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**Peace Agreements as a Means for Promoting Gender Equality and Ensuring
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El Salvador and Guatemala**

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Gender Equality and the Central American Peace Accords: The Cases of El Salvador and Guatemala

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The Salvadoran and Guatemalan experiences demonstrate that peace agreements should be viewed as important opportunities to promote gender equality. The experiences of both countries indicate that women's participation in the design of peace agreements and the explicit recognition of women's rights in the accords themselves do not guarantee that the struggle toward greater gender equality is won. This paper provides a succinct overview of the evolution of the two accords and their subsequent implementation.

Background

On January 16, 1992, the government of El Salvador and the guerrilla forces integrated in the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) signed historic peace accords at Chapultepec Castle, Mexico. This agreement ended a twelve-year conflict (1979-92) that had traumatized a whole nation. The war ravaged the country, creating 1.5 million refugees and claiming the lives of more than 70,000 people, most of them civilians. In the wake of the accords, optimism regarding El Salvador's future was widespread. On December 29, 1996, another Central American peace accord was completed. The guerrilla forces integrated into the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) and the Guatemalan government, headed by President Alvaro Arzú, signed an agreement that ended the conflict that had engulfed Guatemala for thirty-six years. The human suffering during this period defies imagination. According to the report by the Commission for Historical Clarification, charged under the peace accords with establishing the truth about Guatemala's violent past, more than 200,000 Guatemalans were killed or disappeared over the course of the conflict. In addition, hundreds of villages were destroyed and 1.5 million people were internally displaced or sought refuge in Mexico.

In order to understand the scope of the human tragedy caused by these wars, we need an appropriate context. The Vietnam War in which 58,000 North American soldiers were killed led to the Vietnam Syndrome. The impact of the war on the North American public was so great that it took years to rebuild public support for open foreign interventions involving U.S. troops. Yet the human cost incurred by the United States in the Vietnam War pales in comparison to the suffering wrought on the Central American societies. In terms of the U.S. population, the conflict in El Salvador would correspond to 3.5 million deaths and 75 million refugees. Finally, the genocide in Guatemala would have been the equivalent of 6 million dead North Americans.

Women's Participation in the Conflict

Women played an important role in the guerrilla movements of El Salvador and Guatemala. At the time of the 1992 demobilization of the Salvadoran FMLN, female combatants represented 29 percent of the fighting force. In addition, women were part of the political

personnel constituting close to 37 percent of the cadres. Only in exceptional cases did women join the struggle in order to change prevailing gender relations. Instead they did so out of a sense of social justice or to survive the repression unleashed by the army and police forces. The FMLN did not explicitly address women's rights in its early programs and announcements. FMLN commanders, whether male or female, did not focus their energy or thoughts on women's rights. Although women did start to organize within the FMLN in the last years of the struggle, I argue that the lack of gender consciousness during the time of the war explains to a great extent why female leaders did not focus on gender issues during the peace negotiation.

In Guatemala, women were also an important part of the guerrilla forces. Although we lack exact data regarding the URNG's gender composition – a result of the continued climate of fear at the time of demobilization and the URNG's secretive nature – a European Union-sponsored study of the socioeconomic background of the guerrilla membership gives a reasonably accurate picture of the number of female fighters. Women combatants represented about 15 percent of the 2,940 combatants that officially demobilized. Thus, compared to El Salvador, the percentage of women in the URNG was only half as great as the percentage of women in the Salvadoran guerrilla movement. Among the political cadres, women constituted about 25 percent.

The Guatemalan movement initiated its struggle a decade before its Salvadoran counterpart. In the early 1960s, women were still largely precluded from serving as armed combatants in guerrilla forces throughout the world. When the massive incorporation of women started in the 1980s, traditional gender views continued to shape the views of the Guatemalan leadership, a reality that contributed to the lower levels of female participation.

Women's Role in the Negotiations of the Peace Agreements

El Salvador

Women's issues received scant to no attention in the peace negotiations in El Salvador, although Nidia Díaz, Lorena Peña, and Ana Guadalupe Martínez, all high-ranking female commanders, participated in this process. At the time, none of the three women could have been considered an advocate for women's rights. Peña has affirmed that the special problems of women were simply not discussed during the negotiations. Now a committed feminist, she recognizes that women's emancipation was not an issue during the war and that she had had no idea of gender consciousness at the time of the demobilization. Díaz strongly supported women's rights within the FMLN but tended to keep a low public profile on gender issues, a habit she maintained during the negotiations. Martínez, on the other hand, was the least likely supporter of a women's rights agenda. Although she expressed support for the inclusion of women in all party activities, she considered the organized women's movement extremist and radical.

