

Up in Arms!

A Brief Women's History of Militancy in Latin America

During the last several decades of the Twentieth Century, unprecedented numbers of women across Latin America participated in grassroots groups, political parties and guerrilla movements in response to human rights violations by repressive regimes. The essay describes how at a time of national crisis, women who had been socialized for the home became militant, risking family alienation, public rebuke and great personal harm in their struggle for social justice. It suggests, however, that the most profound change was not achieved in the public arena but in their gender awareness and transformation as women. The Mirabal sisters in The Dominican Republic, Gioconda Belli in the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional of Nicaragua, and the Peruvian women of Sendero Luminoso worked alongside men in resistance movements. Others, including CoMadres of El Salvador and the Chilean “arpilleristas,” united in mother-centered groups. The women represent a cross-section of Latin American society and espouse diverse political leanings. As a collective, their feats debunk a highly gendered Hispanic social order that frequently devalues women’s contributions. When harsh experiences catapulted women to question socio-political realities in their countries, many emancipated themselves from the gendered-laden strictures that limited their roles and isolated them from the possibility of civic engagement. In this regard, all the women discussed in the paper acted as revolutionaries within their communities. For many, their gender awakening would draw them into a new Latin American “woman’s” revolution in the wake of war.

Contemporary Latin American history has shown that when men take up political struggle, women also mobilize. During the 1970s and 1980s across the Americas, women’s participation in the public arena peaked in reaction to extreme human rights violations by repressive regimes, some of which had been in power for generations. The women themselves little imagined the

extent of their political engagement in a culture that had socialized them for the home. Neither had they anticipated developing a gender consciousness as a consequence of struggling for social justice.

In the early 1960s the Dominican Republic began to emerge from a thirty year-long totalitarian state. During that same period, increased opposition to the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua spawned a revolution that devastated the country all through the 1970s. Just as the Nicaraguan Revolution was drawing to a resolution in 1979, a civil war growing in strength in neighboring El Salvador would rage for twelve years. Meanwhile during the 1970s and 1980s in South America, military governments systematically stamped out dissent by terrorizing the populations of Chile, Argentina and Uruguay. In Peru, a peasant-based insurgency launched into armed struggle in 1980 and plagued every administration for nearly two decades. During those volatile decades, women all over Latin America were also up in arms.

Despite the differences between the agrarian-based Central American and Andean countries of South America, and the more proletariat populations of the Southern Cone (Chile, Argentina and Uruguay) nations, the political repression that led to huge numbers of disappearances, tortures, imprisonments and deaths in both hemispheres was largely authoritarian states' response to "popular demands for socioeconomic development and distributive justice" (Angell 25). During the last three decades of the twentieth century, unprecedented numbers of women participated in grassroots groups, political parties and guerrilla movements whose activities ultimately aimed at closing the enormous gap between a wealthy minority and a poor majority, a legacy of Spanish colonialism in Latin America.

The women in this survey represent a cross-section of Latin American society (Indian, peasant, poor, uneducated, mestizo, literate, middle class, professional, housewives, mothers) and diverse political leanings (nonpartisan or adherents of Right or Left wing politics). Differences aside, in their struggles for justice all the women were moved to varying degrees of militancy during a time of great political crisis when public dissent often meant brutal punishment, and even death, for self and kin. As a collective, their feats—drawn here from a variety of sources such as creative literature, autobiography, published scholarship and internet websites—debunk a highly gendered Hispanic social order that frequently devalues women's contributions.

Perhaps the group of Latin American women best known internationally for confronting a repressive state and politicizing the institution of motherhood were the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo who organized themselves in the dictatorial Argentina of the 1970s and 1980s. Since much has been published on this group's mobilization during that country's national crisis, known as the "Dirty War," I will limit this essay to women's militancy elsewhere in Latin America (Bouvard 19).¹ However, I would like to suggest some reasons for the exceptional notoriety of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo when similar women's groups in the region also sought public recognition as upright citizens forced

to protest out of extreme maternal grief. The visibility of a weekly gathering at an appointed time in the heart of the capital's main square, Plaza de Mayo, "the seat of power in the country, flanked not only by the presidential palace but also by the cathedral and the most important banks" was an ingenious strategy that helped publicize the Argentine women's cause within and beyond national borders (Bouvard 2). But besides the physical appropriation of a key patriarchal space as sustained protest tactic, the overall group's personal profile most likely contributed to their positive public reception. Among factors influential in garnering public sympathy, I propose: the women's Euro-centric lineage, unlike the indigenous ancestry predominant in Latin America; the fact that many of their disappeared sons and daughters were students, and not illiterate peasants; and that the women were not affiliated with any party at a time when social protest in Latin America was associated with a communist ideological agenda. Ironically, worldwide, the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo became an alternate model for political opposition and accomplishment within a society where power has been historically weighed in terms of military strength. To their credit, those resilient women left a legacy for human rights militancy that included the public debate on holding a despot government accountable in the wake of political crisis.

Although throughout the region the majority of women and women's groups, like the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, confined their political involvement to civil disobedience and nonviolent forms of protest, others took up dangerous combatant roles. I will identify women whose activism stemmed from their identification as mothers foremost, but I also record militancy by non-mothers because, despite differences in personal life circumstances and resistance methods, all the women acted in a self-sacrificial capacity, as expected of mothers in Latin America.

