salvadoran people’s indignation and resentment against the oppressive government. During the mass, Monsignor Romero publicly denounced the military killing, violence and repression against the Salvadoran people.

In the name of God, then, and in the name of this suffering people, whose cries reach more loudly to heaven every day, I appeal to you. I beg you. I order you, in God’s name, to cease the repression, to not obey if they order you to kill! (White, 2009, p. 100)

This quotation immortalized Monsignor Romero’s work and legacy in many Salvadoran people’s memories and hearts. “He also inspired Salvadorans in general for his willingness to stand up to the armed forces of El Salvador unapologetically.” (White, 2009, p. 100) Monsignor Romero became a martyr of the war because he was murdered for speaking his mind, for denouncing injustice and repression, but most of all
for defending the basic human rights of freedom and happiness of the Salvadoran poor and disenfranchised, and for turning his back to the powerful oligarchy.

It is important to note that the Catholic Church had been historically aligned with the Salvadoran government, the oligarchy and the military. Therefore, Monsignor Romero’s killing was an event that showed the degree to which the military was able to impose itself on the country. His killing was the proof of increasing repression and violence by the government, which was reaching the point of become unbearable for the great majority of the population. As a consequence of the constant violations of human rights and repression of the population’s most vulnerable sectors, many people started to organize into guerrilla groups to force structural changes in Salvadoran society.

During the 1980s, five guerrilla based organizations united to create the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) in order to coordinate a revolutionary movement in El Salvador as a result of the accumulation of multiple economic, social and political problems. During this period, “the right wing represented the traditional elites in the military and the Salvadoran oligarchy, whereas the guerrilla factions that emerged in the 1970s represented the left.” (White, 2009, p. 81) Men and women came together and took up arms to defend their ideals and fight against the repressive government. The guerrilla movement was characterized by a strong ideology and a commitment to lead political, social, structural and cultural change.

Some examples that further illustrate this point are the multiple ways in which the FMLN built their organizational structure by incorporating entire communities of the civilian population into their revolutionary initiatives. During the beginning of the war, the guerrillas lived among the people. Guerrilla members helped plow land and harvest
land; they provided medical assistance that had never been available before; they taught peasants how to defend themselves from the military forces; and they launched important education and literacy campaigns for peasants and for guerrilla members, as well (Montgomery, 1982, p.149). Due to these different participatory and inclusive political approaches by the FMLN guerrilla forces, the great majority of the civilian population tended to support the guerrillas and the revolutionary struggle. It has been well documented that the FMLN guerrillas had strong civilian population support, especially in communities where the guerrillas had a strong presence and further interaction with the people. Consider Montgomery’s observations about the interactions between peasant civilians and the FMLN guerrillas:

A subtle indication of support was that in personal conversations with hundreds of peasants they never used words like ‘terrorists” and “subversives” to describe the revolutionary organizations. They talked about “the Bloc” (BPR), “the Leagues” (LP-28), the Popular Organizations”, and “the Front” (FMLN). They referred to the guerrillas most often as “los compañeros” and occasionally as “los muchachos” (the boys). The first four terms are neutral, the last two are positive, and “muchachos” is a term of affection (Montgomery, 1982, p. 144).

As a result, most of the Salvadoran population in the rural areas supported the guerrilla’s revolutionary efforts in the country, not only due to state repression against peasant and poor civilian populations; but also due to the FMLN guerrillas close relationship to civilians who lived in rural areas that were under their control.

This popular support must be addressed since it is important to acknowledge that during this period, the Salvadoran government, in concert with the oligarchy, and via the actions of the military, actively targeted anyone who supported any kind of social, economic or political reform in the country. The military government would suppress any individual perceived as “subversive”, which was any person who disagreed with
governmental policies and actions. During this period, the Salvadoran government operated under an official law known as “The Law for the Defense and Guarantee of the Public Order”, which gave the state the right to arrest anyone it suspected of being a subversive (White, 2009, p. 94) Some of the most targeted groups were students, union leaders, teachers, peasants and Jesuit priests among others. There were special clandestine branches of the military, commonly known as Death Squads, whose main purpose was to kill, eliminate, and “disappear” people suspected of “subversive” activity. In fact, “the military was responsible for more than 95% of the violence and murders of common people” (Avila, 2008, p. 13). El Salvador was a battlefield between the military armed forces and the guerrillas for twelve years leaving thousands of victims. By the end of the war, “there were seventy-five thousand dead, two million displaced, an estimate of one million war refugees, and billions of dollars of economic loss to a country that had anything but budget surplus.” (Shayne, 2004, p. 24) The war came to an end in 1992 with the signing of a peace agreement, mediated by the United Nations, between the FMLN and the Salvadoran government under the presidency of Alfredo Christiani. The FMLN disarmed, stopped the guerrilla warfare efforts, and became a legitimate political party. In fact, it still remains the official opposition political party in El Salvador.

For a more general understanding of the extent of government repression and the politico-military consolidation of the FMLN guerrilla movement, a national and international brief timeline is provided in Appendix A in order to provide insight into some of the national events and factors that fueled the civil war in El Salvador.
Machismo and Marianismo in Latin America

The discussion of machismo in Latin America and specifically in El Salvador is necessary to the analysis of gender relations within the guerrilla structure and its impact on guerrilla women’s experiences. The terms macho, machismo and machista have always been associated with Latin American culture (Melhuus and Stolen, 1996, p. 14). Therefore, a definition of Machismo is helpful to comprehend better the gender relations between men and women under regional and cultural norms. Even though Machismo is a broad term that manifests itself in different capacities determined by cultural, social, physical and regional contexts, it can be broadly defined as: “a cult of exaggerated masculinity, characterized by its assertion of power and control over women, and over other men” (Chant and Craske, 2003, p.14). As a result, machismo defends male superiority and the control over all aspects of women’s lives. It is important to note that machismo does not only affect women’s lives, but also men who do not fit pattern of exaggerated masculinity. Machista norms promote power and control over other people, men and women. It encourages sexual domination over women, and sometimes other men that are considered “feminized” or weaker men. There are other masculine traits that also tend to be overemphasized under the macho cult, such as men’s roles as financial providers, virility, physical strength and courage.

The origin of Machismo has not been well documented, but there are multiple theories of its origin and development. Generally, machismo has been connected to the colonial period in the Americas. According to Alfredo Mirandé (1997), there are two theories relevant to colonial legacies in the Americas that might explain Machismo in the region: (1) machismo might have originated from the humiliation of indigenous men due to their military defeat, and the rape of their women by Spanish conquerors; and (2)
Machismo was introduced in the Americas by the Spanish due to their strong patriarchal culture, in which women are perceived as inferior (Chant and Craske, 2003). Furthermore, according to Chant and Craske these machista beliefs became exaggerated by the conquistadors when they engaged in sexual relations with indigenous women who were brutalized due to their gender and racial inferiority (Chant and Craske, 2003, p. 15). Whether these theories are accurate or not does not undermine the fact that the Machista value system has had concrete consequences to gender relations in Latin America. Machista beliefs are not particular of Latin American culture since we find similar practices and behaviors around the world. However, the term “Machismo” itself has been widely used to refer to this phenomenon in the Latin American region.

Under a Machista culture, gender roles and relations tend to be polarized and restricted, which creates unrealistic expectations of femininity and masculinity. These gender expectations are not only shaped by machismo, but also by Marianismo, which could be considered as its feminine complement. Marianismo is a cultural practice rooted in the religious imagery of the Catholic Virgin Mary. As part of Marianism, women are expected and encouraged to emulate the Virgin Mary’s characteristics, such as submissiveness, martyrdom, abnegation and sacrifice.

Marianismo pictures its subjects as semi-divine, morally superior and spiritually stronger than men. A female cannot hope to attain full spiritual stature until her forbearance and abnegation have been tested by male-inflicted suffering. Men’s wickedness is therefore the necessary precondition of women’s superior status. (Stevens, 1973, p. 57)

As a consequence, Marianismo complements Machista notions of male superiority and control over women’s lives in “mundane” everyday life since women are only perceived to be morally or spiritually superior to men when they have suffered
physical or moral abuse from men. Within this contextual norm, women are expected to embrace and internalized inferiority and male dominance in their lives. The combination of Machismo and Marianismo is a dangerous combination due to its restrictive and polarized gendered nature. “Machismo’s emphasis on male primacy, belief in men’s rights to control women, and a strong emphasis on male strength and sexual prowess contributed to a polarization of gender roles and provided cultural legitimation for the abuse of women.” (Chant and Craske, 2003, p.15) Additionally, Marianismo further supports and enhances this cultural practice.

Even though not much scholarly work has been produced on Machismo in El Salvador, this small Latin American country is not an exception to this regional trend. Machismo is well rooted in Salvadoran society because the polarization of gender roles in which men are perceived as superior and women as their subordinate are generally prominent in cultural expectations and behaviors. Many Salvadoran men and women continue to be socialized under these traditional cultural beliefs. However, it is important to highlight the fact that culture and cultural practices are malleable and in constant change, so culture should not be assumed to be static. The general trend of Machismo in Latin America and in El Salvador is not to suggest that there has not been a significant change in the area of gender equity. However, Machista culture is worthwhile mentioning in the context of revolutionary uprising in El Salvador as an effort to understand better how war conditions affected women’s experiences, which were significantly influenced by patriarchal and Machista cultural systems. Despite its efforts for liberation and justice, the FMLN guerrilla structures were not immune to deeply rooted Machista beliefs in Salvadoran society. As many female combatants report in
this study, there was a significant gap between the revolutionary ideal of equality and its actual practice in terms of gender relations. This gap and ideological contradiction will be further explored in Chapter 4 while discussing women's roles and experiences inside the guerrilla structure.

Another necessary piece of background information essential to this study is a brief description of the two rural communities where this research took place. The names of these two communities have been omitted due to security purposes and the protection of participant's identities. Therefore, the historical background will only refer to the departments in general and not to the specific rural communities.

**Background on the Two Rural Communities Specific to this Research**

This section will describe the two main Salvadoran regional jurisdictions, referred to as Departments, which serve as the locations for this study. The two rural communities in this study are located in the Department of Chalatenango and the Department of Cabañas. Both departments are located in the northern part of the country. These departments were highly affected during the war because they were considered territory controlled by the guerrillas. Therefore, both rural communities also share common contextual and historical events. The two communities were heavily affected by military violence and repression. As a result, according to informants, most of their inhabitants were more willing to support the revolution by either joining or actively supporting the guerrillas. Furthermore, both communities have gone through repopulation and community rebuilding experiences. People from these two communities had to leave everything they owned to save their lives and either move to refugee camps, join the guerrilla movement or move to another department to live with relatives. However, the last option was the least feasible since most families had been
living in these communities for generations. There had been little migration outside these two rural communities to other areas of the country. The map provided at the end of the chapter, Figure 2-1, illustrates the territory under guerrilla control. The two departments included in this study were heavily influenced by guerrilla culture since most camps were hidden in mountainous, wooden and hill areas. The departments of Chalatenango and Cabañas can be found in the northern part of the country. A short historical background on each community is provided below. Once again, the name of the specific villages and towns are omitted to protect their identity.

**Rural Communities in the Departments of Chalatenango and Cabañas:**

**Rural Community in the Department of Chalatenango:**

The department of Chalatenango is located in northwest El Salvador as Figure 2-1 illustrates. The capital city has the same name as the department. In terms of topography, Chalatenango is a mountainous area. In fact, it has the nation's largest peak, known as El Pital (White, 2009). In addition, this department has multiple rivers and small creeks throughout the territory. Chalatenango is mainly an agricultural and cattle raising area. Chalatenango was one of the departments heavily affected by the civil war. Due to its rich natural resources in terms of hills, mountainous areas and rivers, Chalatenango was a good location for the subsistence of guerrilla camps. There were many guerrilla camps located within this territory, especially in the mountains and wooded areas. The mountains provided a secure area for the guerrilla camps because of their isolation from the major towns and allowed for a way to hide from the Salvadoran military forces. However, as a consequence, the civilians who lived in the towns close to the mountains became easy targets of military repression.
The rural community in Chalatenango experienced high levels of military repression. By the late 1970s, the residents of this community were forced to leave their homes due to persecution and the virtual total destruction of their town. For example, there were multiple documented massacres against civilian populations in this part of the country, such as the Sumpul and Las Aradas massacres. Some women interviewed as part of this study are survivors of these two massacres. The people who were killed in these two massacres were all civilians, including women and children. Silvia describes her experience as one of the few survivors of the Sumpul massacre as follows:

We had to cross the Sumpul River. You could see people die there, running away from the military. Some of them would drown trying to cross the river... I would say there were around 1,500 people. There were a lot of people, but the ones that were captured were around 400 (Silvia; Interview 2012)

As a result of the constant persecution, repression and murders committed by the Salvadoran military against the civilian population, the whole community was forced to leave their belongings, houses and land in order to migrate to the Mesa Grande War Refugee Camp located in Honduras. This camp was administered by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. The first families arrived at Mesa Grande in 1981, and many of them came from Chalatenango. In 1988 people started to return from Mesa Grande to repopulate the community, which they found completely destroyed and abandoned.

For us it was really sad when we entered [the village]. There were no paths. We came with all kinds of people, little children, men and women adults and elderly people... We couldn’t even work here because there wasn’t anything... we had to drink water from the creeks, and we had to get up at 2am to collect water because we were afraid to do it during the day because we were afraid of soldiers shooting at us (Campos, 2004, p. 19)
A total of 175 families were responsible for repopulating this rural community in Chalatenango. The first thing they did was to create a community based organization in order to rebuild the village with the help and coordination of multiple international entities (Campos, 2004, p. 20). Many residents are still active in community organizations and events, especially women. This community has an active community center where multiple cultural, health and educational programs are offered for free to the whole community. For example, there are programs that promote cultural identity through the arts among youth. The community center also sponsors multiple activities, such as workshops and informational sessions for all residents of the area including youth, adults and the elderly. Many of the people working in the community center are ex-guerrilla members and war refugees from the area. In addition, the most active members in the community center are women who were either guerrilla members or part of the civilian support.

**Rural Community in the Department of Cabañas:**

The department of Cabañas is located in the northern central part of El Salvador, next to the department of Chalatenango, with Sensuntepeque as the capital city. The entire department has a hilly terrain rather than a mountainous one. The name of the department, Cabañas means “400 hills”. This department has one of the coolest year-round temperatures in the country” (White, 2009, p. 7) the area is made up of deep wooded areas, creeks, rivers and even caves. This area’s main economic activity is agriculture, primarily grain production. Similar to the rural community in Chalatenango, the Cabañas community was a town strongly affected by the war. Its deep wooden areas facilitated guerrilla mobilization and clandestine activities. Another reason for the military persecution in this town was the strong influence of Christian Base Community
activities and peasant activism in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Not only activists were persecuted by the military during the civil war, but the majority of the civilian population was as well, regardless of their actual political activism or viewpoints. All inhabitants were labeled as “subversive” by the military government. Thus, many people from this community were often “disappeared,” tortured and killed by the Salvadoran military forces. The town suffered heavy aerial bombardment and was completely destroyed by the Salvadoran military forces. Consequently, all the inhabitants were forced to leave their homes. People from this community had few available options: they either had to move to different parts of the country or join the guerrilla movement.

After the signing of the Peace Accords, the residents of this community were able to return to their homes and reclaim their town. In 1993, the first groups of people started to repopulate the town. To further illustrate this point, consider Tatiana’s repopulation experience:

> When we came back, it was really bad, there weren’t any houses here. It was just woods. People started to clean up and then, they started to build their houses. The military had destroyed everything we had, so that we would surrender, but thanks to God, we never surrendered.” (Tatiana; interviewed 2012).

According to this informant, the families that came back to repopulate the town received land and were able to rebuild their houses. Some of the families even built their houses the exact same way they were before the destruction of the town. Many people were able to reclaim and restore their land and restart their lives over again. Due to the impact of the war on the town and its history of political struggle and repopulation, this rural community now has a communal approach to civil participation and governance. Community residents function collectively in overseeing the town’s social, economic and political needs. Most of the members in this communal directive are
women who were involved in the guerrilla struggle. Similarly, to the Chalatenango rural community, this town also incorporates youth initiatives in the arts, especially theater and dance. Many of the women are also involved in the production of artisanal crafts which are specifically associated with the town for sale to visitors and tourists.

**Theoretical Considerations of the Study**

This section describes, analyzes and challenges some mainstream concepts regarding guerrilla organization/groups, guerrilla members, and women’s roles within the guerrilla structure. First, the term guerrillas must be defined in order to understand better the context in which women played a role inside this structure. According to Linda Rief, “guerrillas are members of political organizations operating in both urban and rural areas which use armed warfare for the purpose of changing social structure.” (Rief, 1986, p. 147) This definition will be used for the purpose of this study to understand guerrilla warfare as a structure where members of political-military organizations seek to change an existing socio-political system. In this case, the goal was to overthrow the repressive military government of El Salvador. The Latin American guerrillas were highly influenced by the Cuban revolution and the writings of Che Guevara, who defined the structure and characteristics of guerrilla warfare. Che Guevara describes guerrilla warfare as, “a war of the masses, a war of the people. The guerrilla band is an armed nucleus, the fighting vanguard of the people. It draws its great force from the mass of the people themselves.” (Guevara, 1961, p.17) Guevara’s definition of guerrillas is military oriented since it emphasizes military combat. In addition, he defined specific characteristics of guerrilla warfare including military tactics, such as continuous, nomadic mobilization of guerrillas in mountainous and wild areas, political propaganda, and the distribution of all structural needs by specific individuals according to their
capabilities. Guevara’s description of guerrilla warfare also emphasizes the importance of popular support from civilian population. “The guerrilla fighter needs full help from the people of the area.” (Guevara, 1961 p. 17) However, according to this statement there is a marked difference between the people and guerrilla combatants, so who is a true “guerrillero/guerrilla member”? According to Che Guevara,

The guerrilla fighter is a social reformer, he takes up arms responding to the angry protest of the people against their oppressors, and he fights in order to change the social system that keeps all his unarmed brothers in ignominy and misery (Guevara, 1961, p. 17)

Clearly, by this definition a guerrilla member is a man, and he has taken up arms to fight for his people to liberate them from oppressive social, economic and political systems. In addition, this definition of a guerrilla member is also limited to a military figure. This description is heavily militaristic and therefore masculine in nature because the idea of the “new man” is based on these two characteristics. This fact leads to the question: Were there women guerrilla members? In theory, the answer is yes. However, due to the nature of most of their participation in practice, women have not been fully recognized as guerrilla combatants mainly due to the division of labor and the value assigned to their work. Women had a significant participation in the guerrilla movement. “Approximately forty percent of the FMLN members, thirty percent of the combatants and twenty percent of military leaders were women.” (Luciak, 1995, p. 3; Mason, 1992, p. 65; Montgomery, 1995, p. 123; Kampwirth, 2002, p. 17) Many of these women performed multiple roles within the guerrilla structure as combatants, political strategists, paramedics, radio operators and cooks. However, due to the traditional division of labor, women were relegated to less visible work within the guerrilla structure. For example, within the guerrilla culture, military and combatant work was
highly valued while domestic work, such as cooking and the care of others was not as highly regarded. In fact, domestic work was hardly noted and valued. Many women served in more traditional female roles within the guerrilla structure, such as cooking, cleaning, and the caring for others (children and the wounded). However, many others also performed non-traditional female roles, such as military combatants, commanders and political strategists. In some cases, there were women who also performed both, traditional and non-traditional female roles at the same time while they participated in the guerrilla struggle. However, women who performed more “masculine” roles were regarded with more prestigious statuses, as opposed to those women who performed traditional “female” roles within the guerrilla structure. Therefore, women who were able to function in leadership positions were also able to climb up the ladder in terms of status, respect and consideration as guerrilla members.