The Salvadoran negotiations were conducted in secrecy with little to no input from civil society. Thus, the few women in the FMLN negotiating team could not rely on input from strong women's organizations, assuming they would have been inclined to do so.

Guatemala

In Guatemala, on the other hand, a vocal women's movement supported the efforts of a few high-ranking female URNG officials to put gender equality on the agenda of the peace negotiations. For example, Luz Méndez, a member of the URNG's commission negotiating the peace accords, was conscious of the importance of incorporating women's rights into the agreements. She had learned from the Salvadoran experience. As discussed, the FMLN leadership had paid little attention to women's rights in the peace negotiations. Although Méndez and several other officials advocated the necessity of incorporating a gender perspective into the accords, this view was not representative of the URNG in general. Awareness of gender issues was limited in the guerrilla movement. This made it imperative for the advocates of women's rights to be supported from sectors within society at large.

The talks held between various sectors of Guatemalan society, including the business sector, the religious community, and the labor unions that preceded the signing of the first accord were essential because they legitimized the idea of a negotiated end to the armed conflict. The role of civil society in the peace process was institutionalized by an accord that established the Asamblea de la Sociedad Civil (Assembly of Civil Society, or ASC). The ASC consisted of ten diverse organizations representing the main sectors of Guatemalan society and derived its legitimacy from the January 1994 framework agreement, giving it official recognition as an interlocutor by the parties to the peace talks. Specifically, the ASC was charged with the mandate "of transmitting to the UN moderator, the government and the URNG, nonbinding recommendations" and "of acting as guarantor for bilateral agreements to give them the character of national commitments."

The Assembly of Civil Society played an important role in advocating the inclusion of women's rights into the accords. A highly visible group within the ASC was the Women's Sector. URNG official Comandante Lola affirmed that the Women's Sector, practically the only one with a permanent presence in the Assembly of Civil Society, influenced the coordination and the content of some of the accords. As a result, women's rights were specifically addressed in four of the seven substantive agreements that were reached between July 1991 and September 1996. This fact was publicized only days after the signing of the accords in a study of the accords' gender content conducted by researchers from the University of San Carlos and released in January 1997. The emphasis on gender issues in the Guatemalan peace accords indicates that the level of gender awareness in the region had changed since the 1992 Salvadoran agreement.

Gender Provisions in the Peace Agreements

El Salvador

In El Salvador, the FMLN negotiators focused on political and military issues rather than socio-economic problems and lacked an awareness of the importance to advocate the inclusion of gender as an organizing principle. Thus, women's rights and needs were barely addressed in the accords.

Guatemala

There were a number of important passages on women's rights in the accords. In the accord establishing procedures for the resettlement of populations uprooted during the war, the parties agreed "to emphasize in particular the protection of families headed by women, as well as the widows and orphans who have been most affected." Further, the Guatemalan government "committed itself to eliminating all forms of discrimination, factual or legal, against women, and to make it easier [for them to have] access to land, housing, [and] credit and to participate in development projects. A gender perspective will be incorporated in the policies, programs and activities of the global development strategy." In the important agreement on the rights of Guatemala's indigenous peoples, considered one of the key achievements of the URNG leadership, indigenous women were given special protection. For example, sexual harassment of an indigenous woman was to be punished particularly severely under Guatemalan law. Women's political rights were also addressed. The accord concerning the strengthening of civil society advocated the introduction of measures of positive discrimination to increase female participation. The agreement required the signatory parties "to take the corresponding measures in order to ensure that organizations of political and social character adopt specific policies tending to encourage and favor women's participation as part of the process of strengthening civilian power."

The international climate during the peace negotiations played an important role. For example, discussions on the socioeconomic and agrarian accord coincided with the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. Having gender issues on the forefront internationally made it easier to incorporate provisions favoring women's rights into this accord. A key passage of the agreement stated:

Recognizing the insufficiently appreciated contribution of women in all spheres of economic and social activity, particularly their work in favor of improving the community, the [signatory] parties recognize the necessity of strengthening women's participation in economic and social development on terms of equality. To this end the government commits itself to take the specific economic and social situation of women into account in the strategies, plans and development programs and to train civil servants in the analysis and planning based on this perspective. This includes: recognizing the equality of rights between women and men in the home, the workplace, production, as well as in social and political life and assuring them the same possibilities as men, in particular concerning access to credit, the awarding of land and other productive and technological resources.

Thus, the Guatemalan accords were very advanced in addressing the role of women in society and advocating change toward greater gender equality. The accords reflected a rethinking of women's role in society. At least at a formal level, women were acknowledged as key protagonists in Guatemala's future development. Yet the challenge remained to implement the provisions in the accords in a way that would transform Guatemalan society.