The Dominican Republic: The Mirabal Sisters a.k.a. the "Butterflies"

The 1994 bestseller in the United States, *In the Time of the Butterflies*, a novel by Dominican-American writer Julia Alvarez, popularized the story of the Mirabal sisters, underground human rights activists assassinated on November 25, 1960 by order of the dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo who ruled from 1930-1961. Long before writing the book, Alvarez sympathized with the homegrown national heroines because her own father, a medical doctor by profession, was forced into exile when the U.S. backed plot to depose Trujillo failed (Alvarez 323). The four Mirabal sisters (Dedé, Patria, Minerva and Maria Teresa) grew up in a prosperous family that could have avoided the regime's violence by pretending to support Trujillo. Their tragic fate was sealed, however, when at boarding school, Minerva became aware of students whose family members had disappeared, been tortured, imprisoned or killed by Trujillo's secret police. The appalling human rights violations sweeping the Dominican Republic led Minerva to a personal commitment to fight for justice in her country. Eventually,

two other sisters, Patria and Maria Teresa, joined Minerva's anti-government efforts. All three sisters married men working in the underground and became mothers. Patria is quoted as saying: "We cannot allow our children to grow up in this corrupt and tyrannical regime, we have to fight against it, and I am willing to give up everything, including my life if necessary."²

The eldest sister, Dedé, was not directly involved in clandestine activities but supported her sisters by caring for their children whenever they went on missions and by visiting them during periods of incarceration. The three sisters took the alias of "Las mariposas," the Butterflies, which became the symbol for freedom on the island and a thorn in Trujillo's side. No matter how he harassed them, the three sisters would not desist from conspiring against his regime. Annoyed at their bravado, Trujillo decided to get rid of them.

Dedé shares in an interview that Trujillo had stated publicly, "I have only two problems, the Catholic Church and the Mirabal family." "Eight days after making that statement," Dedé asserts, "was when he sent the boys to Puerto Plata [prison]" (Mirabal).³ That's when Trujillo granted the women permission to visit their jailed husbands, whom he had transferred to an isolated part of the island in order to force the wives to travel on a rural mountain road (Alvarez 323). As planned, Trujillo's henchmen intercepted their jeep. Patria, Minerva, Maria Teresa and their driver were clubbed to death in a sugarcane field and placed back in their vehicle, which was then pushed over a cliff to simulate an accident. The crime, however, backfired on Trujillo because he had underestimated the manifestation of public outrage for the deaths of the Butterflies and the reaction of fervent support for their cause. Six months later Trujillo died under a hail of bullets when his car was ambushed in an assassination plot orchestrated by a group of the country's elites.

Dedé, the only surviving sister, raised her own and her sisters' children, nine in all. She is still alive and has dedicated her life to honoring the legacy of the Butterflies, including preserving their birth place for public viewing and establishing a Mirabal museum. There are also monuments, parks, schools and libraries named after them. The Obelisk on the waterfront that Trujillo commissioned to honour himself was painted over in tribute of the murdered women. In commemoration of the sisters, the United Nations passed on December 17, 1999 a resolution (54/134) adopting November 25th (the day of the sisters' killing) as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. In August of 2009, at the age of eighty-four, Dedé published her first and only book, *Vivas en su jardín* (Alive in the Garden), a personal testimony to ensure historical memory of her family life during the Trujillo regime.

Chile: The Arpilleristas Stitching Protest

During most of the 1970s in the Southern Hemisphere Chile was going through its own period of severe repression by order of General Augusto Pinochet who ruled as military dictator between 1973 until his ouster in 1990. In 1971, just

a couple of years before a military coup toppled democratically elected President Salvador Allende and installed General Pinochet in power, thousands of middle-class women had organized and rallied against President Allende in what was called “March of the Empty Pots” in Santiago (Baldez 1). The racket produced from thousands of women beating empty pots in the streets throughout many neighborhoods of the capital made stirring news. Chilean women had organized and demonstrated a significant lack of middle-class support for Allende’s socialist revolution, pressured the military to intervene in housewives’ concerns about rampant food shortages, and sent a signal of domestic discontent to observers around the world” (76). Women taking to the streets proved instrumental in “catapulting men to action” because the housewives “organized the protest at a moment when the opposition parties were poised to take definitive action against [Allende’s] government” (Baldez 76-78). The national crisis eventually culminated in the military coup that ousted Allende and ushered in Pinochet’s totalitarian regime. The military junta quickly launched a campaign to fight against Marxists with mass detentions of opposition sympathizers, union organizers and anyone affiliated with socially disenfranchised groups. The hardest hit sectors were the working class poor and shantytown populations.

During the dictatorship the major churches of Santiago responded to the urgent call for help from mothers and wives by forming the ecumenical Pro-Paz (Pro Peace) Committee in 1974 (Agosín, *Tapestries* 7). Immediately, a constant stream of distraught women with detained and disappeared relatives sought services at the Pro-Paz office. The women needed therapy for their personal trauma as much as a way of making a little money to support the family suddenly left without a breadwinner (Baldez 130).

Valentina Bonne, an artist working for Pro-Paz modified the idea of the Panamanian *mola*, an Indian hand-stitched tapestry, and came up with the *arpillera* as an item the women could produce to sell (Agosín, *Tapestries* 114). *Arpillera* is the Spanish term for “burlap,” the cheapest affordable material used for the backing of the small tapestries each woman designed personally. The *arpilleras* showed scenes denouncing human rights violations, the protests of political activists and the suffering of those left behind. Lacking resources to buy all the materials, the women at first cut up clothing and unraveled sweaters, their own and those belonging to the disappeared family member (Agosín, *Tapestries* 105).