Karen Kampwirth has theorized women’s participation in the revolutionary struggle in three main categories, which she identifies as: (1) High-prestige, (2) Mid-prestige and (3) Low-prestige positions within the guerrilla structure. According to Kampwirth, women who performed leadership roles in non-traditional female roles, such as commanders belong to the high-prestige group. Mid-prestige members of the revolution were women who held some sort of leadership position in traditional female roles, such as leader of paramedics or as political educators. Low-prestige members were women who performed all sorts of traditional female roles as cooks and caregivers in camps, safe houses or any other location under the guerrilla structure (Kampwirth, 2004, p. 9-12). Kampwirth explores the development of women’s feminist consciousness as a reflection of personal empowerment through their revolutionary
participation. Consider the following quotation explaining the unique location of mid-prestige women within the guerrillas:

[Mid-prestige] work is much more likely to be personally empowering than making tortillas. Moreover, their position in the middle meant that, on the other hand, they were not shielded from the brunt of machismo within guerrilla ranks, as were female commanders, but, on the other hand, they had the opportunity to develop political skills and consciousness that might not have been available to very low ranking female participants. (Kampwirth, 2004, p. 10)

Kampwirth considers that women who performed low-prestige traditional female roles in the guerrillas were not empowered by their participation, as high and mid-prestige women were. In addition, she argues that mid-prestige women are overwhelmingly represented in the feminist movement in El Salvador due to their revolutionary experience in which they were able to learn new skills and develop socio-political consciousness. At the same time, they experienced gender discrimination and sexism in the guerrilla camps and structure.

These claims are problematic in the sense that it assumes that all women who performed traditional female roles within the guerrillas were not empowered by their participation in the revolution due to their low status in the structure. In addition, a class element could be added to Kampwirth’s analysis since most of the women she bases her analysis on are urban middle class women. Therefore, her analysis is not representative of peasant women. Furthermore, the vast majority of peasant women performed mid and low-prestige roles in the guerrilla structure; and consequently, it has been assumed that they lacked exposure to gender consciousness. Many peasant women were also restricted to only participate in low-prestige tasks, such as cooking and the care of others because many of them had little, if any, education. They were only familiar with domestic work, so they contributed to the revolution according to their
capabilities. As a result, Kampwirth’s claim of women’s empowerment seems elitist, as it excludes the majority of peasant women’s experiences and contributions. It is not accurate to assume that all women who performed low-prestige roles, who were mostly peasant women, were not empowered by their revolutionary participation. Additionally, Kampwirth’s classification of women’s roles and prestige undermines traditional female work within the guerrilla structure, which was essential to the survival and sustainability of the revolutionary struggle.

Julie D. Shayne builds on the idea of women performing low-prestige and traditional female roles within the guerrilla structure because of sexism. However, unlike Kampwirth, she seeks to highlight the importance of women’s traditional female work for the advancement of the revolution and the sustainability of guerrilla warfare. Shayne introduces the idea of women performing roles as “gendered revolutionary bridges.” She argues that women were the physical bridge between the FMLN guerrillas (organized left) and unincorporated citizens. According to the author, “gendered refers to femininity, revolutionary to the type of social movement of which the women are a part, and bridges implies the strategic connections women make as a result and subversion of femininity within such a context” (Shayne, 2004, p. 43). Therefore, Shayne argues that women’s gender allowed them to create important connections and essential bridges with the community, which led to the support and survival of guerrilla warfare by providing food, shelter and medical supplies. “Women activists subverted prototypical images of femininity as mothers, teachers, and refugees while transmitting highly militant messages.” (Shayne, 2004, p. 43)
Belinda Robnett emphasizes women’s leadership roles as bridge leaders’ activists in terms of mobilizing people at the micro level during the civil rights movement in the United States. The author suggests that African American women served as bridge leaders by “initiating ties between the social movement and the community and between prefigurative strategies aimed at individual change, identity and consciousness” (Robnett, 1996, p. 1664). In her essay, Robnett challenges the notion of leadership in traditional social movement scholarship by arguing that African American women’s activist work during the civil rights movement was a different form of leadership that had not been considered before. Usually bridge work or more community work has been rewarded as activist or community work, but the people doing this outreach have never been considered movement leaders. Therefore, Robnett challenges this restrictive definition of social movement leadership. She suggests that bridge leaders are essential to the mobilization of people, ideological spread, consciousness rising, and grassroots organization, which determines either the success or the failure of social movements.

In El Salvador, many peasant women were bridge leaders in their communities since often they were the ones in charge of finding food supplies, safe houses and other resources needed for the guerrillas’ subsistence. Without these women’s community based connections, local knowledge, domestic and care giving work, would have not been possible. Without this kind of work, the guerrilla camps and combatants would have not been able to survive in the mountains, much less would they have been able to effectively fight military forces that had more economic and gun power advantage. Therefore, women who worked as bridge leaders during the revolution should be
recognized as revolutionary leaders, not only seen as “helpers” or “supporters” of the revolution. Their work was as equally dangerous and indispensable as that of guerrilla combatants to the success of guerrilla warfare survival and effectiveness.

The above concepts will be further discussed and developed in each of the subsequent sections in order to provide a better understanding of peasant women’s roles, participation, identity and personal empowerment. In addition, these theoretical concepts are helpful to explain methodological considerations and to further contribute to the field of revolutionary women’s scholarship throughout this analysis.

**Methodological considerations**

For this study I interviewed a total of seventeen women, who identify themselves as either guerrilla members or part of the “masses.” The masses was the term used for the civilians that supported the guerrillas and often followed them into the mountains to escape military massacres in their communities. I was able to interview women from these two communities by a word of mouth or snow ball sampling approach where the women themselves asked their friends to participate in this project. Therefore, I had limited control over the number of women reached to interview in this sample. I was able to interview eight women in the rural community located in the department of Cabañas and nine women in the department of Chalatenango. The participants’ ages ranged from thirty-four to seventy-two years old. In addition, most of them had low levels of formal education. Some of them could not read or write and some had recently gained literacy. The majority had only completed one or two years of elementary school. Two women had completed their high school education, and one of them had attended college. Most women had children and were still active in their communities. All women
had been born in their respective communities and had come back to repopulate these towns at the end of the war.

The interviews took place in the summer of 2012 when I spent a week in each of the communities, sharing meals and participating in multiple community activities. Most interviews ranged from one to three hours. The interviews were recorded, coded, transcribed, translated and subsequently analyzed to better identify patterns and themes. These themes and patterns were compared across narratives through the use of grounded theory in the process of data analysis. The coded interviews have been divided into four main themes: (1) Motivation to join the guerrillas and age, (2) Roles and guerrilla activities/Gender relations within the guerrillas, (3) Identity, and (4) Women's personal empowerment. These four main themes were compared and contrasted across all of the interviews in order to better analyze and theorize these themes. In addition, participants war names or pseudonyms are used in this analysis in some cases and in other cases, I gave the participant a different name in order to protect their identities.

The study departs from the personal narratives of women themselves informed by feminist and oral history approaches. Following feminist research tradition, the interviews used in this study were semi-structured, open-ended interviews since it allows for free interaction between the researcher and the participants. It also allows for concept clarifications, discussion and follow-up questions in order to create a sense of conversation rather than interrogation throughout the interviewing process. Furthermore, feminist open-ended interviewing “offers researchers access to people’s ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the
This study aims to follow sociologist Sherman Gluck’s concept where “women’s oral history is a feminist encounter because it creates new material about women, validates women’s experiences, enhances communication among women, discovers women’s roots, and develops a previously denied sense of community” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 126). Feminist oral history has allowed this study to acknowledge the value of peasant women's experiences and honor their participation in El Salvador's revolution. In addition, the feminist oral history effort is also centered on Emma Perez deoclonial imaginary, in which “to decolonize our history and our historical imaginations, we must uncover the voices from the past that honor multiple experiences, instead of falling prey to that which is easy allowing the white colonial heteronormative gaze to reconstruct and interpret our past” (Perez, 2003, p. 123).

Based on Perez’s concept, this analysis aims to uncover peasant women’s experiences and honor their stories. Aware of my position and role as a researcher and historian in this project, I have embraced Perez’s decolonizing imagery which allows for rethinking history in a way that gives recognition to revolutionary peasant women, who have often been on the margins of Salvadoran war narratives and history. Furthermore, I aim to expand the definition of “revolutionary women” to a more inclusive term in which women’s contributions, either traditional or non-traditional, are recognized and honored.
in Salvadoran society. Therefore, I consider this decolonizing imagery key to the process of creating knowledge and contributing to history from a different perspective.

In addition, I draw from Joan W. Scott’s concept of *subject positioning*, which is the attempt to view, analyze or study the subject [person] by trying to understand the complexity of his/her identity as attributed. This identity can be either embraced or rejected by the person. As a result, the researcher seeks to understand, rather than ignore these dynamics within a subject’s identity (Scott, 1991, p. 21). I found the subject positioning framework a helpful tool while analyzing peasant women’s testimonies, experiences, roles, identities and personal empowerment in El Salvador’s revolution. This framework highlights the complexity of an individual’s identity and especially, the influence that the environment [historical period, social class, gender, family background, social beliefs etc.] has in the formation of that identity. As a result, I have acknowledged participants individuality and their own paths into revolutionary work by highlighting their experiences and avoiding overgeneralization. Additionally, I include Scott’s notion of visibility in which she states that by making a movement/issue visible, one breaks the silence about it and challenges preexisting notions, which opens new possibilities for everyone (Scott, 1991, p. 774). This concept has been applied to the oral history effort by recording women’s experiences and their contributions in the guerrilla armed struggle with the main goal to honor, acknowledge, and most of all, make their strength and support to this political project visible to the Salvadoran people.

Through this project, I seek to reveal something that has existed for a long time. However, it has been constantly repressed. I aim to make women’s strengths and valuable contributions to Salvadoran society more visible to everyone in order to
demonstrate that their strength and value has always been imbedded in Salvadoran history, but it has been continuously repressed and undervalued. Experience has been used to produce history and when only certain experiences are perceived to be worthwhile or valuable to be part of history, traditional/accepted/naturalized history represents the hegemonic power of normativity. I aim to make women’s experiences visible to be taken into account to produce new knowledge and history. However, I would like to clarify that I do not intend to essentialize peasant women’s war experiences in this study since I recognize women’s individual life experiences, revolutionary paths and voices.

Feminist research and oral history approaches, allowed me to connect to the peasant women I interviewed. While I am aware that I am not a peasant woman, I consider it significant to note that my race, ethnicity, gender and age facilitated the connectivity between myself, the researcher, and the interviewed women. As a Salvadoran myself, I was able to quickly connect to these women through a shared history and cultural knowledge. We shared the same language and colloquialisms, which allowed for our conversations to flow smoothly. It also allowed me to ask personal and delicate questions about their lives that they would have never shared with a stranger. In addition, my gender and age worked to my advantage to create a safe, fun and comfortable space for women to talk about their war experiences and life stories.

As a young Salvadoran woman researcher, I did not have a threatening image, and the women were open to sharing their lives, including painful and intimate memories, as well. The older women often associated me with one of their “little granddaughters.” The younger women could quickly identify with me by talking about
daily life issues. Our conversations fluctuated from the most serious topics, such as the loss of a child, to unexpected laughs at funny remarks women would come up with in the middle of the interviews. Through these dynamics, I was fortunate to join women in a journey of self-reflection through an oral history process where they were able to re-think their revolutionary participation and life experiences. In addition, I was able to witness these women’s joy and excitement about sharing their personal stories and opinions about the revolution in El Salvador. The sense of entitlement and the ownership of their personal stories is one of the most powerful things I have been able to witness in my whole life, and for that I am grateful to all the women who were willing to share their stories with me.
Figure 2-1. Map of El Salvador highlighting guerrilla controlled areas throughout the country as of 1984. The dark striped lines emphasize guerrilla territory which was mainly concentrated in the northern part of the country. Chalatenango and Cabañas were significant areas under guerrilla territory, as shown in this map.
Figure 2-3. “Exposition, We Are All From Here”. Picture taken at the front door of the Community Center in Chalatenango where they have an exhibit of multiple, eye witness testimonies of people who repopulated the village by the end of the war. This exposition alludes to the village’s historical memory about the repopulation of their town. Picture taken by researcher during the summer of 2012.
CHAPTER 3
WHAT WERE WOMEN’S MOTIVATIONS TO JOIN THE FMLN GUERRILLAS?

I decided to join the guerrillas because the military killed my daughter. She was 17 years old. She was a catechist who taught children. When the military took her out of the house, she was already incorporated in the FPL. They [the military] came around 7am. She was a young girl… how could he opposed them? I found her four days later. They cut her breasts, insert a stake in her part [vagina], and they burned her alive. They took out her finger nails. They tortured her. I was 40 years old. I was furious because they killed my daughter! So I didn't care if they killed me. I worked with the guerrillas throughout all the war [12 years].

(Luz; interview 2012)

I decided to join because there was too much repression against the civilian population. They [the military] took us out of our houses and burned them. They killed my father. He was only a peasant man who shared God’s word with everyone.

(Chila, 55; interview 2012)

Women’s motivations for joining the guerrilla movement in El Salvador have captured many scholars attention due to the fact that women challenged their traditional gender roles by joining the guerrilla movement. Most women in El Salvador previously had been limited to only the private and domestic sphere. However, through their participation in the revolutionary war efforts, many women were able to move into the public sphere as politico-military guerrilla members. Some scholars have pointed out two major motivations for women to join the guerrilla, personal and/or familial networks and previous involvement in Christian based communities (Kamwirth 2007, Shayne 2004). These motivations have been prominent in Latin American revolutionary women’s participation in other groups, such as student based organizations, peasant and workers unions. However, these narratives have failed to elaborate further on
women’s personal journeys into guerrilla participation. These two prominent motivational factors have been used across social class and ethnic groups. The data collected for this study supports and further elaborates on these two main motivational narratives. Personal and family networks and Christian based organizations were among the two most prominent motivational triggers reported by respondents in my study. However, they also reported personal and/or social repression and political ideology as major motivations as well. In the context of motivational factors for peasant women’s joining the revolutionary guerrilla, it is important to understand these four repeated patterns as intersecting with one another instead of viewing them as separate motivations. Thus, the major motivations that peasant women from the two rural communities in Cabañas and Chalatenango identified were: (1) personal and family networks, (2) participation in Christian based organization, (3) military repression, and (4) development of socio-political ideology. A detailed analysis of these four categories will be developed in Chapter 3.

**Importance of Family Networks and Revolutionary Tradition**

The two opening quotations for this chapter exemplify the importance of family networks and the influence of these family ties in these women’s decisions to incorporate into the guerrilla movement. Luz’s and Chila’s main motivation to join the guerrillas was the persecution and murder of a close family member. Many other women experienced this situation as well. Personal and family prosecution forced many peasant women to incorporate into the guerrilla as a means to save their own and their families’ lives. Persecution and repression was common during this period, especially in communities controlled by the FMLN guerrilla because the military did not draw any distinctions between guerrilla members and the civilian population. Family members of
individuals who were involved with or even suspected to be in the guerrillas were killed even if they were not organized or supporters. There were secret branches of the military whose main purpose was to persecute and kill people who were labeled as “subversive” and against the government. The military government sent out teams known as “Escuadrones de la Muerte” [death squads]. These repressive groups had a great deal of power, and they abused it in many ways without any fear of repercussion.

Additionally, some women stated that they joined the guerrillas because their husbands had joined previously. Consider the following statement: “I joined because of my husband, to be with him and help him out” (Ana; interview 2012). This statement represents the immediate factor that led Ana to join the guerrillas. However, it is not the only one, because later in the interview she revealed her church activism through the Christian base communities and her family’s involvement in the struggle. This is important to highlight because often peasant women’s motivations to join the guerrillas have been solely attributed to husbands, fathers or other male family member who have influence or even force women’s participation in the revolution. Ana’s example, however, complicates this assumption by demonstrating that a deeper understanding of women’s motivations reveal complex and intersecting motivational factors.

Another major motivation for women to join was family traditions of resistance. Consider Rita’s statement: “All my family was in this struggle. Some of my siblings had died already. And we were always taught we had to work for it, to be part of the process, and to be involved [in the revolutionary struggle]” (Rita; interview 2012). Rita’s motivation reflects the importance of family influence in ideology and commitment to the revolutionary effort. Rita’s mother, father and older siblings had been involved in the
struggle since she was a young child. So when she got older, she felt a commitment to her family’s historical tradition, to continue their revolutionary work and their tradition of resistance. Consequently, she found herself deeply committed to the revolution.

Similarly to Rita’s case, Roxana’s main motivation to join the struggle was shaped by family tradition, “When I joined, the war was almost over. It was 1989. I joined because of family tradition. All my family had been involved [in the guerrilla], and they both [mother and father] died as guerrilla members. That’s what motivated me the most.” (Roxana; interview 2012) Roxana’s case sheds light on the importance of family ties. Even if she never had the opportunity to really know her parents because she was a young child when both of them died, she still held this strong commitment to her revolutionary activist family tradition. Roxana’s revolutionary commitment might be a result of her grandmother’s effort to keep the family’s revolutionary traditions alive. Roxana’s grandmother, the person who raised her, maintained the memories and revolutionary sacrifice of Roxana’s parents alive in Roxana’s consciousness. Therefore, this indirect family revolutionary tradition and participation, reinforced by her grandmother, played a crucial role in Roxana’s decision to join the guerrilla movement.

Similarly to Rita and Roxana, many others were motivated to join the guerrillas due to their families’ traditions and commitment to the struggle. Direct family ties were an influential force in many women’s decision to join the guerrilla either through family traditions or through ideological familial influence. However, another prominent and even complementary reason provided by interviewees was the influence of the Christian based organizations in each of their communities.
Communities Influenced by Christian Base Organizations and Liberation Theology

Liberation theology and Christian base organizations (CBO) were prominent in both rural communities included in this study. Out of the seventeen women interviewed, ten of them stated that they had been part of a Christian base organization before joining the guerrilla, and that this involvement was their primary motivation to join. The remaining seven women highlighted other primary motivations for joining, but religious beliefs were articulated through the liberation theology concepts of justice and solidarity for the poor. This fact, demonstrates their exposure and familiarity with liberation theology philosophy through community church base organizations. As a result, peasant women’s participation in Christian base organizations seems to be one of the most important motivations for joining the guerrilla struggle.

Liberation theology spread throughout Latin American in the 1970s and is most associated with Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez who is credited with developing the concept (Berryman, 1987, p.24). During the late 1970s and early 1980s the spread of liberation theology was prominent in multiple areas of El Salvador, mainly through Jesuits priests who strongly identified and promoted liberation theology philosophy and religious practice. Jesuits priest were strongly committed to liberation theology, one of the most well-known Jesuits priests who dedicated his life to liberation theology philosophy and pedagogy was Father Ignacio Ellacuría. As a matter of fact, Ellacuría was one of the six Jesuits priests who died in the University of Central America UCA campus massacre in 1989. The military branch, known as death squads, was responsible for this massacre as a response to the Jesuits outspoken opposition to the military repression used by the government (Burke, 2000). Ellacuría was a Spanish
priest who had been assigned to work in El Salvador. Over time, he became radicalized and highly committed to the Salvadoran people’s struggle due to his personal experiences of and witnessing of political repression, poverty and injustice.

Liberation Theology’s themes resonated with the revolutionary Salvadoran context, but also with the larger Latin American multi-nation struggle for economic freedom and social justice. Liberation theology sought to apply religious faith both to critique unjust economic systems and to motivate the poor and oppressed to create awareness about socio-economic systems that create unjust social inequalities thus justifying social activism to change such structures (Berryman 1987). Liberation Theology was part of a change in the Catholic Church’s approach to religiosity in which specific action was taken in order to promote social justice. This practical application placed an emphasis on people’s everyday life experiences and connected through biblical study groups the biblical teachings relevant to people’s lives (Levine, 1992, p. 39-40). During the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s in El Salvador there was a period of intense persecution of the church focused on those inspired by Liberation Theology. Many Jesuit priests, religious women and even catechists were singled out and murdered by military forces.