Women's Role in the Post-Conflict Era

El Salvador

The lack of a gender perspective evident in the accords and in the design of the reintegration programs, translated into discrimination when female combatants initially did not receive equal treatment in the allocation of crucial resources such as land. The reasons were many, ranging from machismo to lack of support from the male-dominated leadership of the guerrilla movement. Nidia Díaz, the FMLN official originally in charge of the land program, has said that while the exclusion of female combatants was not officially sanctioned or designed, the socio-cultural context often made it a reality. Lorena Peña concurs: "I believe that the principal problem that we have experienced is that the reintegration of the female combatant into civilian life has taken place under the classical sexist concepts that have predominated in all political forces of the country, including the FMLN." This was particularly evident in the case of the Land Transfer Program established to provide land to ex-combatants.

Early appraisals of the Land Transfer Program were quite pessimistic. In 1993, Lorena Peña claimed that an estimated 70 to 80 percent of female combatants did not receive the benefits allocated to them. She based her opinion on the findings of a study sponsored by UNICEF that recorded the difficult situation female ex-combatants faced a year after the signing of the peace accords. Later data on the reintegration programs, however, revealed that the early instances of discrimination had largely been rectified.

From a gender perspective, the central problem in the implementation of the land program was that initially many women were excluded. By the time the program neared its completion, however, one could not detect evidence of formal gender discrimination. In terms of gender equality, the case of the ex-combatants is most illustrative. Women represented 29 percent of the FMLN's combatants at the time of demobilization. Since the female militants receiving land titles made up 26 percent of the beneficiary population, the data did not support the earlier reports of gender discrimination. Thus women received land according to their relative strength in the FMLN at the time of demobilization. In light of this evidence the question must be raised why the perception of widespread discrimination continued to prevail among female FMLN officials as well as rank-and-file members.

While the later record of the land-titling program contradicts claims of massive discrimination, evidence from the early stages of the reintegration programs indicated that women were indeed discriminated against. A 1993 study of the Land Transfer Program concluded: "A good part of the *tenedoras* (squatters, generally supportive of the FMLN), particularly those that are *acompañadas* (common-law spouses) or married, remain at the margins of the benefits of the Land Transfer Program, because the communal leaders apply discriminatory criteria to women." Senior FMLN officials confirmed that there were problems, particularly in the departments of Cuscatlán and San Salvador. Apparently, these problems were due to actions taken by local officials and not the product of official FMLN policy. However, these instances of discrimination took a variety of forms.

In cases in which both husband and wife were *tenedores*, frequently only the husband was registered as a potential beneficiary, a practice in direct violation of the official guidelines.

FMLN leaders maintained that local officials misinterpreted the rules and allocated land per family group and not per individual as established in the guidelines. Although some women who had been excluded originally were later incorporated when new lists were drawn up, feelings of discrimination lingered.

Women faced a variety of hurdles. Communal leaders established their own requisites for potential beneficiaries, such as knowing how to read and write or possessing birth certificates or voter registration cards. Since women were more likely than men to be illiterate and to lack proper documentation, these measures were discriminatory. Further, those women who were successful in obtaining land experienced greater difficulties problems in obtaining loans than the men did. Another manifestation of these subtler and therefore hidden forms of discrimination could be found in the poor quality of the land that was often assigned to women. In addition, many potential female beneficiaries excluded themselves, feeling they were incapable of assuming the responsibility of repaying the assumed debt. Others argued that they were too old or lacked farming experience.

Apart from the land issue, male and female FMLN members alike faced enormous challenges in their efforts to reintegrate themselves into society. Yet, according to a representative FMLN study of beneficiaries of the accords, female combatants were confronted with additional hurdles "due to their gender, since society in general restricts the opportunities for development of women as such and because of this there is greater discrimination toward FMLN women who did and do not conform totally with the stereotypical roles assigned to women." Also, the programs failed to consider the special needs of women. FMLN women who gathered for a national meeting in August 1993 complained that the "reintegration plans did not take women's specificity into account and because of this the benefit for women ex-combatants has been minimal. Also, there are programs that were implemented with a stereotypical vision of women. There has been no responsible follow-up of widows, wounded ex-combatants, or the orphan children of the war." This reality resulted in frustration and anger voiced by female militants.

Women were allowed a "counter-traditional role" as long as it was in the interests of the struggle. After the war, when their new identities threatened traditional gender relations, an attempt was made to relegate them to the private sphere and disempower them. A 1993 study of 1,100 FMLN women provided evidence that this was indeed the case. In one important indicator, 57 percent of the women interviewed reported that they had worked primarily in the household before the war, while barely a year after the peace accords 95 percent said they were engaged in domestic work.