The military junta recognized the protest value of the women’s stitching and prohibited the exhibition or sale of *arpilleras* in Chile. It eventually shut down the Pro-Paz Committee responsible for the workshops. In response the Catholic archbishop of Santiago, Cardinal Raúl Silva Henríquez, formed the Vicarate of Solidarity, an organization that “could not be dismantled because it functioned entirely within the strict ecumenical laws of the Catholic Church of Rome and the office of the Archbishop” (Agosín, *Tapestries* 8). As the dictatorship escalated its campaign to purge Marxist subversives, the numbers of women—the

majority housewives living in shantytowns—needing some form of income increased. Forced to organize a system of larger scale production of *arpilleras*, the Vicarate established twenty regional workshops throughout the country and channeled the tapestries abroad (Agosín, *Tapestries* 45; Baldez 130).

Again, getting the word out about the military junta's human rights abuses was as important for the women as the income the sale of the *arpilleras* generated for their dispossessed families. For daring to denounce the detentions and disappearances, the state persecuted *arpilleristas* like Violeta Morales who recalls how the government-controlled newspapers defamed the tapestries as the work of women revolutionized by priests (Agosín, *Tapestries* 108). She recounts the harassment at checkpoints throughout the city, the home raids in search of revolutionary material and how *arpilleristas* would be followed in public. All these intimidation tactics, aimed to get them to stop searching for their relatives and stop participating in Vicarate workshops, were terrifying in a militarized city kept in "order" through censorship, curfew, secret police, disappearances and clandestine prisons. Eventually the women participated in bolder protest actions, including hunger strikes, chainings to government buildings, sit-downs and street marches, which exposed them to harsh treatment during detentions and health consequences from the tear gas used by defense forces (Agosín, *Tapestries* 111, 121, 136).

Chilean expatriate Marjorie Agosín, the first Latin American scholar to publish a book in the United States on the *arpilleras*, observes that at the time the women were unaware of the huge political implications of their work (Agosín, *Scraps* 10). Moreover, many could not anticipate how the years of struggle would heave gender issues to the forefront and transform their lives in other ways. Twenty years after the coup, Violeta Morales, a mother of five who had been abandoned by her husband and then was left without support when the brother, sole provider for the family, disappeared, articulated gender consciousness born of her experiences:

Our men were so *machista*. Instead of helping us in those years, they pulled us down. Some of the women's husbands would not let them attend meetings or help in the training or with the solidarity work.... As a woman I realized as part of this process of fighting for liberty in my country that the myth ... that the man is the one with the power and physical force to control everything—only goes so far. It was the women comrades who managed to end the military nightmare in our country.... Women, who were always housewives, woke up and didn't submit until freedom returned to their country and its citizens. One must remember that we were the ones who organized the first protests. (Agosín, *Tapestries* 109)

In a Chile living under fear, mothers and wives who had not been involved in politics before the Pinochet government became *arpilleristas* by economic

necessity and publicized the plight of the detained and disappeared. These civic warriors set a national model for courage that spawned a movement for political truth and social justice. After many repressive years under Pinochet, Chilean women from diverse backgrounds mobilized against that regime as they once had against Allende. They used the slogan “Democracy in the Country and in the Home” to emphasize their “demands for human rights, economic justice and women’s equality” (Baldez 1).

Even after the return to Chile of a democratically-elected government in 1990, the *arpilleristas* continued their efforts to determine the whereabouts of their disappeared relatives. The new government’s policy of “truth and reconciliation” fell far short of the “truth and justice” the women had risked so much to secure (Agosín, *Tapestries* 137). In the transition to democracy the women’s demands had become politically inexpedient to the new state’s campaign for healing. The *arpilleristas*, however, had indelibly politicized their hand-stitched *arpilleras*, some now considered collectable art, that testify to the darkest period in modern Chilean history and serve to remind a nation to keep the memory alive, lest another regime of impunity return to power.

El Salvador: CoMadres or Committee of Mothers

This Central American country has a history of military coups, human rights violations, failed agrarian reform, ruling class economic control and foreign political influence in its national affairs (Stephen 809-810; McClintock 3-4).⁴ But the period that concerns us here and during which mothers mobilized as an organized civic group began in the 1970s when fraudulent presidential elections in 1972 and 1977 unleashed huge civil protests.⁵ Particularly leftist political groups demanded fair elections and social reform for the country’s peasant and working class poor living at subsistence level while the landholding elite controlled the economy and lived in opulence (McClintock 171). The government’s response to the country’s civil unrest and the far right’s call for “a campaign of ‘sanitation’ to eliminate ‘Communists’” was to suspend constitutional rights and implement a state-run terror apparatus that would affect mainly peasants but also Salvadorans of all walks of life (McClintock 170-171). Rampant paramilitary assassinations, mass executions in the countryside and ‘disappearances’ that resulted in incarcerations, torture, mutilations and death became routine techniques used to dismantle subversive groups and crush insurgency (McClintock viii).