It is important to highlight the fact that Christian base organizations started to be active before liberation theology. For instance, the existence of Christian base organizations in El Salvador has been traced as back as far as 1968 under the leadership of a priest named Father Jose Alas. According to Jenny Pearce, Jose Alas was one of the first priests who tried to implement techniques of consciousness raising among his followers, and he established the first Christian base organizations in El
Salvador in 1969 (Pearce, 1986 p.104). According to Alas, peasants who participated in CBOs discovered “that they were not kings, they were the slaves.” This realization motivated peasants to work towards land reform and become more critical about their situation as a poor and landless peasantry (Pearce, 1986, p. 103). Church base communities or Christian based organizations [Comunidades Eclesiales de Base] are defined “as small lay-led communities, motivated by Christian faith, that see themselves as part of the church and that are committed to working together to improve their communities and to establish a more just society.” (Berryman, 1987, p. 64) Therefore, these organizations served as a space to promote consciousness raising, in which peasants were able to create a new way of thinking about themselves and their communities through biblical study groups.

Christian base organizations were mainly present in the rural parts of El Salvador. The two rural communities included in this study might exemplify this fact. For instance, the great majority of women interviewed in this study reported being active in Christian base organization within their communities. In these groups, they were exposed to the concepts of liberation theology and political theory through consciousness raising practices and exercises. Biblical study was popular in both of these rural communities. Through the process of Bible study, participants were able to develop critical thinking skills and share everyday life problems with one another as means to develop and achieve solutions to community concerns and structural social problems. Many women became active in politico-military organizations through CBOs, which were the “primary embodiment of liberation theology” (Berryman, 1987, p. 63). Christian base organizations further enhanced a practiced liberation theology. Most
interviewed women reported a strong commitment to Christian base organizations, which demonstrated the pivotal role that these organizations played in women’s lives. This might suggest that Christian base organizations were crucial to peasant women’s revolutionary mobilization and long-term participation. To further illustrate this relationship, consider Bella’s history of her participation in the FPL, which was one of the five politico-military organizations that constituted the FMLN guerrillas. She describes liberation theology’s connection to her revolutionary mobilization as follows:

We joined because we saw that it was necessary. First, I thought it was personal help, to help one self to get away from the ignorance we were at, to see the reality we lived in. We ignored the reality… in the organization we started with biblical reflections. My husband gave biblical reflections and guidance from the documents of Medellin where they made pamphlets to liberate people… we started with biblical reflections, and after that, repression came. They [the military] did not let us have our meetings because they said we were Marxists and Leninists. They said that we were teaching Marxism. We were excommunicated from the church, and after that we created the FPL (Bella; interview 2012)

As Bella’s story illustrates, her participation in the FPL started through the Christian base community organizations. The base membership for the FPL was mainly created by the members of CBO in this particular community. This was true for many other women from both communities who were radicalized in Christian based organizations and later one participated in the FMLN guerrilla. In addition, her story also represents the fact that the religious approach was highly dependent on the priests in charge of the communities. In this case, the previous priest embraced liberation theology in this community, and he supported and further enhanced the Christian base communities. However, he was persecuted by the military, and forced to leave. Due to this fact, a new priest came to the community. This priest was conservative in his
doctrine, so he excommunicated all members of the Christian base community groups and banned the practice of liberation theology.

Additionally, it is important to acknowledge the role that the church played under liberation theology to provide women with a space to participate in political and philosophical debates, which ultimately radicalized their ideologies or viewpoints. It is well known that the most active participants of many Christian, religious movements and churches have been women. As a result, the church has been perceived as a proper place for women to meet or work together. However in this case, the church and the biblical study groups became an avenue for men and women’s participation in social justice issues and political consciousness raising. Therefore, Bella’s statement is useful to further understand rural women’s motivation to participate in the revolution. They were heavily influenced by their previous knowledge, activism and radicalization gained through their involvement with Christian base organizations in their respective communities.

Christian base communities and liberation theology were a strong influence that motivated many men and women to join the revolutionary struggle in both of the rural communities included in this study. Similarly to Bella, Irina’s experience further illustrates the importance of CBOs in rural communities and its influence on women’s conviction to join the revolution.

To tell you the truth, the majority of people from this community who joined the struggle came out of Christian base organizations, that's where our formation started. We started creating consciousness about our reality. We had Bible studies circles, and we were around sixty young people. Every week, five nuns and a priest would come visit us. We all were committed to liberation theology back then… those studies helped us understand the Bible and apply it to our reality. That way, we realized how we had our eyes
closed, only praying, praying and praying without realizing that we were being exploited. (Irina; interview 2012)

As this quotation reveals, Christian base communities were crucial to peasant women’s consciousness raising and political participation. Most women interviewed in this community made reference to their religious beliefs of justice for the poor and equality, which they developed through liberation theology and the Christian base communities. Furthermore all women interviewed, with the exception younger women, stated that they were part of Christian base communities during the 1970s and 1980s. The younger women interviewed were not part of Christian base communities because they were young children during this period. Therefore, Christian base communities were a major motivational factor for peasant women’s participation in the FMLN guerrillas since it provided a space not only to develop socio-political consciousness through biblical studies, but also to radicalize their beliefs and ideologies of equity and justice. This contributed to these women in joining and supporting the guerrilla movement.

The two communities studied in this thesis confirm the pivotal role that Christian base organizations played in understanding peasant women’s motivation and participation. Regrettably, these motivations have been long ignored. Most scholars have challenged the notion of women as apolitical beings. However, they have only placed their attention on urban women who were union members, teachers, and/or students (Luciak 2001, Kampwirth 2002, and Shayne 2004). Often, these women were able to develop their political consciousness through their access to higher education and labor movements according to the dominant narrative on women’s guerrilla participation. However, this narrative ignores peasant women and their paths towards
political consciousness development and guerrilla participation. In addition, Viterna (2006) argues that peasant women in El Salvador were pushed or forced into activism due to their social location as peasant women, but they had not developed a strong ideology or commitment to the revolution prior to their mobilization. Her study found that these peasant’s women’s participation was mostly circumstantial, which ignores the influence of women’s social and political ideology in their guerrilla mobilization. In contrast, Viterna explains peasant women’s mobilization as a multiple intersecting factors were changing contexts, biographical characteristics, and personal networks were the most important factors determining their participation. She states these women were mainly pushed or persuaded into guerrilla activism due to the intersection of multiple social characteristics and situational contexts.

While this analysis is helpful to better understand peasant women’s mobilization into guerrilla movements, this approach is also limiting in the sense that it ignores women’s agency and conscious decision making abilities. As a result, this narrative ignores peasant women’s agency and socio-political commitment to the FMLN guerrilla, which has further silenced an important aspect of peasant women’s guerrilla motivations for mobilization. The narratives shared by the women in these two rural communities challenge prominent narratives in guerrilla women’s literature by demonstrating the significant role of Christian based communities in rural areas. Women were able to develop socio-political consciousness and radicalized their views and beliefs to the extent that they were committed to join the revolutionary struggle. Another important aspect in the creation of strong personal and political convictions that influenced many
peasant women interviewed in this study to join the guerrilla movement was their experiences with governmental repression by Salvadoran military forces.

State Repression

State repression was a major motivation identified by women from these two communities in Chalatenango and Cabañas. Many of these women reported state or governmental repression as the main reason for their involvement in the FMLN guerrillas. They either experienced it directly themselves or witnessed it at the local community level. Military repression and persecution against the civilian population was prominent in both rural communities in this study. As it has been mentioned before, these two communities were impacted by the close location of guerrilla camps; so they were perceived as “red territory” by the Salvadoran armed forces. This meant that military repression was equally applied to the residents of the entire village. Everyone who lived in these two communities was considered a national threat. The military forces labeled all village inhabitants as “subversives”, which was the dominant discourse at the time. A subversive was anyone who did not agree with the military regime, and therefore, a threat to national security. Due to this extreme repressive context, military forces targeted entire villages where houses and agricultural acreage, primarily corn fields, were burned and destroyed. As a result, many people could not subsist in these communities. In addition, these actions and government strategies were a way to prevent guerrilla members’ survival in the mountains since they depended on village people and resources to maintain their basic needs, such as food and water.

Many women shared their experiences of persecution by the military forces by explaining that in their communities almost all civil population was targeted by military forces. Consider the following testimony: “Ever since the military troops came here, we
had to leave our houses because they persecuted everyone, so we had to leave” (Ana; interview 2012). This quotation demonstrates the fact that military troops persecuted everyone, regardless of their association with the FMLN guerrillas. Due to this repressive environment, many women decided to join the guerrillas after witnessing government repression in their communities. “There were a lot of people who were leaving because of bombs, military attacks and threats. When Monsignor Romero started to come to the community, that’s when it got worse…I decided to stay with them [the guerrillas] because you could see all the injustices.” (Silvia; Interview 2012) Silvia’s testimony illustrates the repressive conditions under which people had to live during the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s. This experience influenced her decision to join the guerrillas because she did not want to keep running away from military repression, and she also committed herself to working for social justice.

Many women interviewed identify state repression as a major personal motivation to join the guerrillas. Many women experienced repression directly where a relative had been violently murdered by the military, as in the case of Lucia whose quote opens this chapter. Luz’s seventeen year old daughter was raped, tortured and killed by Salvadoran military forces. Lucia’s indignation motivated her to join and work for the guerrillas throughout the entire twelve years of the civil war. State repression against civilians was cruel, especially against women. Consider the following testimony,

In the village where I lived, they [the military] killed five women. They took them out of their houses at 5am naked, naked, naked. They took them to the river and threw water in their genital parts. After that, they raped them, and then killed them. All that just because they were women. We went to see them afterwards when the dogs were eating their bodies. All my mom did was to bring a blanket to cover their bodies. And that was normal back then. Women were worth nothing. They [the military] could follow and kill women. (Francisca; interview 2012)
A deeper analysis of this testimony and Luz’s daughter case shows the way in which military repression could be gendered based. Francisca’s testimony about the five women who were raped and killed demonstrates the gender dimension of repressive military actions. It is well known that military forces used cruel methods of torture and public intimidation during this period. However, there has not been an in-depth analysis of government initiated gender based violence. As Francisca states: “all that just because they were women” and “that was normal back then”. Military repression against women was gendered since it promoted sexual and general violence against women. These women were not guerrilla members according to Francisca, but they still experienced government violence, as a way to intimidate people, but especially the women from the village.

Many women related cases in which they witnessed violence against women from military forces where rape and sexual violence were common. Women’s testimonies showed how rape and sexual violence against women was normalized in Salvadoran society during the civil war. There were women who even joined the guerrillas because they felt their involvement offered them protection and they felt safer there. Consider the following quotation, “my daughter told me that she preferred to get killed in the mountains fighting [with the guerrillas], instead of being taken and raped [by the military forces]” (Bella; interview 2012). The gender dimension of military repression is important to highlight since repression is often taken as a uniformed experience, when in reality men and women from different social locations experience it differently. For example according to interviewed informants, cases of public torture and rape were exclusive to rural areas where peasant women were the primary victims of this from of
state gender violence and repression. Many similar testimonies of peasant women can be found in rural communities where the military forces were especially cruel due to extremist nationalist ideologies and the belief that these actions supported national security.

One of the main reasons that fueled the revolutionary war in El Salvador was extreme government repression against almost all sectors of Salvadoran society. However, it must be recognize that women were more vulnerable to sexual abuse and violence because of their gender status. Similarly to Luz’s case, consider the following quotation from Maria Serrano in the film Maria’s Story, which illustrates the extreme levels of sexual violence against women and the use of it as a mean not only to generate fear among the population, but also to demoralize the guerrillas.

I had never felt that much hatred against the enemy until they killed my daughter. Not only because they killed her, but because after she was dead, they undressed her and cut her into pieces. They inserted a knife inside her and cut her up into two pieces. If you could know the rage I feel. (Serrano, 1992)

Like Maria’s daughter, there were many women who were victims of atrocious acts of sexual abuse and violence. These experiences can be understood as an extension of gender inequality and the undermining of women’s dignity and bodies. Symbolically, rape and sexual violence against women by the military represented the violence and subjugation of the Salvadorian people by the repressive military state.

In addition, many women who shared these testimonies also mentioned that this type of state repression was not only enacted by military forces, but also by “the civil defenses”. The civil defense groups were made up of civilians or people from various nearby communities who joined and/or supported the Salvadoran military forces for protection. These civil defense groups were made up of men from the community, and
their role was to identify people who were involved in the guerrillas or supported the guerrillas. Civil defense groups were as repressive as military soldiers, and they were especially involved in many cases of rape in rural communities. This fact, demonstrates gender inequalities in Salvadoran society strongly rooted in patriarchal systems, where rape and violence against women was used as a weapon of war, and it was even normalized. Therefore, state repression played a crucial role in women’s decision to join the guerrillas due to civil population repression and gendered based violence, as well. Additionally, many women expressed that they had witnessed military repression in their communities and economic disparities in the country. This further contributed to the developed of their political ideology of opposition to the government.

**Personal and Political Ideology**

Personal and political ideologies were another important factor for women’s incorporation in the guerrilla movement. These ideological beliefs generally include land reform, and social justice ideals. For example, consider Iliana’s motivation for joining the FMLN guerrillas:

I joined when the organization first started in 1973. I was part of FECAS [Peasant Workers Federation]. What motivated me to organize was because here [her community] has always been an agricultural society. The vast majority of people did not have their own land, and they all had to work as temporary workers for other people [the land owners]. The popular struggle was for land. I didn’t fight for land for myself because to be honest, my family had land, but I felt bad that most people had to go really far to harvest and work the land… I was already incorporated in the FPL. I joined when I was 39 years old. I dedicated myself to the people’s struggle from 1977 until 1991, full time! (Iliana; interviewed 2012)

Iliana’s main motivation for joining the revolution was her previous experience in the FECAS organization, where peasants organized themselves to achieve land reform. Therefore, before she joined the guerrillas, she already had activist and organizational
experience through FECAS where she learned multiple leadership skills. In addition, she was also part of a Christian based community in her town. Similarly to Iliana, there were many women who stated that they were already part of either FECAS or the FPL before joining the FMLN guerrillas. Consider this quote from Rosibel: “I was part of the FLP in the 1970’s. We wanted land to work on, we started the movement” (Rosibel; interview 2012). Thus, many women from these two communities were either aware of or part of land reform movements during the 1970’s. This fact demonstrates that many peasant women were politically active before joining the FMLN guerrillas. This disproves the dominant notion that peasant women joined the revolution because they were either forced to due to the circumstances, as Viterna suggests, or they simply joined without having a political or ideological cause to join the struggle.

In terms of political ideology, many women also made insightful comments during the interviews regarding their ideological motivations to join the revolutionary struggle. Consider Roxana’s explanation of her involvement: “I joined because the country needed changes. Here [El Salvador] poverty has always been terrible. The government has never worried about people’s basic needs to have a decent quality of life” (Roxana; interview 2012). Similar to Roxana, many women alluded to their experiences of poverty and social inequalities as a major motivational factor. Many women from these two communities grew up experiencing injustice and repression, and they consciously decided it was time to do something about it. Women, like men, developed a sense of social consciousness and responsibility. As Linda Rief suggests, this fact disproves the idea that women are rendered apolitical by patriarchal attitudes.
as Schmidt had argued before (Rief, 1986). Once again the notion that women are apolitical, and especially peasant women, is challenged by these women’s testimonies.

Chapter 3 has highlighted the major motivations women in both rural communities identified as important decision factors for their participation in the FMLN guerrilla movement. All the motivations discussed above should be understood as multiple intersecting forces, as opposed to single motivations that are independent from one another. In most cases, all of these motivations were intertwined throughout the women’s multi-dimensional personal journeys into guerrilla participation.
CHAPTER 4
WHAT WERE WOMEN’S ROLES AND PARTICIPATION IN THE REVOLUTION?

Women played a determinant role in the revolution because I think that the objectives that we had as a movement, without women, they would have been unattainable. Tell me, what would they have done without women? They needed the involvement of both [men and women]. Even if there was discrimination in the organization because they [men] didn’t want to make a tortilla or fry an egg, Dios guarde! Only women!

(Roxana; interview 2012)

Women were important in the war because they served as cooks, as paramedics, and as radio operators. In everything! There were women fighting with their rifles. When I saw this, it made me feel good because it showed that women were able to do the same things men do.

(Chila; interview 2012)

Women demonstrated their capabilities as combatants and leaders. We showed those abilities that were hidden. It was a great lesson to men who always used to think that women were weak. They would say, damn it! We are always talking about how women are weak and now they [women] are showing us the opposite.

(Irina; interview 2012)

The above quotations and images provided at the end of Chapter 4 in Figure 4-1 and Figure 4-2 represent the multiple areas in which women participated in the FMLN guerrillas. Figure 4-1 represents guerrilla women performing traditional female roles, as paramedics within the organization. In contrast, Figure 4-2 depicts guerilla women performing non-traditional female roles, as military combatants. Much of the literature has focused on revolutionary women who performed non-traditional female roles and/or held high level leadership positions within the FMLN guerrilla structure, either as combatants or leaders [politico-military commanders] (Luciak 2001, Kampwirth 2002, Roggeveen 2003, Sajjad 2004). In addition, the literature which describes guerrilla
women’s personal accounts are also dominated by urban women who held important leadership positions in the FMLN guerrilla structure. Examples of these urban women are Nidia Diaz and Lorena Peña who have been able to write their own books about their war experiences (Diaz 1991, Peña 2009). These three women exceeded expectations in their leadership roles within the revolutionary struggle, and they are also urban women who functioned in high status level/roles within the FMLN. Therefore, their experiences are not representative of the majority of women who participated in the FMLN guerrillas.

Peasant women’s roles and participation in the guerrilla organization has not been deeply discussed by scholars. To this date, peasant women have not produced literature of their own war experiences with the exception of Maria Serrano who participated in a documentary in collaboration with Catherine M. Ryan, Pamela Cohen, Monona Wali, Alma Martinez, and Edward J. Olmos. This famous documentary titled Maria’s Story, feature’s comandante Maria Serrano from Chalatenango, in which she narrates her story as a peasant guerrilla woman (Serrano, 2010). Throughout the film, Serrano’s guerrilla experience resonates with that of the women I was able to interview for this study. However, it is important to note that there was a fundamental difference in Maria’s guerrilla experience and the women from the two communities studied in this project. Due to her talent and revolutionary commitment, Serrano was able to achieve a leadership position as a political-military strategist within the FMLN guerrilla movement. As a result, she enjoyed significant authority, respect and recognition within the guerrilla organization, which most peasant women who performed domestic labor or traditional female roles did not. Therefore, Serrano’s guerrilla experience is not representative of
most peasant women, much less those women who performed domestic and traditional female roles in the FMLN guerrillas.

The experiences of peasant women’s and their work in the FMLN guerrilla have been largely ignored in Salvadoran revolutionary women’s literature. It is important to acknowledge that women’s roles and participation in the revolution was influenced by women’s social locations. Intersecting factors, such as class and gender often determined the roles they performed within the guerrilla organization. Women contributed in different capacities and extent according to their skills and degrees of commitment. The important intersection of class and gender has been often ignored by scholars who seek to describe revolutionary women’s experience in guerrilla movements. However, Linda Reif, briefly alludes to the importance of gender and class while assessing barriers that women from different classes experience in guerrilla movements’ activism. Reif highlights gender and class inequalities in terms of low education, low income, few marketable skills and major domestic responsibilities (Reif, 1986). Peasant women’s participation in the guerrillas was highly determined by all these factors since most of them did not have the opportunity to attend school either due to patriarchal norms or due to the lack of economic resources. Many of the women interviewed for this project did not know how to read or write during their participation in the guerrillas, and some of them are still in the process of learning. In addition, they were highly responsible for domestic tasks and the care of children. Therefore, peasant women were significantly disadvantaged compared to urban women, who had more access to resources such as education, and peasant men who held higher status than peasant women in all areas of life. “The double disadvantage of gender and class, is
reflected in studies of conventional politics that show that low socioeconomic status decreases women’s activism more profoundly than it does men’s” (Rief, 1986, p. 152). Due to the intersection of gender and class discrimination, peasant women’s roles and contributions to the revolutionary struggle have often been ignored and undervalued.