Guatemala

The challenge of reintegrating the URNG combatants into civilian life was enormous. Of particular concern were the poverty and the ethnic backgrounds of the ex-combatants. The majority of the URNG's personnel came from Guatemala's twenty-one indigenous peoples and belonged to the most marginalized sectors of society. Among URNG combatants, indigenous people represented more than 80 percent, while they made up about 50 percent of the political cadres. Communication between URNG members was difficult due to significant language

barriers within the indigenous community. According to one observer, the URNG members spoke 16 indigenous languages

The living conditions of Guatemala's indigenous communities were appalling. The people had little access to the most basic human needs, including health care, housing and education. World Bank data reveal that in the countryside, where the overwhelming majority of the indigenous population is located, 90 percent lived in conditions of abject poverty. In the case of URNG personnel, government statistics indicated that in the zones of origin of the majority of URNG members, 82 percent of the population lived in poverty or absolute poverty.

Not surprisingly, evaluations of the peace accords' impact sounded a pessimistic note. Leaders of the women's movement argued that the demands of women in respect to the implementation of the accords lacked tangible results and that commitments had not been converted into actions. The government was criticized for "failing to have an idea of how to attend to women's historic problems" and for lacking a strategy of action designed to ensure that the provisions of the accords would not remain empty words

Conclusion

The Central American peace agreements teach us that our analysis is in need of greater sophistication. We need to review our standards of evaluation and focus on the need for substantive as opposed to formal gender equality.

The peace agreements of Guatemala and El Salvador failed to resolve the fundamental problems that led to the wars in the first place. The Guatemalan and Salvadoran peace accords differed significantly. The 1992 Salvadoran accords constituted, in the words of United Nations negotiator Alvaro de Soto, "a negotiated revolution." Under its terms, the Salvadoran government agreed to many demands made by the FMLN. The URNG, on the other hand, lacked a comparable bargaining position. Ironically, from a gender perspective, the Guatemalan accords are excellent whereas the Salvadoran agreement is deficient. Yet the agreements predict little concerning women's position in the two post-conflict societies.

The Guatemalan accords can best be compared to the constitutions of many countries that guarantee extensive rights to the citizens that in the end are rarely granted. The accords remain a document that establishes normative goals for the future of Guatemalan citizens, but not an enforceable code of law. As several observers have emphasized "the Guatemalan agreement contains more wide ranging language on social and economic areas, by far, than the Salvadoran accord, but a great many of the provisions are stated in sufficiently general terms as to make them virtually unenforceable," a fact described as the Achilles' heel of the accords. There is strong consensus that the URNG's weakness at the bargaining table made it impossible for the guerrilla leadership to negotiate more specific, enforceable agreements, a reality that impedes the full realization of the provisions in the accords. The URNG continued to exhibit political weakness during the implementation phase, at a time when a strong advocate was needed. Thus, when Guatemala held a referendum in May 1999 on the constitutional reforms, necessary to fully implement the peace accords, the referendum failed to gain the support required to change the

constitution. This development raised serious questions regarding the viability of the accords. In the end, the URNG did not have the power to deliver on the promises entailed in the accords and the government showed little interest to do anything without being pressured. Thus, until today, the emphasis given to women's rights in the accords has not translated into concrete improvements for the female population.

In El Salvador, the FMLN's political strength permitted the new party to pressure the government to adhere to the provisions of the peace accords, which established benefits for the ex-combatants. While formal gender equality was achieved in most instances during the implementation of the benefits programs, the prevailing cultural norms impeded progress toward substantive equality. Nevertheless, the Salvadoran experience teaches us that ex-combatants need to form strong political parties as a sine qua non to ensure the implementation of any accord.

The political will of the leadership is in the end more important than the best formal provisions or the best intentions of the international community. Although the importance of establishing measures of positive discrimination was explicitly mentioned in the Guatemalan accords, little was done to guarantee women adequate political representation. Although civil society contributed greatly to the successful initiation and conclusion of the peace negotiations, it lacked the power to push for a successful implementation of the accords. In El Salvador, on the other hand, the female FMLN militants were successful in gaining substantial representation in the FMLN's leadership structures and in their party's parliamentary representation.

We have been successful in putting gender equality on the agenda. Now, we need to ensure that we direct our attention toward ensuring substantive equality. This requires more than formal guarantees. I argue that the fight for substantive gender equality requires a transformation of a society's gender consciousness, which in turn can only be achieved if women and men form a strategic alliance.

Several passages of this paper are taken from Luciak, *After the Revolution: Gender and Democracy in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001). Please see the book for appropriate references