In response to the desperate cries for help of the dispossessed—peasants kicked off their lands, women raped by soldiers, husbands, sons and daughters disappeared—the fourth Catholic Archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Arnulfo Romero, preached from the pulpit urging the rich and powerful to share their wealth and called for government soldiers to disobey illegitimate orders to kill since it violated the divinely ordained right to life (McClintock 263). The Archbishop also publicly expressed his opposition to United States military

aid used by Salvadorian armed forces to kill civilians (McClintock 263). For his sermons Monsignor Romero would be assassinated on March 24, 1980 while celebrating Mass, but he left CoMadres (comité de madres or committee of mothers) in place.⁶ CoMadres was formed on Christmas Eve 1977 in the capital city of San Salvador when Monsignor Romero and a hand full of priests called a small group of mothers, each with a disappeared, assassinated or jailed relative, to meet over dinner and officially organize under the auspices of the archdiocese. The idea was to create an instrument of support to unify the many women struggling to uncover the fate of victims of political repression (Schirmer 32).⁷ Over the twenty years of civil conflict in El Salvador, CoMadres, an association without political affiliation, would grow to more than five hundred women strong and would come to welcome mothers of soldiers (Schirmer 33).

Before CoMadres was formed, the women searched alone for their relatives and alone they suffered the responsibility of supporting children while dealing with the social stigma of having a loved-one targeted as a “subversive” undesirable. After all, social expectations held women responsible for being good caretakers and ensuring that their family members did not become bad citizens and threats to national security (Stephen 812). For some women, visiting police stations, military barracks, morgues and combing the outskirts of the city known as “body dumps” had begun years before CoMadres was formed (Schirmer 32; Stephen 811).⁸ Meeting around a common experience of loss lessened the women’s feelings of alienation and renewed their sense of purpose as they continued to search for the whereabouts of their relatives. Interviews with CoMadres members register how women appreciated learning from each other and worked collaboratively, respecting the skills each could bring to the table, despite different educational levels or political and leadership experience (Schirmer 34-35). Women also testified how the struggle awakened their self-confidence and a sense of empowerment (Schirmer 30).

In El Salvador as elsewhere in a Latin America in deep crisis, the parameters of gender disappeared when “the predominant imagery of women as self-sacrificing mothers and wives was shattered” as groups of women appropriated the street and public forums as territory for confronting and disobeying state authority (Stephen 812). Security forces warranted punishing such women as “subversives” given their willingness to abandon the Catholic Virgin Mary, as model female, and turn themselves into disgraceful public displays of misconduct, and hence symbolic whores. From an authoritarian perspective, a woman acting up in public places loses the privilege of gender deference and “all her rights ... as a citizen, human being and protected woman in a patriarchal state” (Stephen 812).

Knowing the probability of detention, torture, rape and even death, CoMadres members engaged in nonviolent but defiant acts to denounce the escalation of human rights violations and raise public awareness of the carnage.⁹

To break the silence surrounding the extent of human rights violations, they educated the public by clandestinely distributing flyers at markets and during Sunday masses, and issuing denunciations to radio stations and newspapers, this despite tight state surveillance of the media. More openly, CoMadres eventually broadcasted a daily radio program through the Catholic Radio Station. They organized protest marches, paid for newspaper ads denouncing disappearances, staged sit-ins at key government offices and churches, engaged in hunger strikes, and some even managed to travel abroad in their sustained effort to sway national opinion and the international community to pressure the Salvadoran government to stop the blood shed (Schirmer 32-33, 38; Ready, Stephen and Cosgrove 187-188).

Risking their lives, the women of CoMadres combed the streets each morning to photograph bodies for later identification at their headquarters. In 1980 they averaged one thousand bodies a month. The group of mothers also created the Commission on Clandestine Graves, a unit that helped uncover mass burials, often filled with only parts of bodies. When, after Monsignor Romero's murder, CoMadres continued its operations, the regime stamped them as a threat to national security and bombed their headquarters more than once (Ready, Stephen and Cosgrove 187). The state's disregard for human rights was so blatant that CoMadres documents on its website how in 1981 the leader and organizer of the "Death Squads" of El Salvador (Roberto D'Aubuisson Arrieta) declared publicly that all its members would have their throats cut one by one.¹⁰

Despite continued threats, sacking and bombing of their office, kidnappings, arrests, torture, rapes, and disappearances of CoMadres members and their families,¹¹ the group persevered in identifying the casualties of the government's civil-war brutalities and created programs for orphans and widows, which became a significant component of their social action campaign. As with the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, the CoMadres of poverty-stricken El Salvador also "carved out a new political identity and practice" based on their roles as mothers (Ready 187).¹²

The first Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award established in 1984 by his eldest child, Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, to honour courageous and innovative individuals striving for social justice throughout the world was presented to CoMadres for the group's sustained activism, which is at the heart of the human rights movement and in the spirit of Robert F. Kennedy's vision and legacy.¹³

After the signing of the Peace Accords in 1992, CoMadres began a national census of the victims and families of the disappeared and assassinated. When the government did not build the memorial to the victims as mandated by the U.N. Commission, CoMadres mobilized and joined a group of NGO's that formed the Committee for the Monument. A wall memorial was finally dedicated in December 2003. More than three decades after its founding in 1977, CoMadres remains vigilant about human rights issues in El Salvador.

The group is committed to increasing literacy. It also advocates for children and youth, trains orphans and victims of the war in first aid, provides basic life skills, sponsors education and technical training, and maintains an online reporting site for victims and witnesses.

