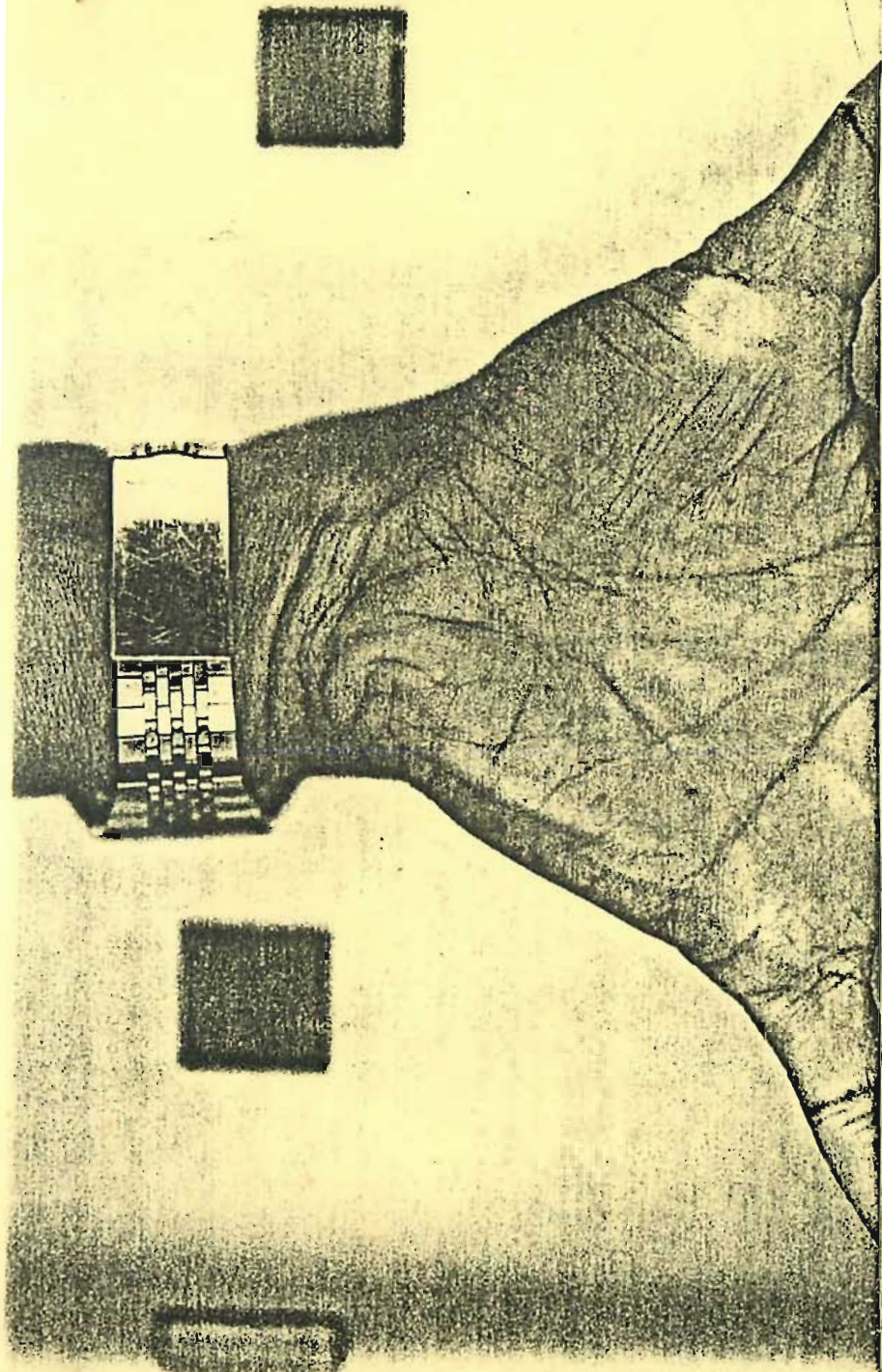


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**PARTICIPATION OF LATIN AMERICAN WOMEN  
IN SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ORGANIZATIONS:  
REFLECTIONS OF SALVADORAN WOMEN**

**BY THE ASSOCIATION OF SALVADORAN WOMEN**

Traditionally the mode of development of the Latin American economies has been structured around the production of raw materials and oriented toward satisfying the demands of the foreign market and the interests of the bourgeoisie. Concomitant with this was high concentration of income, large foreign debt, inflation, and military dictatorship. Permanent economic, political, and social crisis is therefore characteristic of the great majority of the countries of the continent; and in its wake, poverty, super-exploitation, and repression.