Women challenged their traditional gender roles by stepping out of their homes, the private sphere, and into the public sphere by joining the guerrillas. However, women performed traditional and non-traditional female roles during the revolution. Traditional female roles include jobs such as cooks, care givers either as paramedics or as family care givers. In addition, radio operators and general educators were often associated as more gender appropriate for women. Non-traditional female roles usually include military and political work. Many women performed traditional and non-traditional female roles, and sometimes even both at the same time during the revolutionary struggle. Due to patriarchal ideologies and attitudes strongly rooted in Salvadoran society, the subordination of women and their relegation to the domestic sphere was prominent within the guerrilla structure. This led to the undervaluing of women’s feminine roles and their contributions to the revolutionary struggle.

As an effort to highlight peasant women’s importance in the revolution, Chapter 4 mainly focuses on women’s traditional female roles within the guerrilla structure and their contributions to the revolution. Most women in this study performed traditional female roles within the guerrilla structure. Table 4-1, provided at the end of Chapter 4 summarizes the roles performed by women from both communities in order to better understand the multiple areas in which women participated during the revolution.
Table 4-1 shows that most women who participated in this study performed jobs as cooks, as paramedics and as political cadre/activists. Even though political cadre or activist work could be classified as a non-traditional female role since it deals with political knowledge and strategy, this job was also seen as appropriate for women because they had to interact with people and entire communities in order to increase civilian support for the FMLN guerrillas. It also included political education to different sectors of the civil population and to guerrilla members, as well.

It is important to highlight the fact that peasant women were more likely to be part of the masses or guerrilla bases, and to perform traditional female roles within the organization. Most of them did not have much education and the skills necessary to occupy leadership roles within the structure. However, there were many peasant women who were military combatants and leaders of political cadre.

Peasant women were over represented in the guerrilla camps' kitchens. They were the majority functioning in this indispensable, but undervalued job. “In the kitchen, the majority were women. There were only two men in the kitchen. The leader of the cooks was a man, but he just gave orders. He wasn’t the one making the tortillas.” (Rita; interview 2012) Most women interviewed stated that many women worked as cooks or as paramedics in the guerrillas. Four women interviewed shared their experiences as cooks themselves. In addition, almost all women interviewed described a time when they were cooks in the guerrilla camps even if they had another job in the organization. Most of them stated that they decided to join or “help” the cooks because of solidarity, because it was a hard job that did not receive any recognition. Most participants mentioned the fact that being a cook was a difficult job given that the guerrilla camps did
not have the means to cook and feed large groups of people. Also, women who were cooks had to constantly move around and find creative ways to cook with limited resources. Also it is important to note that the guerrilla camps were always moving and changing locations in the mountains or woods. The cooks had to carry all the pots and pans and other cooking utensils on top of their own survival backpack. “It wasn’t easy [to be a cook]. We had to starve and be under the rain. We couldn’t even sleep. It wasn’t easy… we had to carry all the pans, but sometimes the combatants would help us carry them. But they weren’t always helping out with kitchen stuff” (Rosibel; interview 2012). As expressed by Rosibel, cooks were responsible for carrying all cooking supplies and for finding food provisions. Even though being a cook was not a prestigious position in the guerrillas, it involved a lot of creativity and sacrifice to feed people in guerrilla camps. There were women who were in charge of feeding large groups of people. “The guerrilla camps had around 100 people each… we [cooks] had to get up really early to make tortillas, and when we [guerrilla camps] took over villages, we had to cook all night long [for guerrilla members and the village people]” (Rosibel; interview 2012). According to all the women interviewed, the vast majority of cooks were women which shows the gendered distribution of labor where women were assigned to traditional domestic duties.

Another major role performed by women in the guerrilla structure was as paramedics or nurses. This position was crucial to the health and survival of guerrilla members and people who were part of the masses, as well. Paramedics or nurses performed multiple roles. In combat, they were charged with attending wounded guerrilla members. They were also in charge with carrying medicine and the guerrilla
camps first aid kit everywhere they went. Consider the following statements: “I treated the wounded in combat. I cleaned them up, injected them and treated them to send them to a second place [little hospital-like places hidden in the mountains to treat wounded guerrilla members]” (Silvia; interview 2012). There were women who learned to be paramedics really early by watching others who mentored their interests in medicine. For example, Elsy learned a lot from a doctor at the Mesa Grande refugee camp in Honduras. When she joined the guerrillas, she became one of the best combat paramedics. Consider Elsy’s recall about her experience in Mesa Grande as a nursing assistant, “At 12 years old, I was the one that gave shots to people. They came to see me. The nurses would tell me the symptoms, like I was a doctor there. I felt so proud of myself!” (Elsy; interview 2012) She joined the guerrillas when she was thirteen years old, and she performed the role of a combat paramedic until the end of the war. There were men who were paramedics, as well, but the majority of guerrilla members who chose this job were women. Paramedics were indispensable to the survival and medical treatment of guerrilla combatants. In addition, women who performed these roles were highly valued in guerrilla camps since they were the “doctors” of the groups or camps. These women were also taught how to use firearms, rifles, and they had to carry their own, as well. In the case of active combat, they could protect themselves. Therefore, they held a more prestigious status than that of the cooks because they were closer to be combatants. Combat paramedics were essentially combatants who specialized in the medical treatment of the troops.

Peasant women were highly present in political and community activist work. Political and activist work consisted of creating popular support for the revolution.
through the development of social consciousness and political education. This work was done within the guerrillas and outside with the civilian population in order to promote the revolutionary cause. Within the guerrillas expansion work consisted of organizing people and creating consciousness about the political situation in the country. Consider Illiana’s description of her work in this area,

I was part of political cadre work. I had to organize people all around. What I did was to talk to people and let them know about the situation they were living under. I used to tell them that the only way to do something about it was through organizing [the community]. Even still now, I have that same idea that without organization, there is no solution. (Iliana; interview 2012)

Iliana was in charge of guiding political consciousness groups for urban based guerrillas. She worked with university students even though she was a peasant woman who had only finished high school. However, she was knowledgeable about political theory and the political situation of the revolution in El Salvador due to her long activism in peasant and guerrilla movements. Therefore, she was constantly asked to share her political knowledge with new members. Similarly to Iliana, Eva de Rosa describes her political cadre or activist work in Nicaragua. She was in charge of raising political consciousness among Salvadoran guerrilla members who were recuperating in Nicaragua. And at the same time, she was promoting social consciousness and support for the revolution among Salvadorans who resided in Nicaragua, many who were refugees from the civil war.

I was incorporated in political consciousness raising within the guerrilla members that were in the struggle, but they didn’t fully understand the political implications of that participation… I was in political/activist work because we were raising consciousness with Salvadorans that lived in Nicaragua (Eva de Rosa; interview 2012).
Irina also shared her experience as an expansion worker. She was in charge of promoting protest and revolutionary culture within the guerrilla camps, the masses and civilian population living in FMLN controlled territory. “In 1983 they transferred me to be part of expansion work. I was in charge of popular culture, and there, we were in charge of protest music. I wrote so many songs. It is so sad [because in the process,] I lost all my notebooks” (Irina; interview 2012). Therefore, as these examples demonstrate, women were key elements to the spread of political consciousness and education. They not only worked with guerrilla members, but also with the civilian population. In addition, they were in charge of promoting and spreading the ideas of the revolutionary culture, which was indispensable to the FMLN guerrilla’s popular support, and therefore, reproduction or ability to survive. Even though, political cadre and activist work was highly important to the revolutionary struggle since the guerrillas would have never been able to be as successful, much less to survive without popular support from unincorporated people, this type of work was not recognized as important or indispensable to the revolutionary effort. Women dominated this kind of work since it was seen as “working with the people”. This kind of work is automatically associated with women’s work, due to the traditional notion of women being more sociable and caring more about people. In addition, this kind of work was undervalued since it was associated with femininity while masculine work such as taking up arms was glorified in guerrilla culture (Kampwirth, 2002, Shayne 2004, Murguialday 1996).

Building on this fact, Shayne and Robnett’s have coined the terms “gendered bridge leaders” and “bridge leaders” respectively. As described earlier in the paper, Shayne’s idea of women as gendered bride leaders alludes to the fact that women’s
gender and social constructions of femininity allowed women to mobilize more freely and take action with less suspicion during the war. “Stereotypical notions of femininity allowed women to perform dangerous tasks partially protected by their femininity” (Shayne, 2004). Strong patriarchal notions of femininity, in which women are seen as submissive and apolitical, allowed women to have more freedom of movement since they were able to deceive the Salvadoran military forces more easily. “As a result of femininity and even sexism, women revolutionaries were able to create logistical support bridges, as well as bridges between the leftist movement and the masses” (Shayne, 2004, p.44). The non-threatening image of femininity allowed women to carry out multiple functions within the guerrilla structure. For instance, women performed multiple clandestine missions in order to transport armament, money, food, clothes, and medicine in support to the guerrilla’s existence.

Consider the following testimonies: Luz, who was a messenger and transported armament during the war states, “For men the war was more difficult because women raised less suspicion than men. I was really careful to not be suspicious. One has to be dynamic, and not say what one does. I even hid armament in flowerpots that I used to sell. One had to be creative and plan things right.” (Luz; interview 2012) According to Luz, women had an advantage over men due to gender based feminine roles where they were much less suspicious than men. However, in Luz’s case, it was not only a matter of gender, but also age expectations since Luz was a mature woman when she was doing this work. Similarly to Luz, Eva de Rosa shared her multiple experiences as a guerrilla member covering up for the fabrication of explosives in an artisan store where she sold paintings. In addition, she was in charge of transporting money between El
Salvador and Nicaragua at the time. Eva de Rosa was carrying a significant amount of money for the guerrillas, and the Salvadoran military was checking bags at the airport. She was nervous and thought it was the end of her revolutionary activism. However, instead, she thought about asking for help from the military officer in charge.

I went up to him and I told him that my son was sick, that he had been vomiting. I told him, I want to get out of here fast, so could you please check my bags fast because my son can’t handle this anymore… So he said, “Oh yes madam, I can do that.” He picked up my son and my suitcase and said, “I won’t check your bags.” He took my passport to immigration and he himself took me out of there! I don’t even know how I thought about that, and that man, he had a nice attitude towards me. Everyone was worried about me because that was the first time that the military was there [in the airport]. But at the end, if it is not your turn, it is not. [Laughs] (Eva de Rosa; interview 2012)

As these previous anecdotes illustrate, guerrilla women were more able to deceive military forces due to their gender and the perception of their traditional feminine within Salvadoran society. Furthermore, Robnett’s description of women as bridge leaders is especially useful to understand the role of peasant women as bridge leaders in rural communities’ controlled by the FMLN guerrillas. These women were the ones who worked to create political consciousness in their communities to support the guerrilla movement. In addition, these women were in charge of collecting resources, such as food and clothes from the communities to send to the guerrilla camps in the mountains. Consider Jessenia’s experience, “I was always helping the guerrillas through the community. If they [the guerrilla camps] needed food, I would come and organize women in the community [to get food]” (Jessenia; interviewed 2012).

These women were not only responsible for supporting the guerrillas with food and resources, but also they promoted and nurtured popular revolutionary culture in their communities. Many of the women interviewed stated that they worked in
consciousness raising activities to gain support for the guerrillas, especially women working on political activism. For example, Irina always enjoyed working with the people, the masses, as they were called. When Irma was doing her political work, she would go to the villages and talk to people there, help them out with their domestic chores and gain their trust. She worked to build positive relationships with the people, so that they would have a good concept of the guerrillas and support them when needed.

There were ladies that made flowers out of dry corn leaves, and we brought it to the people in the villages to show them that up in the mountains, there wasn’t only guerrilla members, there were also many people who were [part of the] the civilian population, and this is what we did. With things like that, little by little we were gaining popular support and that was our work of expansion. (Irina; interview 2012)

In addition, Irina’s work has important to the guerrilla’s information and mobilization since people from local villages and communities were the best resources for this task. As a result, women’s political and activist work served as a bridge between the FMLN guerrillas and the unincorporated civilian population. This work was extremely important since the support from communities and villages was indispensable to the survival and success of the guerrillas in conflict zones. Popular support was essential to the revolutionary effort. Regrettably, this type of work has been long ignored and unappreciated due to its invisibility because primarily women were the ones who were often performing it. As Irina relates:

Many comrades started to realize the importance of our work with the masses, with the people. Some of them would say, now I understand how important your work is. I only have to worry about myself and my rifle. I clean it and that’s it. You have to deal with sick people, wounded people, pregnant women, everything! (Irina; interview 2012)
Irina was not only in charge of expansion, but also of the mobilization of the masses in her area. The masses were people who followed the guerrillas into the mountains because if they stayed in their communities, they would be killed by the military. These were large groups of people including men, women, children and elderly people. According to Irina, her group consisted of approximately four hundred people. This number was considered a normal size for a group of masses, all forced to flee their communities and seek refuge with the guerrillas in the mountains. Therefore, the work of women as bridge leaders was extremely important to the protection of civilian population, as well as the guerrilla population.

It is important to acknowledge guerrilla women, especially the roles of peasant women as bridge leaders because their work was often invisible. Women as bridge leaders performed multiple integral roles to the revolutionary effort by transporting messages, armament, money, food and other kind of resources to the urban and rural guerrillas. In addition, they performed a lot of work with local communities and within refugee camps outside of El Salvador such as those in Honduras near the Salvadoran border. They were able to successfully achieve all these goals and take action due to the accepted societal interpretation of traditional gender roles. These accomplishments were in part because they were expected to do this kind of work by the FMLN guerrilla leadership and on the other hand they were more able to deceive the Salvadoran military forces at the same time.

As noted earlier, a relevant framework to the discussion of women’s traditional female roles is Karen Kampwirth’s classification of high-prestige, mid-prestige and low-prestige members within the guerrilla structure (Kampwirth 2001 and 2004). Using
Kampwirth’s framework, high-prestige members were women who held leadership roles within the guerrilla structure, such as commanders; mid-prestige members were women who performed traditional female roles, but held some sort of leadership or decision making position, such as head of paramedics or head of political expansion work; and low-prestige members were women who performed traditional female work and did not have any sort of leadership position, such as cooks and care givers (Kampwirth, 2004, p.10).

While Karen Kampwirth is a feminist scholar, her classification of high, mid and low prestige guerrilla membership still reproduces patriarchal values in which certain women’s work is valued as inferior and unimportant. According to Kampwirth, “low-prestige participants were much less intensely socialized [in revolutionary culture], probably because the leaders of the organization did not believe they needed to be socialized in such ways in order to effectively carry out their work.” (Kampwirth, 2004, p. 11) However, previous examples have demonstrated that this is not the case. Women who served as cooks, paramedics and expansion workers were all politically aware and even introduced revolutionary ideals within their families and within their communities.

All the women I interviewed studied political ideology and sometimes were introduced to gender equity ideals. All guerrilla members had to go through training where they were taught multiple skills, according to their role within the structure. Many women reported that within the context of this training, they learned how to read and write and sometimes public speaking. In addition throughout the interviews all of the women demonstrated significant political understanding about their participation in the revolutionary war. They also showed high levels of gender awareness when asked
about women’s roles and participation in the revolution. Most of the women interviewed in these two communities were also currently recognized leaders in their respective communities for providing leadership and direction for different community based projects. Therefore, Kampwirth’s assumption that women who performed low-prestige roles within the Salvadoran guerrilla structure did not develop a gender and political consciousness is not supported given the statements by those interviewed for this study.

**How was the revolution different for men and women?**

There were some differences in the ways in which men and women experienced the revolution within the FMLN guerrilla due to gender-based power relations. Multiple scholars have explored unequal gender relations in the revolution by highlighting the uniqueness of women’s experiences as guerrilla members (Rief 1986, Murguialday 1996, Rodriguez and Montoya 1996, Vazquez 1997, Kampwirth 2002). Some of the most prominent themes explored within these works are women’s with motherhood experiences, sexuality issues inside the guerrilla structure, and gender discrimination within the organization. These three themes seem to resonate with women’s experiences in the two rural communities in northern El Salvador. Most of the women who participated in this study identified differences between male and female guerrilla members in the war. According to their testimonies, guerrilla women faced different experiences than guerrilla men due to motherhood, sexual harassment and organizational discrimination.

Ideologically, in the guerrillas, men and women were equal since they had the same rights and responsibilities within the structure. Many of the women interviewed stated that there were no gender differences between male and female guerrilla
members. For example consider Bella’s description of gender relations within the guerrillas, “During that time we were all equal [men and women]. We were really united because we were in the same struggle, and we had the same ideals” (Bella; interview 2012). In this description of gender relations, the ideals of equality, unity and justice are clearly presented in Bella’s statement. These revolutionary ideals were the core of guerrilla ideology, and therefore, male and female militants tried to promote and implement such ideals in their personal relations within the structure. Many of the women interviewed stated that during the war, men and women were treated the same and that they loved and respected each other like brothers and sisters. Most of the women alluded to the experience of solidarity among guerrilla members, no matter their gender. The great majority of the interviewed women in these two communities held positive memories about their relationship with male and female guerrilla comrades. Furthermore, they noted that men respected them much more during the war than before the war because women were seen as guerrilla comrades within the organization. Thus, as guerrilla women, peasant women were better treated and had higher status within the guerrilla structure compared to before the war. The strong sense of solidarity and gender equity is reflected in Rosibel’s memories about her experience in the guerrilla camps:

The war was the same for men and women. There were men and women combatants, and it was like that in everything else. They both participated equally. It was really nice, we were all like siblings. Men respected women. We slept together, and we all respected each other. We shared everything. If a person had one candy, everyone got to lick that candy. (Rosibel; interview 2012)

Additionally, often women based their notions of gender equity through the way jobs and roles were assigned to men and women within the guerrillas. For example,
consider Elsy’s statement: “In the guerrillas there wasn’t a difference between men and women, at least where I was; the job they gave men, the same job they gave women” (Elsy; interview 2012). Elsy’s experience highlights her understanding of equal gender relations based on the same distribution of labor that she was able to experience within her own guerrilla camp.

However, later in the interview she recognized the fact women mostly served as cooks and paramedics. She provides insight about this fact by clarifying that women were more drawn to these jobs because men only wanted to be combatants and the organizations needed both. Elsy’s analysis demonstrated her awareness about gender roles and social expectations from men and women, but she considers both kinds of contribution equally important. However, Elsy’s point of view is not representative of most people since women’s contributions, especially those of cooks has been widely overlooked and undervalued. Some women stated that there were efforts within their guerrilla camps to promote gender equity and to help women better integrate into the struggle. Also many of them stated that women and men were treated equally. However, it is difficult to draw conclusions from these individuals’ experiences. The gender equity efforts seemed to vary in terms of areas and local leaderships, as well. It is important to acknowledge the tendency of many guerrilla members and revolution scholars to romanticize gender relations among male and female combatants during the revolutionary period. As Luciak argues, “There is a tendency among some protagonists and students of Central American revolutions’ to glorify male-female relations during the war” (Luciak, 2001, p. 10). This acknowledgment or reminder is not meant to undermine the fact that many guerrilla leaders and camps might have tried to promote fair and
equal treatment of men and women within the organizational structure. As discussed earlier, many women experienced great levels of respect, solidarity, and unification with their male counterparts. However, it is important to recognize that not all women had the same positive experiences in their gender based relations with male comrades.