Nicaragua: Giaconda Belli—Militant/Writer

Among many anonymous militant mothers in Central America, one story out of Nicaragua emerges as an international best seller from the pen of Gioconda Belli. First known in Latin America for her award-winning poetry but also a fiction writer with a degree in journalism, Belli reveals in *The Country Under My Skin: A Memoir of Love and War* (2003) her involvement the 1970s and 1980s with the Sandinista National Liberation Front (*Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* [FSLN]) that aimed to depose then U.S. backed dictator, Anastasio Somoza Debayle.

Belli was born into a middle class family in a 1950s Nicaragua where, as she notes, even in the capital of Managua “the majority of [the] barrios had no public water system or paved roads. The gulf between rich and poor was abysmal, but it was accepted—as a natural fact of life, or with Christian resignation, as if it were part of a world order that wouldn’t ever change” (26). From the discontent born of such economic disparity and the four decades of corruption by the ruling Somoza family and cronies, the Sandinista FSLN began operations to oust Somoza.¹⁴

On December 23, 1972 an earthquake destroyed the capital of Managua. Perhaps more than any other incident of corruption, the looting of the city by Somoza’s National Guards and the embezzlement of millions of dollars in aid to earthquake victims turned many political figures against Somoza’s regime and bolstered support for the FSLN. Like the Mirabal sisters of the Dominican Republic, Belli could have chosen the cushioned middle-class life of her parents, but it was in school too that the seed for justice was sown.

I remember visiting ... slums as a child; the nuns from school would take us there to teach us about the importance of charity. One day we went to ... a lakeside shantytown. I will never forget the little old lady I saw eating paper, sopping it in dirty, coffee-colored water to satiate her hunger. She was a wrinkled, skeletal woman, with skin hanging off the bones of her arms and toothless grin which, from that moment on, became my mental image of the word injustice. (26-27)

Belli recalls her initial fear when, as a young mother, a Sandinista member approached her to join the FSLN resistance. “But I have a daughter,” she protested. “Your daughter is precisely the reason you *should* do it,” [the man countered]. “You should do it for her, so that she won’t have to do the job you are not willing to do” (34). As Belli experienced herself, promoting motherhood

as policy played a crucial role in women's recruitment into the anti-Somoza insurgency (González 43).

At first Belli's involvement included tasks such as a courier, fund-raising, recruiting members, securing medicines to send to the Sandinista guerrillas in the mountains, writing opinion pieces in the newspaper under a pen name and learning to use fire arms, at which point she classified as a "combatant." Although after the war the Nicaraguan FSLN never released official figures on the gender composition of their guerrilla force, Belli's personal narrative and published accounts suggest that large numbers of women participated at all levels of the insurgency, including important leadership positions (Luciak 16). Women's accounts make clear that at all ranks in the guerrilla forces the experience was much more difficult for them. Typically they encountered discrimination, sexism, and harassment from fellow "compañeros," but they were reluctant to report their transgressors because even high ranking female commanders tended to dismiss gender issues as a genuine struggle for equity within the revolutionary movement. One female combatant reflects as follows on gender relations in the Sandinista guerrilla forces:

It was hard. I always say that this is one of the things few people take into account and value. We as women joined the movement, maybe not because of gender consciousness, but with the realization that we would fight for substantive, profound changes. We did not foresee that we would have to face a dual struggle—the struggle against the system of government and the fight against the men in the movement. (Vilas 185)

Although the FSLN considered women's participation an integral part of the insurgency, women became disenchanted with lack of support for women's rights and realized that most female Sandinista superiors had internalized a culture of war that disregarded gender differences and expected women to act like men (Luciak 18-19).

For those who were mothers, reconciling motherhood and politics was the most difficult aspect of active involvement in the war. Belli's political life became a bone of contention with her parents and husband who could not understand why a well-raised and educated daughter and a comfortable middle class wife and mother would not only neglect her children, but elect to risk her life and leave them orphaned. She tells how very often, when assigned a clandestine operation, she had to leave the children at the spur of the moment. She was also forced to go abroad to throw off the suspicions of Somoza's secret police and she spent long periods of exile in Mexico City and Costa Rica. Even so, she was sentenced to seven years in prison in absentia by the Somoza regime. Belli almost lost custody of her children for abandonment and even when reunited with them could not dedicate full time to their care. Luckily she was not killed for her revolutionary activities. She and many other mothers in Nicaragua and

throughout the region paved the way for the new generation. Ilja A. Luciak substantiates that women in countries like Nicaragua today are “assuming an increasingly important role in the development of Central American society. Their active participation as combatants during the civil wars that ravaged the region has now been translated into significant representation in political parties and social movements” (xiii-xiv).