Latin American women, who face double oppression, have not been exempt from this dramatic reality. Although the principal source of our subjection is capitalism, even before its advent feudal society had already assigned a subordinate role to women. The oppression of women is a suffocating cultural heritage, and, as Simone de Beauvoir has pointed out, "One is not born, but rather learns to be, a woman." We Latin American women have undoubtedly been learning: learning *not* to be

This is a translation of a paper presented by a representative of AMES (Association of Salvadoran Women) at the First Latin American Research Seminar on Women, in San José, Costa Rica, in November 1981. AMES is an affiliate of the FDR (Democratic Revolutionary Front), the coalition of parties and popular organizations which, together with the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) leads the struggle for national liberation in El Salvador. The translation is by Bobby Ortiz.

accomplices of the myth of Cinderella, who waited for Prince Charming to free her from misery and convert her into the happy mother of numerous little princes; learning to take to the streets to fight for the elimination of poverty; learning to be active protagonists in the forging of our social destiny.

To be a member of the working class is not the same as being a member of the upper class; to be a North American or a European is not the same as being a Chilean or a Salvadoran. We are all, to some degree, exploited and we all carry the burden of our patriarchal heritage, but unquestionably our class interests transcend those of gender. What has a Domitila, a working-class woman of the Bolivian mines, to do with the wife of Abdul Gutiérrez, the bloody colonel of the Christian Democratic military junta of El Salvador? For women of the low-income sectors, joining the labor force is linked with a survival strategy similar to that of men of the same class and obeying the same necessities. However, for the women of the middle and higher strata, incorporation into production is determined by the number and age of their children, by their level of education, by the gap between the family wage and their consumer expectations.

There are also differences arising from the degree of development of a region, or from the pattern of urban and rural zones. Our struggle as Latin American women is different from that of women in developed countries. Like us, the latter play a fundamental role as reproducers of labor power and ideology, but *our* problematic arises fundamentally from the economic, political, and cultural exploitation of our people. Our struggle is, thus, not only for immediate demands; nor is it an individual one or against men. We seek the liberation of our countries from imperialism, dictatorship, and the local bourgeoisie—although we work simultaneously around the question of the specific condition of women and our oppression within the capitalist and patriarchal system.

While in the developed countries there is a struggle for contraception and abortion, in Latin America we must also fight against forced sterilization and certain birth-control projects which some governments have agreed to under pressure from the United States. For us women, it is not a

question of demanding collective services such as daycare centers or laundries, but rather of demanding general community services such as water, light, housing, and health care.

For Latin American women "the double day" has another dimension which converts "wages for housework" into a remote goal; our short-term goals are related to employment and job opportunities, to the exploitation of the principal wage-earner, and the impossibility of survival with starvation wages. It makes no sense to struggle against the consumerism of one part of society if we are faced with poverty and the impossibility of consuming by the other part, which constitutes the majority of the people.

In sum we are fighting for a thoroughgoing change which will include women in the production process, which will free both women and men from exploitation and poverty. At the same time the search for solutions to the specific problems of women must not be neglected.

### Invisible Work

Man's work in capitalist society is carried out at the cost of women's work within the home, which saves him the extra hours required for the reproduction of his labor power; hence the higher level of masculine skill and the male monopoly of political power. Both factors are characteristic of class society, and are due to an enormous amount of invisible labor done by women and appropriated by men through the mechanism of the family as an economic unit.