Under a patriarchal society where machismo has been deeply rooted in men and institutionalized in cultural practices, there was a constant struggle between revolutionary ideology and actual practice. Justice and equality for all was assumed to be implemented across social classes, but gender was never directly addressed in the revolutionary process. Consider Luciak’s well-articulated explanation of this phenomenon,

FMLN commanders experienced great difficulties when forced to reflect on gender relations in the camps. They believed in a “revolutionary utopia,” which pretended “that the equality desired for the future existed already in the revolutionary nuclei, where all types of differences were decreed eliminated, for example, those existing between men and women… with such conviction, the leadership of the guerrilla groups rejected the validity of an analysis [focusing] on the different situations of men and women within the group. (Luciak, 2001, p. 11)

As this analysis reflects, there was a significant gap between revolutionary ideology and reality, in which unequal power gender relations were avoided. As a result, there were many instances in which gender inequality was detrimental to some women’s experiences within FMLN guerrillas, especially, those who did not have prestigious roles within the organization. To illustrate further the magnitude of this problem, consider the following statement from Facundo Guardado, a well-known FMLN
revolutionary leader: "War is men’s business and as hard as women try, they will never play the same role" (Luciak, 2001, p.1). This assertion demonstrates the patriarchal and machista biases against women’s potential to successfully participate in the public sphere of politics and warfare. Thus, patriarchal expectations and behaviors heavily influenced women’s experiences within the FMLN guerrilla organizations by stressing notable boundaries and differences of gender performativity and relations in Salvadoran society.

The women who noted differences between men and women’s revolutionary experiences highlighted motherhood, sexual harassment and gender discrimination within the guerrilla organization as the main forms in which unequal power relations were translated into their experiences as guerrilla women. When asked about the different roles of male and female participation in the war, often motherhood was the first issue noted in terms of influencing women’s experiences as guerrilla members and/or supporters.

**Motherhood**

Family separation and motherhood were some of the most prominent obstacles women faced when they joined the guerrillas. There is a variety of motherhood experiences since women who joined the guerrillas could be either married or single. Some women were already mothers and others became mothers during their guerrilla participation. Therefore, women’s motherhood experiences were one of the most important differences between male and female combatants in the guerrillas. Women have always been perceived as the base of the family because they are the ones responsible for taking care of the children, doing household chores and assuring the well-being of the family. Thus, the absence of women from the home is often considered
more serious than men’s absence. “Women are the ones who give birth, who carry the kids. The real responsibility is always taken up by women; from the time the child is in the womb, until he/she is an adult” (Irina; interview 2012). As Irina stated in this quotation, many of the women interviewed were responsible for domestic work and the care of children before and during their participation in the guerrilla struggle. Peasant women who lived in conflictive zones, such as the rural communities highlighted in this study, hardly ever had the opportunity to leave their children at home or with a relative since these communities were completely destroyed by the military forces. Therefore, motherhood had profound implication for all women because of their social expectation to care for their children. Some women had to separate from their children. Some others had to keep their children with them under the worst conditions of the war. Motherhood was experience differently by many of the interviewed women because they were mothers either before they joined the guerrilla movement or they became mothers while actively participating in the guerrillas. All women who experienced motherhood during the revolution expressed hardship since they had to leave their children to do their work as guerrilla members or take them with them while performing their jobs. Consider the following statements of women who took their children to the guerrilla fronts because they did not have another option available at the time of the intense persecution:

I was with four kids during the war. It was hard because we had to run with the kids into the woods. One time in the woods, the military rounded us up, and we ran away. I lost three kids the, the oldest ones…. But my daughter was able to bring her siblings back to us! When we [husband and interviewee] couldn’t feed them anymore, we sent them to the refugee camps with my mother [interviewee began to cry]. (Chila; interview 2012)

As Chila’s motherhood experience shows, she was forced to take her children with her into the woods while escaping military repression. In addition, Chila’s husband
also was guerrilla member, but he did not take care of the kids all the time they were in the mountains/woods because he was a guerrilla combatant. So she had to take care of a baby and her other three children by herself. During the time described she was only part of the masses.

There were cases of women who were forced to suffocate their own babies to avoid being killed by the military forces. People from the masses would often hide in the mountains with the guerrillas to protect their lives, so when the military was close, babies could not cry because their cries would alert the military forces and everyone would be killed. Consider Chila’s testimony:

There was one time, I had my baby, and I was with other ten women who were nursing, too. We were in the middle of an attack and the babies were crying. The people said, close those babies mouths because they [the military] will find us, and so all of the women did it. All babies died suffocated. My baby survived because he wasn’t crying… just because of that… I was the only one that got out of there with my baby. My baby didn’t cry… it was very sad. (Chila; interview 2012)

Many women lost their children during the war in different ways. As this case shows, these women were forced to suffocate their babies trying to make them stop crying in order to save other people’s lives. In addition, there were cases in which the Salvadoran military forces stole babies of guerrilla parents that were found in the mountains. In the case of Silvia, the military took her six month old baby. She was able to find him twelve years later thanks to the help of Father Jon Cortina and international human rights organizations (Silvia; interview 2012). Other women lost their children in combat because they were force to keep them with them rather than find a safe place for them to reside. There are cases of children who grew up within the guerrilla structure. Once they turned thirteen or fourteen years old, they would join the guerrillas as combatants and died in armed conflicts. For example, consider Bella’s case:
I had nine children, five were killed in the war and four survived. We went to a house without anything, not even a chair. When we got into a house where we were going to stay in San Salvador, I looked around and wondered, how many of my children will I be left when I get back home [interviewee began to cry]. (Bella, interview 2012)

In Bella’s case, her older sons and daughter died in combat since they joined the guerrillas as combatants, and the four children that survived where the youngest ones.

Most of the women I interviewed had lost at least one child during the war. Also, when women were asked to talk about their experiences of motherhood, this was the most painful subject for them. Most of them cried while reliving these memories. This fact demonstrates the deep emotional effect of war experiences on motherhood for guerrilla women or women who were part of the masses.

There were also cases of women becoming mothers while participating in the guerrillas. As Irina states,

There was a difference between men and women in the war… men did not give birth in the lines of fire [in combat], and women did, so it was different. Men saw and even had to help women give birth sometimes, so they would realize how hard it is. They would say, damn! This shit is not easy, so men understood that maternity wasn’t an easy thing. (Irina; interview 2012).

This fact is especially true for peasant women since women who were part of the urban guerrillas or were commanders did not face the hardships of giving birth in caves, in primitive encampments in the mountains or in the middle of a combat. Peasant women on the other hand were more likely to experience these hardships. There were multiple cases of women having spontaneous miscarriages because they were in the middle of a firefight and the ballistic concussions affected their pregnancies.

Elsy who served as a combat paramedic narrates, how she lost her baby girl during her first pregnancy. She did not know she was pregnant and while she was in combat, she started to feel strong cramps, but she thought it was her period. However,
when she went to check, she was bleeding a lot. Consider Elsy’s situation as she recalls this experience:

   It was raining really hard and the pain got stronger and stronger, so I went to my boss and I told him that I felt really bad. I told him about the cramps and he knew about health. I told him, I have my period and it really strong, and he said, mmm… are you pregnant? And I said, no that I know of…then I said, I can’t handle the pain anymore and he said I will take you down there [by the river], and I think it is an abortion what you are having. I said yes, I think so because I could feel the baby coming out of me. (Elsy; interview 2012)

   In Elsy’s case, she lost her baby because she did not realize she was pregnant since she had symptoms. She was also inexperienced given it was her first pregnancy.

There were other women who gave birth in caves while they were hiding from the military forces, and there were some women that were able to give birth in the middle of combat.

   There were cases of women who were raped and even tortured while they were pregnant. For some of them, the fetus survived and for some others it did not. Motherhood and stories of being pregnant are difficult to imagine under the conditions peasant women lived during their participation in the guerrillas. These were factors that men did not experience nor could they identify with such hardship. These experiences are important to highlight since peasant women’s hardship and contributions have often been ignored because they are often seen as guerrilla militants only and their social and biological roles as women are often ignored. This viewpoint ignores their biological and sociocultural roles as mothers.

   **Sexual harassment**

   Another sociocultural expectation that shaped many women’s experiences in many guerrilla camps was the objectification and sexualization of their bodies in a male
dominated environment that lead to aggressive sexual harassment behaviors from male comrades. Many women were subject to sexual harassment due to their disadvantaged position as a numerical and gender minority in the guerrilla camps.

Sexual harassment in guerrilla camps was reported by some women in this study. Even though this fact was avoided or ignored by guerrilla ideology that claimed equality for all, many women suffered sexual harassment and even rape in guerrilla camps. It is important to highlight that not all guerrilla camps or guerrillas organizations were the same. Often, the promotion of gender equality depended on local leadership since higher level leadership never addressed gender relations and women’s issues according to most informants. Two works that further illustrate this point are the recompilation of guerrilla women’s testimonies in Central America and Chiapas and the testimonies of women who participated in the FMLN guerrillas, in which women analyze their experiences with gender discrimination, sexuality and motherhood (Murguialday, 1996 and Vazquez, Ibañez and Murguialday 1996). These testimonies were compiled with the intention of addressing gender relations and sexuality issues faced by women during their guerrilla participation. Out of all the women interviewed in this study, only two made reference to sexual harassment in guerrilla camps. Furthermore, one interviewee reported that she had seen and experienced multiple forms of sexual harassment and even a rape attempt during her participation in the guerrillas. Consider Rita’s testimony about male bosses abusing their power within the structure:

The majority of the bosses were men, so if the boss liked you, but you didn’t want anything to do with him, he [the boss] would not give you permission to do certain things or he would punish you by denying your permission to leave the camp and go see your family. They would abuse their power over the women subordinate. You [as a woman] had to sleep with them to have permission to see your family (Rita; interview 2012)
This example demonstrates how some male leaders would abuse their power over female subordinates. This is a clear example of sexual harassment since women were forced to comply with their bosses sexual desires if they wanted to visit their families or have some benefits within the camp. Rita expressed that many women could not handle the pressure anymore and they would comply with their bosses sexual demands in order to have certain privileges within the guerrilla camps.

Another form of sexual harassment was described by Rita as a hostile environment for women where they would be objectified and sexualized at all times. Consider her following statement:

> We were few women [in the camp]. There was an awful environment of sexual harassment. This is an ugly comparison, but I will make it anyway. Have you seen when a female dog is in heat? It was like that. It was harassment day and night. I felt terrible. I didn't like it, and I imagine the other women didn't either. (Rita; interview 2012)

As she describes it, there were few women in her camp, and it was really hard for women to ignore the sexual harassment imposed by their male comrades. In addition, Rita also experienced a rape attempt by her boss while serving in the guerrillas as a radio operator. As she narrates her story, she was sleeping by herself that night since she usually shared a tent with another female friend. However, her friend had gone to visit her lover, so Rita had to spend the night alone. She was alone sleeping when she felt something heavy on top of her, so she woke up, and he was trying to unbutton her pants. But he could not achieve his goal, so she started yelling hoping that someone would come to help her. Nobody came, but she kept yelling and he got scared that someone would come to help her, so he ran away. She further states:

> I was so mad! But it was too dark and I couldn't find it [her rifle]. Then I came back into the room and I started to cry and cry until the next day. I didn't tell anyone about it, not even my friends. [When she saw him the next
day] he said, someone scared you last night huh? And so I told him, you son of a bitch, I know it was you! And he just laughed. With that I confirmed it was him. He never tried to do it again, but ever since then, we were enemies (Rita; interview 2012).

In this testimony, the inequality of power relation between Rita and her boss is obvious since he even laughs in her face after attempting to rape her. He does not think that what he tried to do was wrong, much less would he get punished for such action due to his power as a male and as her boss. In addition, Rita also mentioned that she knew many women who were rape victims in guerrilla camps. It is important to acknowledge that there were women who suffered multiple kinds of sexual harassment and even rape due to gender inequality and gender power relations within the guerrilla structure, especially those who did not hold any leadership positions.

**Gender discrimination**

Some women also pointed out gender discrimination as another expression of gender inequality within the guerrilla structure. This gender discrimination was noticeable in terms of the division of labor within the guerrilla structure. Many women reported to have experienced gender discrimination or to have witness women’s discrimination in the division of labor since women were often relegated to domestic activities traditionally associated with their gender.

Interviewed women identified gender discrimination as a significant difference between men and women in the guerrilla’s structure and from comrades, as well. Consider Roxana’s point of view:

The most difficult thing for me was the discrimination in the FMLN towards women. I didn't experience it myself, but I saw the other women who were not educated, at the most they went to third grade, and they were always sent to the kitchen, and men no! They [the men] could never even make a tortilla! (Roxana; interview 2012)
As Roxana narrates, she witnessed discrimination against women in terms of work distribution within the guerrilla structure. Women who lacked education were often sent to the kitchen without considering their work preference. Furthermore, Roxana was disappointed about the FMLN structured since she also experienced gender discrimination. She intended to be a combatant, but the local leaders did not allow her to do so. She became involved in marketing, propaganda, and education instead.

Roxana also takes her frustration to a broader level where she acknowledges the fact that women’s issues were ignored within the organization. Consider her statement:

I think we are still discriminated against within the FMLN. After the Peace Accords, we fought for a quota system for women, which we didn’t get. I think women have shown that they are capable within the FMLN. The hardest thing for me was that discrimination because I still remember, they didn’t let me be a combatant... they [men] just wanted us to make tortillas for them. (Roxana; interview 2012)

Roxana’s statement expresses her frustration of gender discrimination within the FMLN organizational structure because women’s contributions have not been recognized and their contributions were undermined due to the patriarchal based regime. In addition to organizational gender discrimination, interviewed women also expressed gender discrimination from individual guerrilla members who had their own gender biases. For example, many men were not willing to work with women since they thought women were not capable of doing certain things within the FMLN structure.

Consider Eva de Rosa’s experience with a comrade and coworker:

There was a man that I had to work with, and he made negative comments about it to someone else. He said, I have to work with Eva… imagine that, working with a woman! He had a lot of experience working with unions and university marches, so he thought he was better than me because I had never participated in any of that before. (Eva de Rosa; interview 2012)
As this quotation demonstrates, many women experienced gender discrimination from their peers in the guerrilla movement while trying to perform their assigned jobs. When their jobs were not traditional female roles, their abilities were doubted and resisted by some men. For example, Eva de Rosa experienced rejection from her coworker because he thought women were not good at political work. However, women were never doubted when they performed traditional female roles in the organization as cooks or caregivers. In addition, gender discrimination was not only perpetrated by guerrilla men, but by guerrilla women themselves. As Eva de Rosa suggests, “Women had to overcome fear because we were raised to be afraid. The struggle helped us overcome our fears and it liberated us” (Eva de Rosa; interview 2012).

Women, themselves, also had to struggle with their own gender biases and conceptions in order to perform their jobs within the guerrilla structure. Many women challenged traditional gender roles and socio-cultural expectations by becoming guerrilla members. They transitioned from the private to the public sphere where they performed multiple roles and jobs in the guerrilla organization. The testimonies provided above demonstrate that the ideal of gender equality was not implemented in practice since gender discrimination prevailed in multiple instances and areas in the guerrilla despite some efforts to incorporate women and avoid gender discrimination.

The experiences provided above demonstrate the multiple ways and areas of life in which guerrilla women’s experiences were not the same as that of male guerrilla members due to unequal gender based power relations. Thus, it is important to highlight the ways in which women’s revolutionary participation impacted their personal identity and their own understanding of gender identity.
Table 4-1. This table summarizes women’s revolutionary roles and participation in the rural communities in the departments of Cabañas and Chalatenango.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Role Performed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Luz</td>
<td>Messenger [carrying armament]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bella</td>
<td>FECAS Secretary and propaganda. Also worked on cooking and making reports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rita</td>
<td>Radio communicator/operator.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tatiana</td>
<td>Cook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ana</td>
<td>Cook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iliana</td>
<td>Political educator, activist work, and secretary of FECAS. She was part of organizing and expansion during her entire time of participation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roxana</td>
<td>Marketing, propaganda and education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva de Rosa</td>
<td>Political education, messenger, and cover up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosibel</td>
<td>Cook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chila</td>
<td>Leader of AMES women's organization [popular support organization leader]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessenia</td>
<td>Activist work within the community and paramedic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elsy</td>
<td>Combatant paramedic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herminia</td>
<td>Cook and political/activist work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silvia</td>
<td>Masses paramedic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maritza</td>
<td>Combatant paramedic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francisca</td>
<td>Combatant paramedic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irina</td>
<td>Political and community activist, and masses conductor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 4-1. Paco Metzi picture, “The oxygen of the coffee plantation, women’s tenderness, the worry of the compañeros: indispensable elements” [Text translation] (Metzi, 1987, p. 129) As we can infer from the quotation, women were perceived as “tender beings.” This view reinforced their traditional gender role as care givers within the guerrillas while performing medical care. In this picture, these women are taking care of a wounded guerrilla soldier. 
Figure 4-2. The author of this picture is anonymous by choice and has granted direct permission to the researcher. In this picture, men and women are depicted in guerrilla military training. This picture is an illustration of women performing non-traditional female roles within the guerrilla organizational structure. Photo courtesy of C.K.
CHAPTER 5
IDENTITY: HOW DID WOMEN UNDERSTAND THEIR PARTICIPATION IN THE WAR?

A revolutionary is someone who does not agree with something that is unjust and wants to make a change to make things just. In that aspect, I consider myself a revolutionary.

(Eva de Rosa; interview 2012)

Yes, I am a revolutionary. I am from the guerrilla's rank-and-files, and I was there twelve years without leaving a day. I am a guerrillera because I know why and how the war started, and I was there throughout the whole process… one gets out of the war freer and knowing one can do anything!

(Rosibel; interviewed 2012)

Yes, I feel that I am a revolutionary, and I will never stop being one. What they [the military] did to me, to my husband, and to my sons, I will never forget while I am alive.

(Francisca; interview 2012)

Much attention has been given to guerrilla women who functioned in leadership positions within the FMLN structure. They are automatically labeled as “revolutionary women” due to their visibility as leaders. Women who performed non-traditional female work as military combatants are also automatically perceived as revolutionary agents due to the glorification of military action in Latin American guerrilla warfare structures. However, women who performed traditional female roles in the guerrilla as cooks or care givers are rarely included in the discussion of revolutionary identities. The image of a revolutionary is often limited to a male combatant holding a rifle and wearing military style clothes. This limited image or version of the revolutionary might be due to Che Guevara’s influential guerrilla ideology in Latin American guerrilla warfare. In his writings he always described a young guerrilla man holding his rifle (Guevara, 1961). Imageries of guerrilla combatants as an armed male figure are limiting. Under guerrilla culture, combat and military activity is glorified. These areas were mainly dominated by men
with the exception of a few women who were deemed exceptionally talented as combatants and commanders. Even though many feminist scholars have sought to highlight women’s roles and contribution to the revolution, they have failed to incorporate women’s own identification as revolutionaries and their own articulation of this adopted identity.

Chapter 5 seeks to explore women’s self-understanding of their participation in the revolution, and their own articulation of their identity as revolutionary women. Out of the seventeen women interviewed in this study, only two responded that they were not sure if they considered themselves a revolutionary. They later explained their own definitions and understandings of a revolutionary. In the course of their interviews, they concluded that they try to be one, but they were not sure if they fulfilled the idealistic definition of a revolutionary. These two women had more complex understandings of what a revolutionary should aspire to be, but they both considered that they worked every day to become one. In addition, when all of the interviewed women were asked if they regretted their participation in the guerrilla’s revolutionary effort, they all stated that they never regret their participation in the guerrillas.