Peru: Women’s Participation in Revolutionary Movements

Peru has a tradition of revolutionary women taking up arms alongside men since the colonial period when, with the leadership of Juan Santos Atahualpa in 1742, an indigenous rebellion against Spanish rule included a separate fighting unit of women (Castro 220). After that attempted insurrection, continued opposition from the Indian peasantry culminated in an organized and bloody uprising in 1780 headed by an Indian, Túpac Amaru II, and his wife, Micaela Bastidas. Both became heroic figures, symbols of Inca resistance and the movement for independence from European control (Radcliffe 203).¹⁵

As noted earlier, the long-standing social inequities in Peru were typical in Latin American countries with a historically poor majority used as the work horse of a land-owning oligarchy and foreign corporations. Starting in the 1960s, philosophy professor Abimael Guzmán began preparing the foundation for a Marxist transformation of the foreign-dominated Peruvian state (Manwaring 158). In 1980, under the banner of the Communist Party of Peru, Guzmán launched the armed stage of the planned revolution.¹⁶ Under his leadership, the insurgency movement that became popularly known as *Sendero Luminoso* (Shining Path) aimed to recruit “Senderistas” among the politically disenfranchised and largely Indian, Quechua-speaking, rural population living in abject poverty in Peru’s “sierra” or highlands.

In 1982, two years after Guzmán launched the insurgency campaign against the Peruvian state, one young Indian woman farm worker responded in the following way when asked to comment about the then government’s expenditures on the Miss Universe contest in Lima:

There are so many of us sick and poor—we give birth right on the ground, without any help. There are so many children without food, and the government spends our money on things like this!... As women, as farm workers, we’re angry because we don’t go along with the idea that people should be bought and sold for beauty.... How many times I’ve cried to God! Why doesn’t this government give up and die so the people can take over? That’s why we have to struggle ... we’re going to protest.... Even if he [the president] sends us to the Fronton [prison]—even if he kills us—we’re going to keep on protesting because we’re not afraid of dying. We’ve had enough! (Andreas x)

The high frustration this female laborer expresses and her willingness to fight at great risk, explains the wide support Guzman's movement gained among the dispossessed. What began as an Indian peasant-based movement later spread to the proletariat because it offered the poor masses the means to secure, this time through armed struggle, the agrarian and social reforms the government had been promising for decades (Switzer 30; Manwaring 160).

Appropriating the indigenous model of a male/female dyad incarnating shared communal responsibility, Shining Path enlisted large numbers of women who were drawn by the movement's pledge to address specific issues affecting them. As is still prevalent today, Peruvian women of every class were typically relegated to subservient roles within and outside the home, but women of the lower class were especially prone to suffer all kinds of abuse and deprivation (Tarazona-Sevillano 180). The Maoist solutions proposed by Shining Path appealed particularly to peasant women burdened by inequities characteristic of colonized peoples suffering multiple subjugations: political, societal, religious, ethnic and gender-related oppression (Castro 222). The women attracted to Shining Path had heard the promise of equality and envisioned themselves fighting to escape an existence of unceasing exploitation (Tarazona-Sevillano 180-181). Touting the maxim, "women are one half of heaven," Guzmán advocated that women were due significant roles in "The People's Guerrilla Army" (Castro 219).

In fact, from 1980s government records of arrests carried out in an attempt to dismantle Shining Path, it was estimated that as high as 35 percent of the military command, especially those in charge of underground cells, were women (Castro 219). High ranking Shining Path women leaders identified during incarceration included Laura Zambrano, Margie Clavo Peralta, Fiorella Montaña, Elizabeth Cárdenas, Hilda Tulich, and Renata Hear (Castro 222; Tarazona-Sevillano 187). It became apparent to the Peruvian administration that the scope of female membership was extensive when police raids uncovered the existence of a central committee composed mainly of women (Castro 222-223).¹⁷ Within Shining Path's rigid five-tiered hierarchy composed of "sympathizers" at the bottom rung, followed by "activists," "militants," "commanders," and the "cupola" on top, at least one identified woman, Sybila Arredondo, had reached the highest rank among a small male cadre at the zenith of the power hierarchy (Tarazona-Sevillano 181-183).

The annals of history have recorded the crucial role "Senderista" women played at all levels of the insurgency network and their commitment to sustaining a prolonged attack against the Peruvian state (Castro 223). When at the height of Shining Path's insurgency in 1988 Laura Zambrano was interviewed for a news article, the prominent Senderista operative within Lima's Politburo was quoted as saying: "For the combatants of The People's Guerrilla Army, our center of gravity is to fight, war is our daily life, we fight to conquer power for the Party and the people.... We have been steeled in the harshness of life, in sacrifice and in defiance of death, we incarnate revolutionary heroism" (Castro 223).

The investment in recruiting women, building their self-confidence, training them as militants, and grooming them for leadership roles proved integral in sustaining a prolonged guerrilla insurgency against the state (Castro 223). No doubt, Shining Path successfully capitalized on women's frustration and oppression. As never before in Peruvian society, a movement allowed women the opportunity to prove themselves capable of increasing responsibilities and taking on important missions that legitimized "them to strike back violently against the system that restrained them for so long" (Tarazona-Sevillano 181).

Summary

During the last several decades of the twentieth century, when repressive governments throughout Latin America routinely stifled popular demands for socioeconomic improvements and political reform by using inhuman tactics to purge dissenters, women mobilized in different ways to protest, combat, and survive the violence surrounding them. In the Caribbean, Central and South America, women risked family alienation, public rebuke and great personal harm in their struggle for social justice.

Despite the differences in the modes and extent of women's involvement in the political realities of their communities, their participation reveals a few common threads. First, in response to national crisis, women across Latin America refocused their mothering role from the home to the public arena. Secondly, in that regard, women reacted as warriors, willing to confront danger and risk the punishments that befall subversives. And lastly but as revolutionary, while fighting against state tyranny, many women developed an awareness of self worth that empowered them to question gender inequities in the patriarchal order that had long relegated their lot to second-class citizenship.