The family has been the foundation stone of all class societies and has given stability to the system based on private property. The family nucleus is the economic and legal formation through which the dominant classes put at their service and confiscate the labor of the female population. The toil of the male laborer is not sufficient to reproduce his labor power; another phase of production is required, namely, domestic labor. Carried out by women, it produces goods and services: laundered, ironed, and mended clothing; meals; a tidy house; and children educated in accordance with the requirements laid down for the new generation of workers.

If formerly the capitalists obtained a given amount of surplus value from the male worker, the principal family wage-earner, with the growing incorporation of women into the paid labor force they obtain a further benefit. In addition to the male workers, who are responsible for family subsistence, the women also work (and are paid lower wages), thus making up the deficit of income necessary to survival of the family unit. It is vitally important for the reproduction of class society that we women not exhaust our strength in social production, but rather that we conserve our energy for the private economic nucleus. Thus women, because of this contradiction between the two kinds of labor we perform, are obliged to accept unskilled jobs which leave us with a reservoir of energy for domestic tasks.

In other words, the fundamental aspect of women's problem, exploitation, is the direct result of capitalist relations of production. However, there exists another dimension, *oppression*, which is useful to the system, and whose cultural and social roots go back to the dawn of civilization: female subordination to the male and the division of labor (along gender lines), which predate capitalist society. They are found in most societies known to the history of humanity. So we can conclude that the problem of women is a fundamental social and cultural reality.

In the nineteenth century socialist thinkers assumed that the cause of women was identical with the cause of the working class. Although these thinkers acknowledged that women's subordination predated capitalism, they thought that the abolition of that social system would simultaneously abolish both workers' exploitation and commercialized human relations, freeing women from economic dependence on men and consequently from subordination. However, we think that to achieve our total emancipation such a change is a necessary but not sufficient condition.

It is indispensable that we also transform the ideological superstructures that perpetuate a male-female relationship based on the equation domination-subjection and reproduced fundamentally in the family. The family nucleus is the locus where models and values useful to the system are transmitted through the sexual division of labor; on the legal level, through

inheritance through the male line; on the economic level, as a unit of production and consumption and as a mediator between needs and resources; and on the social plane, by relegating women to the "private" domestic sphere and hampering our social and political participation.

Inasmuch as our specific situation of oppression and subordination is a centuries-old state of affairs which by now we have internalized, it can be said that we women share a specific condition. And it is in function of this specificity that we have been marginalized from history and the values inherent in our subordinate role have been exalted. We must acknowledge that we have internalized these values which now form part of our personalities.

We are conscious of the fact that the alleged separation between the "private" and the "public" is merely a sophism. The private is directly political because patriarchal ideology permeates the individual lives of men and women. It is important to recognize the link between the two areas and understand that although women will not be liberated without a change in society, it is equally true that there can be no genuine social transformation without women's emancipation.

To the extent to which we women are kept isolated and confined to the domestic sphere we will continue to accept our role, to accept the postulate that, due to biological differences, we are weak beings—docile, inferior to men, but also beautiful and noble—to whom have been assigned the important roles of wife and mother.

### Changes That Don't Change Anything

There is a daily growing contingent of women who question our passive role, the defense of the status quo, and our being distanced from political activity on our continent; there is a daily growing number of women who question why we work as much as 80 hours a week on the "double shift" which prevents us from participating in the social process and in decision-making.

In the light of this situation, many ruling regimes promulgate paternalistic legislation which establishes "equality before the law," even "no sex discrimination," including certain measures in favor of mothers and children. These are

formal measures which do not affect the daily reality of the great majority of people. Such is the case with education, for example, access to which is limited for the majority of both men and women of the lower classes, but especially women. Six out of ten Salvadorans are illiterate; well over half are women. In the cities twice as many women as men are illiterate.

In order to avert the threat of a genuine change in the specific role of women and our active participation in the liberation processes which would follow upon a massive increase of female consciousness, many governments have promoted modernist or developmental solutions. They point to the betterment of general living conditions in capitalist countries and to the introduction of new technology; they claim that this economic prosperity offers women the possibility of participating in the labor market and, consequently, of having "access to and participation in social life."