When women were asked if they consider themselves a revolutionary, the vast majority would respond with an energetic: “Yes, I am a revolutionary because….” The three main reasons that women included in their identification as a revolutionary were: (1) The fact that the struggle continues, and they continue to fight against injustice; (2) The fact that they suffered as guerrilla members, and they do not forget about military repression and its repercussions; and (3) The fact that they dedicated their lives to the
revolutionary struggle. Consider the following responses that illustrate these three major themes in women’s understandings and descriptions of their revolutionary identity:

Yes, I am a revolutionary. I am always a revolutionary. The word revolution is universal. We were revolutionaries because we did not agree with the government back then. Now, if we see that again, we will oppose to it. The revolutionary effort never ends. It changes, but it never rests… now we might not fight with weapons, but we fight at the table with politics. There is where the revolution continues (Iliana; interview 2012).

Iliana’s response demonstrates her personal explanation of why she adopted a revolutionary identity during the war, and why she continues to identify herself that way today. In the past, she was a revolutionary because she did not agree with the government and she was an activist throughout the entire revolutionary process. In the current context, she considers that the revolution changed from a violent state of armed struggle against the government to a more ideological and political based approach. Iliana continues to be active in politics and her political ideology continues to be present in her life and in her public work similar to others in her community. Iliana's understanding of revolutionary action goes beyond superficial understandings of revolutionary participation because she acknowledges that revolutionary changes are a continuous process.

In addition, many women when interviewed also alluded to the notion that they continue to be revolutionaries because they keep their revolutionary principles alive and try to live by them every day of their lives. Consider Irina’s description of her identity as a revolutionary woman:

There are still many of us who haven’t lost our revolutionary roots from which we were willing to sacrifice our lives, and that’s what makes me proud the most… I could have forgotten about everything if I were to be weaker in terms of my social consciousness and political ideology, but no. I cannot do that. (Irina; interview 2012)
Irina’s quotation is a powerful reference in terms of revolutionary participation and its consequences in people’s lives. Her statement reflects the power of ideology and political conviction in her life and actions. Similarly to Iran’s statement, most women interviewed related to this point, and mentioned that their current social consciousness and political and community activism is strongly tied to their revolutionary identity.

Another common response provided by women was the fact that they will not forget and do not forgive the State repression against them and their communities. Many women also referred to the death of their children or family members that died in the revolutionary struggle. The women that provided these responses understood their revolutionary identities in the context of their own life experiences and life principles. They strongly expressed that revolutionary ideals must be followed in order to honor the memory of their relatives killed in battle or as a result of conflict during the civil war.

Consider Maritza’s response regarding her revolutionary identity:

Yes, I am a revolutionary until death! We worked in the struggle, and it was hard for us. We keep fighting. We don’t give up. I keep working to that my son’s blood is not in vain. I always remember my son... he would say, if I die, I will die for my people, to bring change to them. My son’s blood will not be spilled in vain! (Maritza; interview 2012)

This quotation demonstrates Maritza’s strong commitment to her son’s revolutionary ideology. Even today, she remains strongly committed to following and further fighting for her son’s ideals. In addition, many women said that they were revolutionaries because only they, personally, can understand how much they had suffered under military repression as civilians and as guerrilla members.

Finally, another prominent response to this question was that women considered themselves revolutionaries because they had dedicated their lives, youth and efforts to the revolution. Consider Silvia’s description of her identity as a revolutionary:
Yes, I consider myself a revolutionary because I left my youth there. The truth is that I do not agree with everything that happened [during the revolution], but I tell my kids, if you ever have to fight for a real change, do it… I always talk to my children about the good and bad things about the war and its consequences. I want them to have an open mind, to think about why certain things take place. One must have objectives in life. (Silvia; interview 2012)

This quotation demonstrates Sivlia’s sense of entitlement to a revolutionary identity due to her lifetime dedication to the guerrillas, even if she did not agree with everything the leadership or the structure represented. In addition, many women also mentioned the importance of sharing their revolutionary experiences with the future generations, their children. Most women brought up the point of educating new generations on revolutionary ideals. These women felt that most revolutionary values are being lost in the present because nobody is interested in talking about the Salvadoran civil war. Most women said that they constantly remind their children and grandchildren about where they come from, their revolutionary roots. This demonstrates two main things; (1) Women’s deeply-rooted revolutionary culture that continues to be passed on to future generations, and (2) The importance of oral history at the personal and community level. Peasant women from these two communities demonstrate deeply engrained protest or revolutionary culture at the personal level, within their own families and at the community level.

According to Linda Klouzal, revolutionary women in Cuba were able to sustain themselves in the face of significant trauma in three main ways: (1) Embracing a sense of one’s place in history, and awareness of a legacy of struggle and suffering similar to one’s own; (2) The importance of community and secure relational ties; and (3) The memory, through stories, of empowering acts (Bhavnani, 2003, p.259). These three main observations provided by Klouzal are most relevant to peasant women’s
revolutionary identities and the effect of this claimed identity in their families and communities. One is able to witness such personal and community pride in terms of the towns’ revolutionary history. The women interviewed for this study, shared their revolutionary experiences with a sense of pride and nostalgia. The fact that these women own their stories, value their experiences and share them with family and community members significantly resonates with Klouzal’s observations about Cuban revolutionary women dealing with trauma and daily life issues. Furthermore, I would suggest that this personal transformation shared by these women, also influences the transformation of their communities as a whole.

To illustrate further the previous point, consider the reflection of this revolutionary ideology in private and community physical spaces. Most of their homes display revolutionary icons, such as Che Guevara, Fidel Castro and Commander Camilo next to pictures of their relatives who died during the revolution. In addition, many of them referred to revolutionary icons in casual conversations, and reported that they enjoyed listening to revolutionary music. At the community level, both communities demonstrated a strong sense of pride of their revolutionary history. In one community’s case, this is reflected in the infrastructure. They have kept the bombs and parts of destroyed helicopters, artifacts from the war, on display in common areas in order to remind their residents about as the town’s revolutionary history and past. The town has a mural the names of the community’s inhabitants who were murdered by the Salvadoran military during the revolution. Most of them were guerrilla members, political activists and/or supporters of the revolution. The bombs are located right next to a rebuilt church with Monsignor Romero’s image painted on it, as a further reminder of the
town’s revolutionary past. This town has its own local museum with historical
documents and weapons that belonged to the guerrilla organization from this particular
area.

Similarly, the other community included in this study displays a strong
revolutionary culture which can be seen in the community center where there are free
workshops and classes for the residents. Primarily young people receive art and cultural
classes that include Protest Theater workshops, dance and poetry performances and
other forms of art. In addition, this community center primarily promotes different kinds
of activities for the elderly and youth, it is not restricted to these two age groups. When
viewing the community center, every room has been named after a guerrilla member
from the community who died during the conflict as a means to honor their memory and
sacrifice. In the main entrance, there are large posters on display with photos and the
narratives of community members who returned to repopulate the town when it was
safe to do so, almost at the end of the war.

In summary, both communities demonstrate pride in their historical and
revolutionary history. They continue to promote these values at the community level.
Both communities have followed a strong revolutionary political and ideological
commitment that has been shared and to some extent passed on through oral history
and community memory. Most residents, even the young, are aware of their local
revolutionary history, and they share it with visitors with pride. Based on in-depth
interviews and active participant observation, it can be inferred that women from these
two communities enhance Klouzal’s three main observations through their personal and
community revolutionary claimed identities. In addition, women from this case study
also illustrate Klovzal’s following statement: “Community is a key theme in women’s stories. Relationship ties may be important to reducing trauma in a number of ways” (Bhavnani, 2003, p.259). Even though they suffered multiple traumatic life events during the civil war, the women from both communities never presented themselves as victims of state repression or economic, political and social inequalities. They presented themselves as agents of change and as activists. It is here, where the power of claiming a revolutionary identity and owning their stories, becomes visible.

The images and conceptual realities of individual’s as dedicated revolutionaries must be expanded to become more inclusive. Rather than only considering the stereotypical image of the armed male combatant, the concept of what constitutes a “revolutionary” should be representative of multiple types of revolutionary participation, as in the case of peasant women’s contributions in El Salvador’s revolution. Even though none of the women interviewed in this study served as guerrilla combatants only, they all identify themselves as revolutionaries. Therefore, Che Guevara’s and Linda Rief’s definition of guerrilla members is limiting and not representative of most peasant women’s participation in the FMLN guerrilla. According to Kampwirth, women who performed low-prestige roles in the guerrillas as cooks, care givers, and paramedics were not able to develop a strong revolutionary culture since they were not as exposed to it as those women who performed high and mid-prestige roles (Kampwirth, 2002, 2004).

High-prestige and mid-prestige revolutionary activists were intensely socialized into the culture of the revolutionary organizations. This socialization involves studying the history of their own countries, reading major works of the international left, and participating in major discussion groups in which they interpreted their studies... low-prestige participants were much less intensely socialized probably because the leaders of the
organizations did not believe they needed to be socialized in such ways to efficiently carry out their work. (Kampwirth, 2004, p. 11)

The majority of women in this study performed low-prestige roles within the guerrilla during the revolution. Even though most of them did not read Salvadoran history books, international leftist literature or participate in discussion groups, all of the women reported that they received some sort of political and historical education in the encampments in which they learned about Salvadoran history and international leftist political ideology. Therefore, these women were aware of the national and international political leftist discourse through a process of oral education. Kampwirth’s assumption about low-prestige participants proves to be inaccurate for women in the two rural communities that participated in this study.

Despite the fact that most peasant women performed low-prestige roles as cooks, messengers and other kind of jobs highly associated with traditional female roles, they still strongly identify themselves as revolutionaries, even if they did not fit the traditional imagery of the guerrilla revolutionary. Regardless of the perceived prestige level of the work performed within the guerrilla, all of the women interviewed adopted a revolutionary identity. They have continued to value that identification and to apply those revolutionary ideals from the past to their new contexts developed after the end of the civil war. As a result, peasant women’s contributions and revolutionary identities must be acknowledged and honored in revolutionary historical accounts and literature.
CHAPTER 6
GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWERMENT: WERE WOMEN EMPOWERED BY THEIR REVOLUTIONARY PARTICIPATION?

I think the fact that women participated in the revolution made us take a big step forward. During the conflict, there was some consciousness raising where men and women themselves were exposed to the idea that women were important. So I think that without that process we would be much more behind. This we can clearly see here [in my community].

(Rita; interview 2012)

Women weren’t taken into account before. We weren’t worth anything, only men. Now, we both are worth the same. I think if I hadn’t been incorporated [in the guerillas], I wouldn’t be able to see this. Before we didn’t think that a woman could be equal to a man. We only thought about house work and having kids. That was all our work. Not now. Not anymore. Now we are able to see that women’s worth is equal to men.

(Maritza; interview 2012)

As mentioned previously, peasant women’s empowerment and gender consciousness has not been discussed or mentioned in the literature of Salvadoran revolutionary women. Karen Kampwirth for example does not significantly address peasant women’s experiences. Her multiple analyses have led to rapid assumptions and conclusions regarding peasant women not acquiring any kind of gender consciousness and personal empowerment. This might be due to the fact that the great majority of peasant women performed low-prestige roles in the guerrilla, with the exception of some cases of peasant women acquiring leadership roles in the guerrilla organization. Revolutionary women’s literature in El Salvador has not explored whether or not peasant women developed gender consciousness through their participation in the revolutionary struggle. This might be the result of the strong visibility that women’s NGOs and feminist organizations have gain as the face of the women’s movement in El Salvador. As a result, most scholarly works have focused on the emergence of the
women’s movement in El Salvador through women’s participation in the revolution
where they were able to develop gender consciousness and organizational skills
(Gonzales and Kampwirth 2001, Kampwirth 2004). However, most of the women who
initiated and are still active in the women’s movement in El Salvador were guerrilla were
mainly women from urban, middle class backgrounds. These women’s experiences
tended to dominate the discourse, and peasant women are seldom represented in it. As
a result, this chapter seeks to highlight women’s gender consciousness and
demonstrate that peasant women from both rural communities in the Departments of
Cabañas and Chalatenango were empowered through their revolutionary participation.

Karen Kampwirth’s work has been predominant in the scholarly literature on
revolutionary women in Latin America and feminism. According to Kampwirth’s
argument, mid-prestige women were able to develop a gender consciousness and
therefore identify with feminist ideals because they were exposed to leadership and
political ideology at the same time that they experienced sexism from the guerrilla
organization. Consider Kampwirth’s statement:

Their position [Mid-prestige women] in the middle meant that, on the one hand, they were not shielded from the brunt of machismo within guerrilla ranks, as were female commanders, but, on the other hand, they had the opportunity to develop political skills and consciousness that might not have been available to very low ranking female participants. (Kampwirth, 2004, p. 10)

As a result, according to this theory, high-prestige women within the guerrilla
organizational structure, such as commanders, did not experience sexism as directly as
mid and low-prestige women, so they did not feel the need to advocate for gender
equity. In addition, low-prestige women did experience sexism, but they did not have the
tools to develop gender consciousness, so they were not able to adopt feminist ideals,
as middle-prestige women did (Kampwirth 2004). It is important to highlight that Kampwirth’s viewpoint of gender consciousness and empowerment is limited to guerrilla women’s participation in the women’s movement in El Salvador as a direct transformation of their revolutionary consciousness into a feminist one. Most peasant women are excluded from this theory in two significant aspects. First, peasant women did not have the means and opportunities to fully participate in the women’s movement in El Salvador because this movement was heavily dominated by urban, middle class women. Secondly, peasant women were implicitly ignored or displaced in this argument since most of them performed low-prestige roles in the guerrilla structure due the lack of formal education and multiple socio-cultural practices and expectations. Again consider Kampwirth’s emphasis on this point in the following statement:

Low-prestige participants were far more likely to receive orders than to give them, and so once the war ended, they were likely to feel far less self-confident and far less politically prepared than their higher-prestige counterparts (Kampwirth, 2004, p. 11)

Kampwirth’s analysis is limited and problematic in the sense that it excludes most peasant guerrilla women, who had a significant level of participation in the revolutionary struggle. It follows that women who held leadership position within the FMLN guerrilla structure were able to learn and further develop their leadership and organizational skills. However, it is inaccurate to assume that low-prestige women did not gain more self-confidence and other kind of skills from their guerrilla participation. Furthermore, this argument implies that only mid-prestige women were able to gain gender consciousness due to their particular experiences within the guerrilla structure. However, the fact that urban middle class women were the main participants in the women’s movement in El Salvador and were able to articulate their identification with
feminism, it does not mean that peasant women did not develop gender consciousness. Peasant women did develop a gender consciousness even though they did not directly participate in the Salvadoran women’s movements or identify themselves as feminists.

All the women interviewed in both communities articulated an understanding of gender equity based on men and women having the same value as human beings. They also provided their own analysis comparing how women have been historically oppressed under a patriarchal system that relegates them to the private sphere through domestic work and childbearing. In addition, they said that if they had not participated in the guerrilla during the revolution, they would not have been able to question traditional gender roles and women’s oppression. Therefore, they would not have been able to develop their current gender consciousness, in terms of gender relations and women’s empowerment. The great majority of the women interviewed highlighted that women from their community were empowered through their revolutionary participation. However, they also expressed that at the structural level, women were still struggling to achieve more political representation. Consequently, based on interviewed women’s perspectives on gender relations and women’s empowerment, it can be argue that peasant women from these two rural communities included in this study were empowered through their revolutionary participation and life experiences within the guerrilla organization. In order to better determine women’s empowerment, such terms must be first defined and clarified before expanding on peasant women’s empowerment through revolutionary participation.

Empowerment has been widely discussed in the development literature, but its meaning is still being debated among scholars. For the purpose of this study,
empowerment is defined as “the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such ability… empowerment entails a process of change” (Kabeer, 1999, p. 437). Kabeer’s definition of empowerment is especially useful in this case because it highlights the fact that empowerment is a process of change, an internal and external transformation. Empowerment can be understood as a personal journey by which a person is able to make important life choices and act upon such choices. According to Kabeer’s empowerment theory, the ability to exercise important life choices can be understood in three interrelated dimensions: resources, agency and achievements. The first dimension of this theory is resources, which represent the pre-conditions that allow people to make choices. For example, resources include material and non-material elements, such as access to economic and social assets. The second dimension of this empowerment theory is agency, which can be defined as the ability to define one’s goal and act upon them. “Agency is about more than observable action; it also encompasses the meaning, motivation and purpose which individuals bring to their activity their sense of agency” (Kabeer, 1999, p. 438). Finally, achievements can be understood as outcomes of life choices shaped by a person’s resources and agency or over all well-being. Kabeer’s theory of empowerment is most relevant to this study in order to understand peasant women’s empowerment through revolutionary participation in El Salvador. However, for the purpose of this study, I will be only focusing on the middle part of Kabeer’s theory, agency because most of the testimonies of interviewed women speak to the importance of women’s agency in the empowerment process.
Kabeer emphasizes people’s abilities to make important choices in their lives, which were previously denied to them. In the context of the empowerment of peasant women in El Salvador, this definition can be understood through two different, but complementary dimensions: (1) Empowerment as access and control over resources and opportunities, such as economic, social, political, legal and cultural barriers under the patriarchal hegemony. In addition, (2) empowerment also involves the ability to see oneself differently and have the capacity to imagine multiple life outcomes based on one’s sense of self-worth. It is this second interpretation of empowerment that seems to be most relevant to peasant women from these two communities’ notions and articulations of empowerment.

First, the notion of imagination and the power of imagining different futures is an important aspect to understand empowerment in the context of Salvadoran peasant women’s lives. Peasant women’s ability to see themselves differently and to envision a different future for themselves and their communities demonstrates the strength of their personal transformations through their revolutionary participation. The fact that a person acquires the ability to make important life choices that were previously denied, not only refers to the material and/or concrete means of enacting personal agency, but also refers to self-esteem, identity, emotions, and a change of attitude towards life. Secondly, building up on peasant women’s revolutionary identities and its relationship with their sense of empowerment, it is helpful to highlight the significance of women’s revolutionary stories as a prominent source of empowerment in their lives. The fact that these women survived the revolutionary struggle, openly challenged the Salvadoran military’s repressive forces, and were able to rebuild their entire communities from total
destruction, can serve as a reminder of their personal strength and power. For instance, “Incidents of strength may be relieved to remind the person that she is empowered, and to counter the horrible experience of being a victim, in whatever sense that may have occur (loss of love ones, torture, repression of expression)” (Bhavnani, 2003, p.260). This approach towards women’s empowerment is relevant to the women from the two communities included in this study because they have demonstrated to find strength, a sense of personal worth and a sense of pride in their revolutionary and guerrilla life experiences. Finally, this dynamic does not take place at the individual level only, but rather at the community level. “To be empowered means to have allies who are strong (brave, crafty, resilient, successful) and who share one’s struggle” (Bhavnani, 2003, p.260). The women interviewed in this study often referred to this point because they highlighted the importance of having a shared revolutionary and/or war experience within their communities. And the comfort, support and strength they feel each time they have the opportunity to exchange war stories of struggle, lose, and hope among each other. Based on this notion of empowerment, women from these two communities have shown themselves to be empowered through their participation in the Salvadoran revolution. In order to illustrate this point, this chapter explores the major themes of empowerment identified by rural women from the two communities interviewed in this study. Additionally, the women's personal understanding of women's empowerment and the importance of gender equity are highlighted to demonstrate rural women’s empowerment through their participation in the revolution.