Foremost, the women acted in a mothering capacity and from a profound sense of social responsibility toward born or yet unborn children, whether biologically their own or those of the community at large. Women from diverse population sectors turned militant, participating in both clandestine and public activities, to protect the human family from the violence threatening its survival and, ultimately, to rally for socio-political reform in their countries.

The Mirabal sisters in The Dominican Republic, for example, joined an underground organization operating to oust the dictator, General Trujillo. While serving that cause, they married and had children. Hispanic society expected them to then retreat from political forays, but as mothers, the Mirabals saw all the more reason to continue with the opposition work that promised a better society in which to raise a family. In 1960, however, General Trujillo did manage to have the three activist sisters killed.

Also recruited to work in an underground movement, Gioconda Belli joined the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional during the Nicaraguan civil war that spanned the 1970s and 1980s. She became a Sandinista because of the conviction that if her generation did not achieve political reform, the

bloody fight would be left for her children to continue. Belli's involvement in Nicaragua's revolutionary movement caused her a divorce, family disapproval, periods of separation from her children and exile. However, she was among the lucky rebels who survived the war, was able to reinsert herself in civilian life as a journalist and even went on to become an award-winning author.

The Peruvian women of Sendero Luminoso too worked clandestinely alongside men in that insurgency movement. However, unlike the Mirabal sisters and Giaconda Belli, who were from middle class families, most of the Senderista recruits had experienced first-hand dire living and working conditions. Sendero Luminoso's popularity in the 1970s and 1980s and particularly Peruvian women's willingness to join a revolutionary organization, whose members would most likely serve as armed combatants, can be understood in light of one particular mother's lament about the social inequities that force indigenous women to birth babies right on the ground and then live to see their children suffer malnutrition and die of illness. "We're not afraid of dying," she exclaimed, "We've had enough!" (Andreas x). This sector of the Peruvian population, specifically targeted for repression because of their communist leanings, was willing to take up arms for a chance at reversing their ethnic group's legacy of poverty.

Other Latin American women joined mother-centered groups that provided support to relatives of the detained and disappeared. This was the case of the Chilean "arpilleristas" who, during the military regime of General Pinochet in the 1970s and 1980s, gathered under the auspices of the Catholic Church to stitch tapestries, or "arpilleras," as a mode of protest, emotional therapy and, often, economic survival, since the national crackdown on dissenters had left many households without a breadwinner. Organized around a craft that Chilean women typically practiced, the *arpillera* groups were quickly censored by the state. Stitching turned into a militant female activity in Chile because the tapestries depicted the violence the military junta unleashed against citizens suspected of political opposition. Eventually, the "arpilleristas" practiced bolder and more public forms of protest to expose the extent of repression in Chile. The women were harassed and many were harshly persecuted for their efforts to denounce the government's human rights abuses.

The CoMadres or Committee of Mothers of El Salvador, another mother-specific and women-run organization, was formed during the late 1970s in the midst of terrible repression against peasant populations and the working poor for their involvement, or perceived association, with leftist groups. Like the *arpilleristas* in Chile, CoMadres members were mainly wives and mothers who had found themselves isolated in their desperate search for disappeared relatives until the Catholic Church stepped in to create an instrument of support. This mothers' group also eventually took on the role of civic whistleblower, a subversive activity for which its members were targeted for and suffered detention, torture and disappearance.

The militant Latin American women described here did not risk their lives

to attain the types of benefits that motivate men to fight and win wars. They did not expect to gain political power. Many activist women did not even anticipate procuring the education levels and job opportunities available to men. Women across Latin America were “up in arms” about the brutalities systematically committed against their families and communities.

To appreciate the warrior’s courage needed to turn militant back in the ’60s, ’70s and ’80s, let us keep in mind that the “street” was off limits and largely an unfamiliar space for Latin American women who were socialized for traditional roles within the home. In those days, whether unlucky enough to have to support a family or educated enough to want to work outside the home, Latin American women were expected to limit themselves to gendered specific employment, always to be carried out with proper feminine propriety. Undermining family expectations by participating in political activities was inappropriate behavior for females. But undermining the state in times of dictatorship and war was outright subversive and involved the risk of death.

For the militant women who survived political participation in their countries during great national crisis, I believe that the most immediate and profound change was not achieved in the public arena, but in their personal growth and transformation as women. One Salvadoran woman’s expression of the gendered consciousness that burgeoned in CoMadres speaks for many of her Latin American sisters during that period:

One became strengthened with the discovery that one could do what one was doing—and many more things besides! Because if I think about who I was when I began, and who I am now, there is such a difference! (Schirmer 30)

For women who experienced a new sense of self, a “feminist” awareness had emerged that would resonate with generations of daughters. Once the guerilla forces demobilized and dictatorships were ousted by democratic rule, women’s vision for their own social movement had been left rumbling across Latin America.

Since the 1980s the proliferation of Latin American women’s organizations and the myriad publications in popular and academic venues that document their social impact and political muscle proves the unprecedented momentum that women’s gendered consciousness ignited in the region as a consequence of war time participation. Without doubt, when harsh experiences catapulted women to question socio-political realities in their countries, many found the inner strength to emancipate themselves from the gendered-laden strictures that limited their roles within the home and isolated them from the possibility of civic engagement. In this regard, all the women discussed here acted as revolutionaries within their communities and for many their gender awakening would draw them into a new “woman’s” revolution in the wake of war.