These seductive conceptions of women's liberation are almost always associated with conservative or reformist values, which do not conduce to effective changes in social relations. They provide a basis for exalting the role of women within the family as an institution which creates consensus and continuity of a culture, and which is an outgrowth of the capitalist system—macho, repressive, and based on the commercialization of human relations.

We think that the integration of women into capitalist society, the offer of a bigger piece of the pie, does not constitute liberation. Nobody can be free in a system that destroys everything human in both men and women. Nor can our problem be solved by the "insertion" (the very word implies passivity) of women into such a system, without our full participation as subject, not object, and without full awareness of the process of change. To postulate our insertion into development, without determining what kind of development, resolves nothing.

### First Steps Toward Liberation

The struggle of Latin American women to transcend the domestic takes place on several levels. It begins with middle- and high-income women who in part delegate their domestic

tasks to other women; some of the privileged women fulfill their social vocation through works of charity, some are political militants who focus on the structural roots of the system.

The condition of the *mujer del pueblo* [literally, woman of the people] on our continent during the last decade has been affected in two different ways. In terms of repression, thousands of women have been harassed and tortured, and have disappeared or been assassinated by the dictatorships. We have also been affected in our specific roles as mother, wife, or daughter of an unemployed, persecuted, or assassinated man. We have had to face the sudden destruction of our families and the need to find a way to manage without our *compañeros*, who frequently had been the only wage-earners in the household.

Then, as a result of the unpopular economic policies of the dictatorships, we women began to organize in *frentes*—of shantytown dwellers and housewives affected by economic, social, and political repression; of factory workers, peasants, and professionals who organized to defend the gains won through long years of struggle. The *frentista* format has become one of the principal responses utilized by Latin American women for dealing with specific demands. Women's mobilizations in defense of, and in solidarity with, the struggles of men have grown from day to day, as a frequent expression of mass participation helping to lay bare certain prevailing contradictions and exposing the true nature of military regimes. Conceived within a liberal context and subject to penetration by bourgeois ideology, the defense of women's traditional role is the precondition of women's mobilization: it is not easy for the state to repress those who, as mothers, wives, daughters, confront it in the very roles which constitute the pillar and foundation of domination.

When the private, domestic realm is altered from the outside, Latin American women come out of their homes and take to the streets. In strikes of miners, industrial workers, and building workers, women have pounded at the doors of ministries and parliaments. They have pressured the authorities and the employers to demand wage increases or jobs for their male family members, or their release from prison.

That is to say, their demands are not their own, but are, rather, familial. Responding to moments of crisis and deterioration of living conditions, women participate massively; as the foundation stone of the home, they defend their families; as the ones who gave life to their children, they demand that their lives be respected.

Historically, however, both the strength and weakness of such movements have resided in their spontaneity. Arising as support groups for male struggles, many of these groups dissolve when the conflicts that gave rise to them are ended; when husbands, fathers, sons return to center stage, we women retreat to our homes, leaving to the men, once again, the sphere of public activity. Perhaps that is why in Latin American history threats to traditional roles have frequently been converted into factors of women's mobilization. However, many of us, as a result of this experience, have recognized the implications of this dynamic, which opens up a terrain bordering on the political and gives to us the objective possibilities of losing the "fear of power," of transcending our traditional condition, of beginning to open up our political space.

### **The Difficult Task of Being Members of an Organized Movement**

If men have, for centuries, devoted themselves to political work and have fulfilled themselves in it, it is because they have always had the support of one or several women who have provided them with children, with affection, with domestic services; to these women are diverted all psychological tensions, thereby freeing men from the small and large problems of domestic life.

We women, on the other hand, do not have such support systems available to us, and in order to utilize our intellectual potential we must organize ourselves in such a way that the private sphere does not interfere with our specific political work. It is indeed dramatic to organize ourselves physically and psychologically to exercise this role without experiencing guilt vis-à-vis the "neglected" roles of mother and wife which relegate us to the domestic sphere.