The entire group of seventeen women interviewed in both communities felt that they were empowered by their participation in the revolution. Furthermore, they
considered this participation as a strong factor influencing their current understanding of gender relations and women’s empowerment. Consider the following the statement:

If I hadn’t participated in the war, I wouldn’t be like this… I remember when I first started to participate in a small group of five people… that time I cried because I was so afraid…. So imagine if I would have stayed that way. I would be a submissive woman who wouldn’t know anything, not even my own rights. I wouldn’t be able to stand up for myself… if I was the same [person] I was before… I couldn’t even say what I felt. Now I feel like I can do anything! (Jessenia; interview 2012)

Jessenia’s testimony about her personal transformation from a shy and submissive woman to a woman who enacts her agency shows that she attributes this to her participation in the guerrillas as a community organizer and health educator. Jessenia acknowledges the importance of her participation as a guerrilla woman since she considers that she would have never been able to develop her public speaking, self-confidence and gender consciousness skills if she had not participated in the revolutionary struggle. In addition, Jessenia’s experience highlights her personal growth and empowerment as a woman. However, Jessenia expands her description of empowerment by including women’s empowerment as a group in society. She acknowledges how women gained more value in society due to their revolutionary participation. Consider, this statement;

Women demonstrated that we can do it too! Just like we all were brave enough to do all the things we did during the war, it is possible, too that we can do other things now, as well. Women started to value themselves more, to take their own opinions into account, to see their own importance as women, that they are capable of anything, too. (Jessenia; interview 2012)

This quotation emphasizes the fact that women were able to demonstrate their capabilities by performing the same roles and making the same contribution as men did during the revolution within the guerrilla organization. This allowed for a means for women to be recognized and consequently increased their value in Salvadoran society.
Furthermore, most women agreed that women’s participation in the war was a significant achievement because it helped to make women’s work and contributions more visible. Their participation further promoted the recognition of women and men as equals with the same capabilities as human beings. Consider Tatiana’s explanation of this fact:

I think we have a big change in that area [gender] because now at least it has been recognized that women are as capable as men, and they have the same value that men do. Before we were discriminated against because men felt that they were more valuable than women. But when they saw that women were doing the same work, they started to take women more into consideration because they saw that women could do the same jobs they [men] did. (Tatiana; interview 2012)

Her explanation highlights the fact that men felt more entitled to dominate women since society, in general, assigned men more value and privilege over women. However according to Tatiana, when women demonstrated that they were capable of doing the same work men did, society started to recognize women, as well. In her opinion, the war created an opportunity for women to show that they were capable of doing the same jobs men had been doing.

Many women also mentioned more specific areas of women’s personal and group empowerment, such as education, community participation and economic development. It is important to note that in development literature, access to education and economic resources are often considered important indicators of women’s empowerment in traditional patriarchal societies. These two indicators or in the context of this study, dimensions of empowerment are also articulated by women themselves as an important aspect of their lives. Consider Iliana’s experience in her community:

Women in the rural areas did not study because their parents wouldn’t let them. They use to say, “no, my daughter, if you are going to get married,
what would you study for?” So men were always the favorite ones and girls were ignored. (Iliana; interviewed 2012)

Iliana’s statement exemplifies the ways in which patriarchal values limited women’s access to education in rural areas, in this case in her community. According to Iliana, education of women and girls was not valued in her community because it was assumed they would be eventually married. And for that they did not need an education. However as Iliana expressed, after the war this mindset changed because women themselves started to value education more due to their exposure to it during the war. As she elaborated on this point, she explains that now, all children and youth have access to education because values have changed in the community. In addition, some students have been able to go to the university because the community has received external support that provides scholarships for those who want to pursue higher education. Many women interviewed also mentioned the fact that their parents never let them go to school, so they did not learn how to write and read until they joined the guerrilla camps. “I remember my dad… he didn’t let me study, not even one day. Now that I am old, [even now] I barely know how to sign my name.” (Chila; interview 2012) Based on their personal experiences, these women value education, and they regret not having had the opportunity to study. So, they promote education among their daughters. “I never learned how to read. I am very shy, but thanks to God, my daughter, the one born during the war, has more opportunities. She is even studying now!” (Tatiana; interview 2012). These two women highlighted the fact that if they would have never been exposed to literacy efforts in the guerrilla camps, they would have never learn how to write their names, much less would have they been able to understand the value of education. Furthermore, the fact that women can study now was a prominent
advancement highlighted by women in these communities in their own articulation of women’s empowerment.

Another factor highlighted by some women was access to economic opportunities to enhance women’s independence from men. Consider Ana’s story:

Before, women were to be at home only, washing clothes and taking care of the children, to make food... That was once the only role [of women]. We never got out of the house. Now, it is not like that. Now if we have to attend a meeting, we go. If you don’t like something, you say it, and it is taken as a way to contribute [to the discussion], but before it wasn’t like that. Women were private, only for the house or only for the men.... Now women are not tied up to men anymore. Women have the right to sell something or do whatever. I feel good about this because when my husband left me, he didn’t help me to support our children. I supported my family on my own with my small food business; I got a credit for it. I had never gotten a credit before, not even borrowed money, but I did it anyway. (Ana; interview 2012)

Ana points out the fact that women were more dependent on men before, and they were restricted to the household. However, nowadays this is not the case anymore since women seem to have more freedom and economic opportunities in her community. This change in the community motivated her to get a loan in order to expand her food business. In addition, Ana’s previous experience as a guerrilla camp cook gave her the confidence to cook for large amounts of people, and it also provided her a clientele since she was well known in the community as a guerrilla camp cook. When she opened up her business, people from the community knew she was a cook during the war and they kept ordering food from her. Therefore, her networks during the war allowed for her business to grow. Furthermore, Ana acknowledged that her participation in the war gave her the strength and confidence to start her own food business after her husband left her with all the children. Similarly to Ana’s, many of the women who participated in this study had their own small businesses and some did their own subsistence farming. They mentioned that their participation in the war
motivated them to follow these paths. A primary reason was because in the guerrilla camps they were exposed to the constant challenge of traditional, gendered distribution of labor and sometimes even gender roles.

Another aspect which they highlight in their understanding of women’s empowerment is the fact that women currently participate in the public sphere through community work.

Before women had a terrible position, still today there is a lot of that, but it has improved a little bit. For example, the fact that women have community and political participation is big, before they didn’t. Before, women only took care of children and washed clothes. (Rita; interview 2012)

As this statement shows, most women interviewed stressed the importance of women’s participation in the public sphere either through political or community work. Most women reported that they enjoyed being active in the community and that working with other women made them happy. Some even mentioned that they could not stay only at home anymore. Many of them indicated that they felt satisfied about the fact that women had gotten out of their houses and were active in their communities participating in multiple areas of life. Some examples of women’s involvement in these communities are participation in municipal, community organizations and women’s groups.

A major dimension of empowerment that has not been given much attention in revolutionary women’s literature is the role of self-esteem, agency and gender relations awareness. Women’s self-esteem and awareness of unequal gender relations are key to the development of women’s personal empowerment, as well the empowerment of women as a group. In their own description of empowerment, women highlighted the importance of self-esteem and unequal gender relations in women’s lives. In terms of self-esteem, some women limited their response into explaining how their revolutionary
participation was the main factor that influenced the development of a positive sense of self-esteem, while other women expanded to the notion that women’s revolutionary contributions promoted women’s self-esteem and self-worth as a group in society. In addition, the awareness of traditional, unequal gender relations was another major factor that women pointed out while describing their own understandings of empowerment. They often talked about examples from their past life experiences [before the war] and compared them to their own present situation or women’s current situation in their communities, in general.

In terms of self-esteem, many women mentioned the fact that the war helped them better understand women’s worth and women’s rights compared to those of men. For instance, consider Bella’s assessment of her revolutionary participation and her understanding of gender relations: “I learned to be a little bit freer. I learned that we are not less than men. We are the same, we have the same value. It is important that women know this because that way one is not submissive. It [revolutionary participation] freed me up.” (Bella; interview 2012) According to Bella, while she was participating in the guerrillas, she learned that men and women have the same value; and this knowledge helped her create a more positive sense of self-worth, something that she had never been exposed to before. She acknowledges the importance of women’s awareness about personal worth and equal gender relations in order to free themselves and not keep being submissive. Similarly to Bella, Luz expressed the importance of an equal right’s rhetoric for women’s empowerment:

The same rights that men have, the same rights women have… Machismo still exists but women became stronger due to the war. We would have never known what we know now if we didn’t participate in the war. What we
suffered in the war, gave us strength. If not, we would still be treated like a mop. (Luz; interviewed 2012)

Luz stresses the importance of women’s awareness about their rights in order to defend themselves. In addition, Lucia compares the circumstances of women before the war when she expresses that women were treated like a mop. This imagery describes the fact that women did not have any sort of status under a patriarchal society because they were used and valued as men pleased, only. According to Luz, this is not the case anymore because women who participated in the revolution learned about their rights, as women, which strengthened women’s agency and value in their communities.

In addition to an articulation of women’s awareness of their rights and their understandings of gender relations, most women stressed the fact that the war helped them develop improved self-esteem as individuals and as part of a social group, as well.

During the war I learned so many things. I learned to speak in public, before that I was shy… I felt liberated… before, women were discriminated [against] a lot, and now I feel that it is not as much. Women are capable of doing anything. I do not think I would I would think this way if I wasn’t organized in the war because I see people who weren’t organized and didn’t participate in the war… they are still the same. They still have very low self-esteem, those women have low self-esteem. (Chila; interview 2012)

As Chila’s testimony reveals, she was able to develop multiple facets of her life due to her participation in the revolution. In this case, public speaking helped her to improve her own self-esteem. Furthermore, Chila also alludes to the notion that it is not only she who has these abilities, but rather all women have them. They just need to be provided an opportunity to explore them. She expands noting that many women, who were not organized or did not participate in the war, still have low self-esteem since they were not been provided a space or an occasion to explore their capabilities. Similarly, Rita further elaborates on women’s self-esteem and empowerment through their
revolutionary participation. “I think the war helped women to value themselves, to increase their self-esteem and it demonstrated that we were capable too, not only men.” (Rita, Interview 2012) According to Rita, women themselves learn how to value themselves after they were able to realize the multiple capabilities they possessed. Therefore, women not only proved to themselves that they were as capable as men, but they also made it evident or visible to men, as well. This factor was important to women’s improved self-esteem as a social group and contributor to society.

Another theme mentioned by the women in terms of gender based inequalities is domestic violence. Many women noted women’s experiences in their communities before the war when they were much more submissive, never got out of the house, and they were not aware of their rights as citizens. Because of these traditional female roles, they were more vulnerable to domestic violence and state repression. Consider this statement:

Before, women were worth nothing. They [the military] could follow women and kill them. After the war, women’s situation got better because we joined the guerrillas. Now, women are more respected. It opened up spaces for women. Before, we didn’t know anything. It was like being men’s slaves only. Before, a man could hit you and hit you, and you had to stay with him. Now, you have to denounce him, and the police will come get him! [Laughs] (Francisca, interviewed 2012).

Francisca’s description of women’s status in her community before the revolution is relevant to this discussion because she clearly states that “women were worth nothing”, so they were subject to State sanctioned and family/domestic abuse. This quotation thus highlights the impact of women’s psychological development of self-worth and awareness of unequal gender relations through revolutionary participation in her community. Similarly to Francisca’s observation, Silvia acknowledges that her
participation in the guerrillas changed her attitude and viewpoint in terms of traditional gender roles in society.

If I hadn’t participated in the war, I wouldn’t think this way. Before, I remember that my dad used to say, women are for the house, and in the house must do all the house work… Among some women things have improved, but not all because there are some women that still get hit and treated badly, and they stay quite… That can’t be… Those times are over! (Silvia; interview 2012)

Silvia’s statement challenges traditional gender roles under a patriarchal value system where women were relegated to the domestic sphere. Under her personal world view this is not acceptable anymore since she learned new parameters to understand gender relations. According to Silvia, she would have never been able to overcome traditional gender roles under patriarchal rule if she had not joined the guerrillas where she learned new parameters of understanding. As a result, the women who participated in this analysis attribute the improvement of their self-esteem and the application of the values of gender equity in their lives to their experiences in the guerrillas and their revolutionary experiences.

The testimonials provided above illustrate the multiple dimensions of women’s empowerment through their revolutionary participation. It is important to note that most women from these two communities performed what Karen Kampwirth has labeled as low-prestige roles within the guerrilla structure. Consider Kampwirth’s argument:

The mid-prestige members were women who either had some authority in carrying out traditional women’s roles (like heads of nursing brigades) or who did work that created opportunities for them to make decisions (such as student activism or human rights activism or political education work). Such work was much more likely to be personally empowering than making tortillas. (Kampwirth, 2004, p. 10)

This argument sustains that only high and mid-prestige women were empowered by their revolutionary participation, as opposed to those who performed low-prestige
roles, such as “making tortillas”. However, based on the testimonies provided by women from the two communities included in this thesis, Kampwirth’s argument that only mid-prestige women were able to develop gender consciousness and adopt feminist ideals of gender equity appears to be false. It is possible that some women who functioned in low-prestige roles were also empowered by their revolutionary participation since they might also have been able to develop gender consciousness, and improve their own self-esteem through this participation. Therefore, this testimony shows women’s sense of empowerment regardless of the perceived value of their participation. Consider Tatiana’s assessment of her participation in the guerrillas:

Participating in the war made me feel more strength because we felt like we participated to the same extent that men did. For example, we cooked their food, and they did other jobs but it was the same contribution… I felt satisfied that I was contributing and working towards the change we wanted to see. (Tatiana; interview 2012)

Even though Tatiana performed the most undervalued job within the guerrilla structure, as a cook, she values her participation by stating that she contributed to the struggle according to her own capabilities. In her opinion, all contributions were valuable towards the end goal of the revolutionary struggle. As a result, the long standing assumption that peasant women were not empowered by the revolution needs to be thoroughly re-valued.

Were All Peasant Women Empowered by their Participation in the Revolution?

There were two main observations from the communities included in this study regarding women’s participation in the revolution and their empowerment through this participation. One observation was related to women who did participate in the revolution, but decided to isolate themselves after the war by going back to their domestic traditional roles. The second observation highlighted the fact that women who
did not participate in the revolution seemed to have never come out of their traditional domestic roles and continued their submissive status at the private and public spheres.

Few women mentioned the fact that they knew women who had been part of the revolutionary effort, but once the war ended, they returned to their quotidian life and performed their traditional domestic roles. Interviewed women expressed their disappointment in these women who excelled as guerrilla members, but did not maintain their ideological principles and were not able to carry them out later in life. Irina clarified that women from her community were exceptionally empowered by their guerrilla participation, but that they were not representative of all women who participated in the armed struggle. Consider her observation about the women from her community,

Women in this community own their stories, they are not afraid to tell them. Together we enjoy talking about our experiences in the war. There are so many women who are proud of what they did and of their own experiences, but we are talking about these women only (Irina; interview 2012).

Irma’s observation is relevant in this discussion because she clarifies that not all women who participated in the war were empowered by their participation in the guerrillas. But she believes the women from her community were empowered through their own revolutionary experiences. This point strongly relates to the previous discussion about the importance of these women’s claimed identities as revolutionaries at the personal and community level. Women from her community have created a space to continue practicing their revolutionary ideas through community activism. They also share their war experiences with one another, which has supported and continued their process of revolutionary empowerment.
Irina’s observation about the women in her community was the same observation made by many women from the other community studied. It is important to highlight this similarity between these two communities that share a common history of forced exodus, repopulation efforts and a high degree of women’s participation in the FMLN guerrilla during the revolution. In the present day, the women from both communities showed significant levels of empowerment as a result of their revolutionary participation. They all possessed significant levels of gender consciousness and provided their own understanding of women’s empowerment, which resonates with Kabeer’s definition of empowerment.

The most prominent theme revealed in the interviews by women was their observations of women who had not participated in the revolutions. Most of the interviewed women noted that women who were never organized in their communities or incorporated in the guerrillas during the war did not seem empowered at all. Instead these women were significantly different from those who had been part of the revolutionary struggle. According to Rita, “There is a big difference between women who lived the [revolutionary] process or were part of the process in the struggle and those who were not.” (Rita; interview 2012) The most significant differences Rita was able to point out were self-confidence, autonomy, community participation and public speaking. Rita’s point of view suggests that the women who did not participate in the revolutionary process were not able to develop skills and confidence to challenge traditional gender roles and patriarchal beliefs. Many women expressed that they had observed this significant difference between women who incorporated in the guerrilla
and those who were not or had not lived in their communities during the war. Consider Chila’s observations:

There are differences between women who were organized and the ones who were not. For example, women who were organized, they are always participating in meetings. They are aware of what is going on in the community, and they work together. Those who were not organized are not aware of what happens and they do not organize themselves in the community. They do not know what’s going on. They can’t express themselves. They can’t speak out. It is important that women know their worth because that way they can defend themselves. If someone wants to make them feel less [worthy], they can defend themselves. (Chila; interview 2012)

As Chila states, based on her personal observations and experiences ex-guerrilla women in her community continue to be active in multiple areas, and they know how to work together to solve community problems. However, women who were not involved in the guerrillas and did not live in this community before the war do not participate in community activities. They are not as aware of their surroundings because they still remain confined to their traditional gendered roles in their domestic labor. They are also not free to move about and lack assertiveness to freely speak their minds and formulate their own opinions. Most of the women interviewed described this phenomenon as revealing low self-esteem and the persistence of traditional patriarchal values and practices in their lives. Elsy elaborates on this point:

At least the women who were involved [in the guerrillas] were able to get out of that mindset that men are worth more than women, just because they are men… women’s minds also changed because we learned how to defend ourselves, and that men are not allowed to mistreat us because we are women… I think if we hadn’t learned how to defend ourselves, we would still be putting up with men. Without that experience, I would not be who I am now. (Elsy; interview 2012)

According to Elsy, the women in the guerrilla had the opportunity to challenge patriarchal beliefs including assumed male superiority and female subordination. Also
this way of thinking was challenged due to the fact that women learned how to defend themselves. In this context, Elsy's notion of women defending themselves can be interpreted as women being aware of their equal value to men in society. The women became aware of their own self-worth and their rights as citizens and as women. This became essential to women enacting their agency to be treated as equals to men. According to Elsy, women were able to change their own traditional patriarchal beliefs through their participation in the revolution.

The testimonies provided in Chapter 6 illustrate how peasant women from these two communities understand personal empowerment through their access to educational, economic, social, and political resources. All the participants in this study stressed the importance of positive self-esteem, personal agency and a sense of control over their lives as the most important indicators of their empowerment. The origin of this empowerment was associated with their revolutionary experiences as guerrilla members. In addition, interviewed women share their observations on other women who were not empowered by their participation in the revolution and those women who were never part of the revolutionary struggle. According to the women from these two communities, they were able to draw distinctions between themselves and the two groups of women mentioned above in terms of ideologies, behaviors and community activism. Therefore, it can be inferred that women from the two rural communities of Cabañas and Chalatenango were empowered through their participation in the guerrilla revolutionary struggle.

**Conclusion**

The contributions of peasant women during the civil war were essential to the survival and maintenance of the Salvadoran revolutionary struggle. This study has
attempted to shed light on peasant women’s roles and participation in the guerrilla structure and to further understand their contributions to the revolutionary efforts. The personal histories of the women interviewed in this study support both their self-identification as revolutionaries and their feeling of empowered through their participation in the FMLN guerrilla. These experiences have been explored in order to highlight the importance of their participation and to better understand the implications of such participation on their personal lives.

This study shows that the motivations of Salvadoran peasant women are consistent with most of the literature that explains women’s mobilization in guerrilla warfare. At the same time, this research has emphasized the importance of liberation theology in the process of social and political radicalization. This finding contradicts the assumption that peasant women were merely forced to mobilize without having developed significant levels of political-social consciousness about their involvement. In terms of women’s roles and participation in the guerrillas, peasant women performed different kinds of roles in the guerrillas as cooks, paramedics, messengers, clandestine operators, radio operators, and political and community activists. Through these roles women were able to contribute to the revolution according to their personal capabilities and interests. Their involvement was essential and critical to the maintenance and success of the FMLN guerrillas. It is important to recognize peasant women’s contributions and efforts in the struggle by making their contributions more visible and further valued. Peasant women’s contributions are stressed in this case study since most of the literature has substantially ignored these women’s heroic efforts. It is also essential to recognize the multiple ways in which guerrilla women’s experiences inside
the guerrilla camps were not the same as that of men due to unequal gender power relations. These inequalities are reflected in the undervaluing of the work traditionally performed by women inside the guerrilla structure and the limitations within the traditional image of a revolutionary guerrilla soldier. As discussed before, traditional female roles and work in the guerrilla was undervalued while those jobs identified as masculine were glorified.