Conclusion

During periods of national crisis, Latin American women discarded social mores and the constraints of their gender. Some opted for a gun as instrument of battle; others used a pen or even sewing needles to denounce human rights abuses. In the 1970s and 1980s, women in many areas of Latin America became politicized by national circumstance and began a silent revolution. Once they entered patriarchal spaces and took up a political platform, they began to also question unequal power relations. For many Latin American women, the end of civil war and dictatorships in their countries marked a new age of gendered consciousness and the spawning of a feminist militancy throughout the region.

¹On the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, one book-length study is Marguerite Guzmán Bouvard's *Revolutionizing Motherhood: The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo*. For an interviewer's perspective see César A. Chelala's piece "Women of Valor: An Interview with Mothers of Plaza de Mayo." A synopsis of this mothers' group can be found in "Women's Staging Coups through Mothering" in *Feminist Mothering* edited by Andrea O'Reilly.

²http://www.learntoquestion.com/seevak/groups/2000/sites/mirabal/English/polpart_fs.html. To locate Patria's quote follow the link to "Their Childhood" and view second page of the "Inside the Cocoon" section.

³Interview found in Dominican newspaper, *Listín Diario*, April 27, 2009 issue. <http://www.listin.com.do/app/article.aspx?id=99091> or www.listindiario.com and search for "Entrevista a Dedé Mirabal."

⁴In *The American Connection: State Terror and Popular Resistance in El Salvador*, Michael McClintock has documented at length El Salvador's history of state terror and counter-insurgency since the late 1960s.

⁵In El Salvador's civil war the government's most serious opposition came from the "Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), a coalition of four guerilla groups and the armed forces of the Salvadoran Communist Party, formed in 1980 (Luciak 3; Stephen 811). Hence, the civil war is frequently documented as beginning in 1980 and ending in 1992 when formal peace accords were signed by the then Alfredo Cristiani government and the FMLN in Mexico City (Stephen 808). However, as noted, civil conflict spanned twenty years since severe political repression by different branches of the national security forces had been operating with impunity against an "increasingly militant population" since the early 1970s (Ready 184).

⁶The complete name is Comité de Madres y Familiares de Presos, Desaparecidos y Asesinados Políticos (Ready 187).

⁷The CoMadres website lists twelve original members: María Teresa Tula, Alicia García, Angelita Carranza, Antonia Mendoza (president), Ana Cristina

Interiano, Alicia Zelayandia, Sofía Escamilla, Mirian Granados, Etelvina Cristales, Alicia Nerio, Transito Ramírez, and Angelita De Madriz. (<http://www.comadres.org>)

⁸Two highly public incidents affected many Salvadoran women of different economic and ethnic groups. A massacre and disappearance of peasants on November 29, 1974 prompted a Catholic priest to organize a 10,000 strong march on the capital. The following year, the July 30, 1975 massacre of university and secondary school students demonstrating in El Salvador was clear evidence that the government would stamp out dissent with the same ruthlessness as applied to the peasantry (McClintock 172-173).

⁹For details on the victimization of CoMadres members and their families by security forces and individual women's experience as group members see Stephen pages 813-820.

¹⁰<http://www.comadres.org>

¹¹The document recording CoMadres accusations against the government of El Salvador can be found online at the Human Rights Library website of University of Minnesota at <http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/cases/1996/el-salvador13-96.htm>

¹²For a personal account of one Salvadoran woman's struggle see *Hear My Testimony: Maria Teresa Tula*, edited and translated by Lynn Stephen (Boston: South End Press, 1994).

¹³ Robert F. Kennedy Memorial website: <http://www.rfkmemorial.org/legacyinaction/humanrightsaawardadvocacy/>

¹⁴When the United States withdrew from Nicaragua in 1933, after almost 21 years of occupation, Anastasio Somoza García, then director of the National Guard prepared his way to gaining presidential power. He plotted the assassination of Augustos César Sandio, the leader of the Resistance Movement and disbanded his guerrilla army. In 1936 Somoza García took over as president and his sons succeeded him and held power in Nicaragua until 1979 when Anastasio Somoza Debayle, supported by the U.S. for his anti-communist stance, fled into exile in Miami and was later assassinated in Paraguay.

¹⁵A Jesuit educated mestizo, he was born José Gabriel Condorcanqui and took the name Túpac Amaru II in honor of his ancestor, Túpac Amaru, the last indigenous leader of the Inca people. In 1760 he married Micaela Bastidas Puyucahua of Afro-Peruvian and Indigenous descent. They were executed together on May 18, 1781 for their leadership in the insurrection against the Spanish Crown.

¹⁶Abimael Guzmán Reynoso officially founded Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) in 1970, but revolutionary operations did begin until 1980. After Guzman's capture in 1992, his guerrilla movement weakened considerably and the Peruvian government's counterinsurgency managed to decommission it as a national threat by 2000 (Switzer 73). For personal background on Guzmán see Switzer page 17 and for details on the distinct stages of the insurgency movement see Manwaring pages 159-164.

¹⁷Regarding *senderista* leader Elizabeth Cárdenas see United States State Department. *Patters of Global Terrorism Report* (1996—Peru) <http://www.state.gov/www/global/terrorism/1996Report/latin.html>.

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