For a woman to be active in sociopolitical organizations

implies the assumption of a definitive commitment, a commitment which, she feels, will have repercussions on her activities as woman, wife, mother, and in some cases, as paid worker. This situation is aggravated by the fact that until now it has not appeared that men have the intention of truly assuming some of the responsibility which for centuries has been delegated to women. It is not easy for men, even with good intentions, to raise their consciousness concerning the privileges conveyed by masculinity and to relinquish their role as the star members of the cast, becoming instead comrades who share daily life and struggle.

Consequently, for those of us who have decided to make a leap onto the stage of history and to become organized political women, protagonists of social and political transformations, the task as we see it is not an easy one.

The parties and movements of the democratic left have, in general, not dealt with the problems of women with the same consistency with which they confront other social problems. Their pronouncements in this regard are limited to the realm of class struggle and thus appear to be detached from political discourse; they do not make reference to the specific condition of women or to our integration in the struggle as a key factor in the liberation of our societies.

This omission implicitly assumes that feminism and socialism are opposed to each other. Women's liberation is not presented in terms of the liberation of the oppressed. The resolution of our struggle is, for the moment, conceived of as technical and private, becoming collective and social only after the exploited sectors have won their liberation, that is to say, in some distant and unpredictable future.

In other words, the failure to integrate the female problematic into the broad political project has, until now, left a large vacuum: a change in the relations of production is advocated, but not in the relations of reproduction; society is to be overturned economically and ideologically, but nothing is said of changes in the family, which is the sphere not only of consumption but also of reproduction of labor power, as well as the strategic locale for the transmission of ideology.

Will the people's organizations be capable of focusing on the specifics of daily life, or will they leave this to the mercy of

the dominant ideology? Will they be capable of breaking the female tradition of conservatism and fear, transforming women on a mass scale into organized political activists? Indicative of the political and ideological maturity of an organization is its analysis and proposals vis-à-vis the present role of women as reproducers of an ideology of domination, and therefore of the perpetuation of a social system.

### Participation of Women in the Process of National Liberation

We Salvadoran women have become aware of our situation; we understand that our revolution for [national] liberation will provide the fundamental solution for our problems. We Salvadoran women have participated, in this century, in all the political movements against domination by the oligarchy, but in the last two decades our participation has grown by leaps and bounds. In the 1970s we adopted a clear revolutionary strategy.

In 1922 there was a demonstration of women in mourning, demanding the release of their imprisoned family members. It was repressed by the regime in power, with seven *compañeras* assassinated. Women also played a part in the heroic insurrection of 1932, which left 30,000 workers and peasants murdered. We also played an active role in the general sit-down strike in 1944, which succeeded in removing General Martínez from power.

A women's organization remembered with respect in El Salvador is the *Fraternidad de Mujeres*, which, in 1960, organized spirited struggles and, together with other organizations belonging to the National Front of Civic Orientation, removed Colonel Lemus from power. (At that time the level of consciousness was not what it is today, and a new tyrant took over.)

A national strike movement known as the "Strike of Steel, Inc.," involving 35,000 workers, took place in 1967. Women workers took part in it massively and militantly. There were also two big national strikes of teachers, the majority of whom were women. These strikers took to the streets in a broad struggle around union and political issues and against the military dictatorship, which had violently repressed these

movements. The firm revolutionary spirit of women began to be forged in those struggles.

The revolutionary student movement also provided the setting for the combativity and revolutionary consciousness of many of our heroic *compañeras* who are still struggling today, and for many others who have fallen in combat against the military dictatorship.

The political-military organizations that are currently offering a new alternative for people's struggle, and which led our people toward our present level of development, arose early in the seventies. At the beginning, women's participation was minimal, and was limited primarily to students and teachers. But with the advent of revolutionary peasant-workers' organizations, peasant women have also joined the struggle in large numbers. Children are also participating, together with their parents, since they also experience exploitation and repression.

In the mid-1970s the mass struggle reached new, qualitatively higher levels of struggle; there were also qualitative leaps in respect to combativity, and there was an acceleration in the process of self-defense in mass political actions. Salvadoran women are participating in diverse and exemplary ways—in tasks of agitation, propaganda, and organization, as well as in the military struggle of our people.