Furthermore, guerrilla women claim their identity as revolutionaries, both, during and after the struggle. By claiming this identity, peasant women are challenging the predominate imagery of a guerrilla revolutionary soldier, who is traditionally represented as a masculine figure holding a rifle. It is also important to stress the fact that women claim their revolutionary identity regardless of the role or job they performed within the guerrilla structure based on the fact that they utilized their own understandings and definitions of such identification. Moreover, by claiming this revolutionary identity, these women seem to express a deep sense of empowerment and pride of their participation in the FMLN guerrillas.

In terms of personal empowerment, this study challenges prominent narratives by providing further information regarding peasant women’s level of personal empowerment through their participation in the revolutionary process with the FMLN guerrilla organizations. This prominent narrative assumes peasant women’s lack of empowerment through revolutionary participation. However, the major findings related to this area suggest that women were significantly empowered through their guerrilla participation by acquiring high levels of self-esteem and control over their lives. In addition, women have verbalized through their testimonial statements, and concretely
demonstrated through their actual life experiences, their personal commitment to the concepts of gender consciousness and women’s empowerment.

The findings of this case study cannot be overgeneralized to the point of suggesting that all peasant women were empowered by their participation in the revolution. There are multiple limitations to the study in terms of the sample size and the methodological approach to Kabeer’s empowerment framework. The two communities’ studies had similar historical background and present activist community work. Also, all the women who were willing to be interviewed were part of the same community network in which they all know each other and work with one another in multiple organizations to do community work. In addition, this research only includes the experiences of peasant women from two communities in northern El Salvador who were actively incorporated in the FMLN guerrilla movement. In order to determine if their participation in the revolution is the main cause of their sense of empowerment, it would be appropriate to also incorporate in the same study the experience of guerrilla women who returned to their traditional domestic roles after the revolutions and the women who were never part of the guerrilla movement. A more holistic perspective of these three different groups of women’s might provide a space for comparison and further theorizing for women’s empowerment through revolutionary participation. Another significant limitation of this study is the narrow use of Naila Kabee’s empowerment framework. Resources and outcomes are not considered to illustrate the level of empowerment experienced by the women who participated in this study. However, the main focus of this study lies on the process, in which women enact their own agency. The inclusion of these three interrelated dimensions proposed by Kabeer would promote a more
complete case for our understanding of women’s empowerment. Nevertheless, I purposely decided to only focus on the process of agency because this study has been guided by participants and what they have identified as important in their lives. Based on the interviews, women regarded agency as the most important dimension of empowerment. As a result, this study highlights the importance of women’s agency and their own understandings and motivations for enacting that agency as an important aspect of their articulation of empowerment.

Despite its limitations, this case study sheds light on the fact that peasant women from the two rural communities, from which this analysis is based, were empowered by their participation in the guerrilla during the revolutionary war in El Salvador. This finding not only challenges previous notions of peasant women not being empowered by their revolutionary participation, but it also opens up a whole field for further research in terms of repopulated villages and towns. Both of the rural communities in this study are repopulated towns, which could suggest that repopulated villages might further enhance the process of women’s empowerment under specific circumstances.

There has not been much literature produced in this area of research. However, Maria Juliá’s study on the Salvadoran repopulated village of Copapayo, conducted before the end of the war, found that women from this town were making major advancements in the area of gender equity and women’s empowerment (Juliá, 1994). Juliá’s findings regarding Copapayo strongly resonate with the two rural, repopulated communities included in this study in terms of women’s efforts towards gender equity and empowerment through community participation and work. However, Juliá does not center her study on how ex-guerrilla women’s experiences during the war influenced
their empowerment and activism in their repopulated communities. Therefore, further research is encouraged to explore the relationship between peasant women’s participation in the revolution and their levels of empowerment in repopulated areas in order to establish a more comprehensible argument.

This research has highlighted the importance of revolutionary identity and personal empowerment through revolutionary participation to peasant women from two different communities in northern El Salvador. These women’s claimed identities and personal empowerment testimonies have contributed to the visibility of, not only their experience as revolutionary peasant women, but also to the value of their contributions to the revolutionary struggle and to Salvadoran history in general. This thesis major aim has been to provide a space to reveal and honor Salvadoran peasant women’s war experiences, struggles, hardship, activism, visions, dreams and hopes through their own voices. As this research has exposed, women’s participation in the FMLN guerrillas has significantly impacted their lives. In this process, peasant women from these two communities have developed their identities as revolutionary women and community activists. The revolutionary ideals of change, love, justice, community and a vision of a better live will forever be with the women who participated in this research project. I would like to end with Iliana’s powerful words, which I believe capture and emphasize this research’s project major objective and soul: “We, as women in the struggle, ask people to not forget history. Do not forget what women contributed to the political project of this country [El Salvador].” (Iliana; interview 2012).
APPENDIX A
IMPORTANT POLITICAL AND GOVERNMENT REPRESSIVE NATIONAL EVENTS
TIMELINE

1930:

1932:
- La Matanza Massacre peasant revolt takes place under Farabundo Marti’s lead. More than 30,000 peasants are killed by the military under General Maximiliano Martinez’s orders.
- Farabundo Marti is killed by government orders. (Montgomery, 1982, p. 52-53)

1970:

1972:

1975:
- As a response to the increasing organized left, the Salvadoran government responds with the creation of the Anti-Communist Wars of Liberation Armed Forces (FALANGE). “Their mission was to uproot all leftist oppositions and its supporters through force.” (White, 2009, p. 92) ORDEN is another example of a previous military branch created for the same purpose to crush political opposition. “The members of these organizations tended to be former or current armed forces officers who operated with impunity due to their intimate connections to the oligarchy and military within which and from whom they functioned.” (White, 2009, p. 92)

1980:
- Monsignor Romero is killed by Salvadoran death squads under the orders of Major Roberto D’ Aubuisson, who was a graduate of the School of the Americas. (White, 2009, p. 100, Gonzales and Kampwirth, 2001, p. 34)
• Four church women from the United States, Maura Clarke, Ita Ford, Dorothy Kazel, and Jean Donovan are raped and killed by five members of military forces, three of whom were graduates from the United States military institution, the School of the Americas. The women were helping Salvadoran war refugees, which made them a target for the military forces because they were helping to protect people persecuted by the military-oligarchy alliance. (White, 2009, p. 101)

• The Five Guerrilla Groups: Communist Party of El Salvador/Partido Comunista de El Salvador (PCS), Popular Liberation Front “Farabundo Martí”/Fuerzas Populares de Liberacion “Farabundo Martí” (FPL), Revolutionary Army of the People/Ejercito Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP), National Resistance/Resistencia Naiciona (RN), and Central American Workers’ Revolutionary Party/Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores Centro Americanos (PRTC) come together to form the Farabundo Martí Liberation Front (FMLN) guerrilla organization (Gonzales and Kampwirth, 2001 p. 34)

• The revolutionary civil war officially begins

1981:
• Massacre at El Mozote left more than one thousand unarmed civilians dead under the U.S. trained Atlacatl Battalion in Morazan province (White, 2009, p. XXIII). Only one person, Rufina Amaya, survived this massacre. She dedicated her life to serving as a witness to this atrocity by sharing her testimony and denouncing the killing of hundreds of children, women and men from the village. Rufina Amaya, as the only survivor of this massacre was committed to maintaining El Salvador’s historical memory of this tragic event (Amaya, Danner and Henrriquez, 2012, p. 15-20). “The battalion responsible for the massacre was the Atlacatl Battalion, which was supported and trained by the U.S. military. In fact, 10 of the 12 officers in charge were graduates of the School of the Americas, including the commander, Lt. Col. Domingo Monterrosa.” (White, 2009, p. 102)

• The Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) is founded by Roberto D'Aubuisson, who was the head of the Salvadoran Military Death Squads. (White, 2009, p. XXIII)

1982
• The elections of 1982 further demonstrated the alliances between the United States and the Salvadoran elites and military forces. “U.S-sponsored elections in El Salvador lead to ARENA’s dominance of the Legislative Assembly, and the Christian Democratic Party (PDC) candidate Alvaro Magana becomes president (1982-1984) through political corruption, and repression against the Salvadoran people. (White, 2009, p. XXIII)

1989:
Alfredo Cristiani, the right wing candidate from the ARENA political party, wins the presidential election (White, 2009, p. XXIII).

Final offensive by the FMLN guerrilla forces takes place in San Salvador, the capital of El Salvador. This major nationwide offensive against the military demonstrates the guerrilla’s military strength in the country and forces the government to the bargaining table (White, 2009, p. XXIV).

In November, six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter are assassinated at University of Central America – San Salvador by military death squads (Gonzales and Kampwirth, 2001, p. 34).

1992:  
- The civil war officially ends with the Peace Accords negotiated and signed by the FMLN and the Salvadoran government in Chapultepec, Mexico.
- The FMLN becomes the official opposition political party (Gonzales and Kampwirth, 2001, p. 34).

The revolution in El Salvador was not only fueled by the multiple national events mentioned above in terms of the political repression from the government, and the political-military consolidation of diverse insurgent groups in the country; but it was also strongly influenced by international events that transformed economic, political and ideological world views within the country. Some of these influential international events are the following:

**Relevant International Events Timeline**

- **Cold War (1947-1991):** The Cold War was a period of political and military tension between the United States and the Soviet Union. The main premise of this debate was between western ideology (neoliberal capitalism and democracy) and communist ideology. The United States implemented a policy of containment, which sought to stop the spread of communism worldwide. This context is relevant to El Salvador’s revolution because the United States supported the military dictatorship throughout the twelve years of war by providing financial aid and other resources based on the Cold War ideological principles which mandated an end to revolutionary upheaval as a means to stop communism (Pastor, 1992, p. 65-69). However, El Salvador’s revolution was never a communist revolution.

- **Cuban Revolution (1953-1959):** The Cuban revolution was led by Fidel Castro against the repressive dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista. The Cuban revolution’s victory became a symbol of excitement and hope for many Latin American countries under repressive military dictatorships. It also became an example of success for El Salvador’s revolutionary efforts. “The example of Castro’s actions...
combined with his and Che Guevara’s strident calls for revolution in the hemisphere had an immediate and profound effect on Latin American politics.” (Write, 1991, p. 41)

- **The Second Episcopal Conference in Medellin, Colombia (1968):** Bishops from all of Latin America gathered at this conference to discuss a new approach towards religious practices in the Catholic Church. This conference was a major political event because the old alliance of the church with the military and the wealthy powerful elite was challenged for the first time (Montgomery, 1982, p. 99). The concept of Liberation Theology was born from the Medellin conference when bishops urged the church to defend the poor, oppressed and disenfranchised. Liberation theology promotes working for the poor and working towards their self-determination and empowerment through God’s words. Therefore, liberation theology was an essential factor to the Salvadoran revolutionary effort because it promoted grassroots organization and education of the poor. In fact, many people, especially women became active, either joining the guerrillas or supporting them, through the Christian Based Communities. These grassroots organizations were important, not only for the guerrillas’ emergence and sustainability during the revolution, but also because they provided a space for common people from the general population, the masses, to engage and to participate in socio-political discourse and activities.

- **Sandinista Revolution (1978-1979):** The Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua was a rebellion by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) against the Somoza dictatorship (1960s-1970s). In 1979 the FSLN overthrows the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza (White, 2009, p. XXII). The Sandinista revolution also had an important influence in El Salvador’s revolution, not only as a role model of revolutionary victory, but also as a source of ideological and resource support for the FMLN guerrillas. Due to the Sandinista’s revolutionary success, the United States became more and more involved in Central America as a whole, and the U.S. policy in El Salvador strengthened from their fear of another revolutionary victory in the region (White, 2009, p. 102).

- **Ronald Reagan takes office as President of the United States (1981):** Reagan’s office aids the military and right wing politicians in El Salvador until the end of the war. (Gonzales and Kampwirth 2001, p. 34). “Reagan’s campaign was that Soviet-Cuban power was advancing in the world and that the United States must devote all its energies to stopping it and rolling it back” (Pastor, 1992, p. 67). In addition to this ideological fear of the spread of communism, the United States also had multiple economic and political interests in El Salvador and other Central American countries. The United States feared that their businesses and economic investments in the region could be threatened by the wave of revolutionary struggles in Central America (White, 2009, p. 70). Thus, during this year, the United States accelerated its military and other aid to the Salvadoran government. “The aid eventually reaches one million dollars per day” (White,
2009, p. XXIII). Furthermore, the United States provided military training on counterinsurgent techniques that involved torture, assassination and military political repression against civilians, political activists and guerrilla members for the Salvadoran military among many other military dictatorships in Latin America (White, 2009 and Gill, 2005).
APPENDIX B
LIST OF INTERVIEWED WOMEN IN BOTH RURAL COMMUNITIES IN NORTHERN EL SALVADOR

Table B-1. This table lists all the women interviewed in both communities, their age at incorporation in the guerrilla and the role they performed during the civil war. It also shows the women who reported revolutionary identity and the level of empowerment experienced through their guerrilla participation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age at Incorporation</th>
<th>Role Performed in the Guerrilla Structure</th>
<th>Current Age</th>
<th>Reported Revolutionary Identity</th>
<th>Reported Levels of Empowerment through Guerrilla Participation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Luz</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Messenger [carrying armament]</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Reported strong level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bella</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>FECAS secretary and propaganda. Also worked on cooking and marketing reports</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Reported strong level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rita</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Radio communicator/operator</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Reported strong level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tatiana</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Cook</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Reported strong level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ana</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Cook</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Reported strong level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iliana</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Political educator, activist work, and secretary of FECAS. She was part of organizing and expansion during her entire time of participation.</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Reported strong level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roxana</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Marketing, propaganda and education</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Not sure if she is a revolutionary, but sure that she follows revolutionary ideals, and she tries to be one every day of her life.</td>
<td>Reported strong level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva de Rosa</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Political education, messenger, and cover up.</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Not sure if she is a revolutionary, but sure that she follows revolutionary ideals, and she tries to be one every day of her life.</td>
<td>Reported strong level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age at Incorporation</td>
<td>Role Performed in the Guerrilla Structure</td>
<td>Current Age</td>
<td>Reported Revolutionary Identity</td>
<td>Reported Levels of Empowerment through Guerrilla Participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>----------------------</td>
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<td>-------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosibel</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>cook</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Reported strong level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chila</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Leader of AMES, a women’s organization</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Reported strong level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessenia</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Activist work within the community and paramedic</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Reported strong level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elsy</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Combatant paramedic</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Reported strong level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herminia</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Not fully incorporated but she was a cook and did a lot of community development work</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Reported strong level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silvia</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Masses or civil population paramedic</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Reported strong level</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maritza</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Combatant paramedic</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Reported strong level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francisca</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Combatant paramedic</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Reported strong level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irina</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Political and community activist and leader in the conduction of masses</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Reported strong level</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX D
SEMI-STRUCTURED QUESTIONNAIRE USED FOR IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS IN BOTH RURAL COMMUNITIES

1. ¿Por Qué decidió incorporarse a las guerrillas apoyar a las guerrillas? [Why did you decide to join and/or support the guerrillas?]

2. ¿Cuántos años tenía? [How old were you?]

3. ¿Estaba casada o tenía hijos? [Were you married or did you have children?]

4. ¿Era usted activa políticamente antes de incorporarse? [Were you politically active before joining the guerrillas]

5. ¿Qué fue lo más difícil que vivió después de incorporarse? [What was the hardest thing you experienced after joining the guerrillas?] 

6. ¿Cómo fueron afectadas sus relaciones personales durante la guerra? [How was your family/personal relationship life affected once you joined?]

7. ¿Qué rol o trabajo desempeñó usted durante la guerra? [What was your role or task within the guerrilla structure (what was your job)?]

8. ¿Alguna vez tuvo un puesto de liderazgo dentro de la guerrilla? Me puede explicar que hacía y como la hacía sentir este trabajo? [Did you ever perform a leadership role? If so, in what area? Can you please explain what you did and how did this your experience made you feel?]

9. ¿Alguna vez pensó en dejar las guerrillas? [Did you ever think about quitting the guerrillas?] 

10. ¿Cuál fue la razón principal que la mantuvo participando dentro de la guerrilla? [What was the main thing that kept you going in the revolutionary struggle?] 

11. ¿Usted cree que haber sido parte de la guerrilla fue distinto para hombres y mujeres? ¿Por qué? [Do you think that being part of the guerrilla was different for men and women? Why?]

12. ¿Qué tipo de trabajos vio usted que realizaban los hombres y las mujeres dentro de la guerrilla? ¿Hacían lo mismo o era diferente? Explique. [What kind of jobs did you see men and women doing? Did they had the same job or were they different? Explain]

13. ¿Cómo mujer, como cambiaron sus percepciones sobre el rol de la mujer y el hombre (género) y sobre las normas sociales en cuanto al comportamiento apropiado para hombres y mujeres durante la guerra? [As a woman, how did your perception of gender roles (what it means to be a man and a woman according to Salvadoran culture) and social conceptions (what is appropriate for...]

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men and women to do in society) changed during and after the war? How your experience as a female combatant in the guerrillas did changed your perceptions and believes about gender?

14. Usted cree que la participación de la mujer en las guerrillas/guerra ayudo a mejorar la situación social, política o económica de la mujer en El Salvador? ¿Por qué? [In terms of gender equality and women's empowerment, do you think the war and women's participation in the guerrillas improved women's economic, social and/or political status/situation in El Salvador?]

15. En general, usted piensa que la mujer realizo un rol importante en la revolución? ¿Por qué? [In general, do you think women played an important role in the revolution?]

16. ¿Cuáles son las cosas más importantes que aprendió de su participación en la guerra? (personal/social/política etc) [What was the most important thing you learned in your participation in the revolution as a woman?]

17. ¿Basada en su experiencia como revolucionaria, que lección le gustaría dejar/pasar a futuras generaciones? [Based on your experience as a revolutionary, What lesson would like to pass on to future generation?]

18. ¿En su opinión, cual fue el mayor logro de la revolución? [In your opinion, what was the most important achievement of the revolution?]

19. ¿Debido a que el FMLN nunca tomo el poder en el país y se firmaron los acuerdos de paz, usted cree que la revolución fallo/fue en vano? [Since the FMLN never took power after the revolution, but instead we had the peace accords, do you think the revolution failed? Do you think your work was in vain or not?]

20. ¿Usted alguna vez se arrepiente de haber participado en la revolución? [Do you ever regret participating in the guerrillas?]

21. ¿Cómo cree usted que su participación en las guerrillas cambio su identidad personal (la forma en que usted se ve a si misma y la forma en la que otros la ven/perciben)? ¿Usted cree que la mujer tomo un poco más de fuerza después de la revolución/guerra? ¿Por qué y cómo? [As a woman, how do you think your participation in the guerrillas changed your identity (the way you see yourself and the way others around you see you)?]

22. ¿Usted se identifica como revolucionaria, por qué? [Do you identify yourself or see yourself as a revolutionary? /Would you call yourself a revolutionary? Why and why not?]
LIST OF REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Nathalia P. Hernandez Ochoa grew up in El Salvador where she enhanced her passion for revolutionary women’s histories and experiences. In 2005 she moved to the United States to the State of Madison Wisconsin where she earned her bachelor’s degree in International Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in spring 2011. Currently living in Gainesville Florida, she received a master’s degree in Women’s Studies and Certificate in Latin American Studies from the University of Florida in the summer of 2013.