In 1977 organizations arose, composed primarily of women, which demanded the freedom of the many captured and disappeared prisoners taken by the government. The Committee for the Freedom of Prisoners and the Disappeared and the Committee of Disappeared Prisoners carried on spirited struggles—hunger strikes, demonstrations, appeals to international organizations for the freeing of their family members. At the same time the class struggle, which had been characterized by legalistic thinking since 1967, underwent a transformation. With the advent of the revolutionary trade union movement, women workers also joined the struggle.

In 1978 the first steps were taken toward forming the organization that was to become AMES (the Association of Salvadoran Women) as a way of incorporating into political life those sectors of women (housewives, professionals, teachers,

secretaries, shantytown dwellers, students, etc.) who, because of their special circumstances, had not yet joined the people's struggle. The year 1978 saw also the organizing of market and street vendors. AUTRAMES (the Association of Market Vendors and Workers) and the Luz Dilian Arévalo Coordinating Committee of Market Vendors have led spirited struggles, occupying markets and demonstrating to better their working and living conditions.

Salvadoran women have also been joining mass organizations which today form part of the Democratic Revolutionary Front (FDR). Concurrently women have been joining the political-military organizations and armed units of the people. Thousands of women fight with weapons in hand in the militia, the guerrilla forces, and the popular army of liberation, participating both at the rank-and-file level and in the leadership.

Our revolutionary struggle is a political and military war of the entire people against a minority supported by U.S. imperialism. Salvadoran women constitute half the population of our country, and we are participating in this effort on a massive scale. There is no area of struggle today where we are not present. This is an indication of the profundity of the revolutionary struggle in our country, and the way in which women participate demonstrates the high revolutionary level of our liberation process.

For centuries the women of our country have been suffering double oppression and exploitation. Today we are fighting as part of a people who have taken up arms to end oligarchic and imperialist domination. Our presence is felt, from the members of AMES to the highest leadership levels of the FDR. In our country, as in Nicaragua, new procedures are being developed not only in revolutionary organization and leadership, but also in the transformation of human relations. Strategies, speeches, guidelines—these are no longer the prerogatives of men. And they too are aware of the need for, and accept being participants in, an educational process in that respect, a process that will result in human relations that are morally binding on everyone.

We think that in a revolutionary organization there can be no contradictions between professed ideas and behavior. There

must be consistency between the choices made, the values affirmed, and daily life—with no exceptions, no ambiguity.

No real change in society is ever brought about painlessly, nor will the problem of women's organized participation be resolved by the insertion of stipulated quotas of women in the leadership. It is necessary to face seriously and self-critically the male-female relationship with all its implications and understand the gravity of our exclusion from, or relegation to a minor role in, the process of change. We constitute half of humanity and we constitute an objectively exploited and oppressed social group with enormous revolutionary potential.

Keeping clearly in mind that the struggle for women's liberation must be immersed in the struggle for the liberation of our peoples, it is also necessary to point out that we women are a group defined by our own conditions and specific demands and that we cannot wait for socialism or a change of structures to solve tomorrow the very problems that are today the source of our limitations, of our backwardness as integral human beings, as agents of change.

A woman's conscious decision to join in organized struggle implies a transition much longer and more arduous than that of men, inasmuch as we must overcome an endless number of hurdles. If we evaluate these hurdles, we see that, qualitatively speaking, a dual leap has been taken. Obviously this does not mean that we have solved our specific problems of "being a woman," nor is organized participation a panacea that will permit us to achieve our full identity. However, we think that the hallmark of revolutionary feminism is that it locates itself within a context of total transformation of society. We also know that the liberation of women requires a level of generalized collective consciousness which is the result of a development of a new ideology. And that new ideology must be the result of a project for a new structuring of society—a society without private property and without exploitation of one human being by another.

We Salvadoran women ask the peoples of the world to increase your solidarity with the people of El Salvador so as to isolate the junta and bring to a halt the nefarious efforts toward direct and massive military intervention in our country by U.S. imperialism.