



Brenda Carter, Grace Paley, eds.. *A Dream Compels Us: Voices of Salvadoran Women.*
Boston, Mass.: South End Press, 1989. 246 pp. \$25.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-89608-369-1.



Reviewed by Steve Hobden

Published on H-LatAm (April, 1996)

Carmen's brother was arrested by the police. She went to the authorities to get information as to his whereabouts. Certain of his innocence, she co-operated fully with their inquiries about the rest of her family. Instead of receiving information about her brother, she herself was detained, tortured, raped and left for dead. While in hospital recovering from her ordeal, another of her brothers disappeared. Then her daughter was kidnapped by the police. Carmen again made inquiries at the police station. This time she was shot at by policemen from a passing car. A third brother was killed by death squads. A fourth brother was killed by the police and his wife kidnapped. Her sister and uncle were kidnapped and joined the ranks of the disappeared.

Francesca is a nurse. She was a founding member of the union at her hospital. The union was active in cutting the number of hours worked and improving working conditions. In 1983, she was elected to the Union's Co-ordinating Committee. 'Lets see how many days you stay alive' her co-workers commented. Feeling that women were isolated within the union Francesca started a

women's committee to pursue projects specifically designed to promote women's interests. In 1985 a major strike was organised at her hospital to improve bargaining rights with the management. Despite intimidation from the military and the temporary detention of some of the members of the Union's co-ordinating committee, the hospital workers' rights were eventually recognised.

Eugenia was a member of the FMLN's leadership. Initially a student activist, she left the city to work in the countryside, firstly as a member of a Christian Base Community and subsequently as an organiser of the FMLN's guerrilla activities. Her companero, also active in the FMLN, was captured and endured four months of incarceration and torture. Following his release as a result of international pressure, they decided that they could no longer postpone starting a family. One year after the birth of her daughter, Eugenia was killed while transporting military equipment in the lead up to the FMLN's January 1981 offensive.

These accounts are amongst many personal testimonies and documents contained in *A Dream Compels Us: Voices of Salvadoran Women*, edited

by members of New Americas Press. The narratives, primarily collected during the 1980s Civil War in El Salvador, have much to tell us about life in El Salvador during the Civil War, the position of women in that society, and the role of social movements when confronted by a dictatorial regime.

The activities of these women in El Salvador are part of a long (and often forgotten) tradition of women's political activism in Latin America. Examples date back to the colonial period, but during this century Latin American women have been continuously involved in a variety of political and social movements. In 1910, the first meeting of the International Women's Congress in Buenos Aires occurred. During the 1930s, the Inter-American Commission of Women (the IACW) began meeting. Amongst other achievements, representatives from the IACW, present at the San Francisco conference in 1945, were responsible for the insertion of the reference to 'equal rights of men and women' into the first paragraph of the UN charter. More recently the role of women in the Nicaraguan revolution has received much attention, particularly the role of women in the military forces during the war against the US-backed counter-revolutionary forces.

The situation of women in El Salvador has to be understood in terms of the local conditions. In the introduction to *A Dream Compels Us*, the editors provide a concise history of political struggle in El Salvador. This dates back to the settling of the region now known as El Salvador, but concentrates on the twentieth century, paying particular attention to the matanza (massacre) of 1932 when 30,000 people were murdered by the military following electoral gains for the Communist party led by Agustin Farabundo Marti. The marked internal division between the urban elite and rural poor underlies the periodical domestic upheavals in El Salvador. The civil war of the 1980s can be dated back to another 'stolen' election. In the 1972 election, Jose Napoleon Duarte, candidate of a

coalition of the Christian Democratic Party and two leftist parties, was denied a legitimate victory by the military government.

Following the events of 1972, there was an increasing trend in El Salvador to look for alternate means of unseating the ruling oligarchy. Numerous social movements emerged seeking a non-parliamentary route to gaining a more equitable form of society. The reaction of the ruling oligarchy to this development was an increase in the level of repression. This eventually resulted in the eleven year civil war. It was during this period that most of the women encountered in *A Dream Compels Us* became active in politics.

The book is divided into five sections, each of which gives details of a particular form of political participation. Each section is usefully prefaced with a brief introduction by the editors.

The first section, "We Have Found the Strength", gives details of women's activities in the broad based popular movements which flourished through the 1970s. In this section, we hear the testimonies of women like Carmen, whose story was partially outlined above. Carmen went on to join COMADRES (the Committee of Mothers of Political Prisoners, the Disappeared and Assassinated) who campaign to protest against political killings, to campaign for information on the disappeared, and to expose the level of government involvement in repression. There are also testimonies from teachers, union organisers, and nurses.

The second section is concerned more directly with organisations created to promote women's activism and to address their needs more directly. This section comprises articles, seminar papers, and statements by members of various women's organisations. This section is particularly useful for its analysis of the situation of women in El Salvador, the purposes that these organizations seek to pursue, and the hopes for the form that gender relations would take in a post-revolutionary society. The main theme that runs through this sec-

tion is the view that it is the oppressive nature of El Salvadoran society that is the prime cause of women's oppression. Machismo is primarily a result of male socialisation which can be overcome by re-educating men. Women's emancipation lies initially with the overthrow of the structures which lead to unequal power relations between men and women. "Our struggle is, thus, not only for immediate demands, nor is it an individual struggle, nor one directed against men. We seek the liberation of our countries from imperialism, dictatorship and the local bourgeoisie - although we work simultaneously around the question of specific condition of women and our oppression within the capitalist and patriarchal system". (p. 82)

The third section, "Your People Need You", contains testimonies and histories of women active within the ranks of the FMLN. Given the high rate of casualties amongst the guerrilla fighters, this is perhaps the most moving section of the book. The history of Eugenia concludes with a letter to her husband written the day after her last meeting with him and a week before her death. As well as the personal tragedies, many practical issues of being a woman in a fighting force are also raised, including the practicalities of relations with male subordinates and the horrific consequences of being caught by government forces.

The issue of the form of political organisation instituted by the FMLN in the zones under their control and the role of women in the administration of these regions is the subject of the fourth section. Conditions in these zones were extremely difficult with communities having to be constantly prepared to evacuate in the event of an attack by government forces. Even so, various health, literacy, and political programmes were instituted by the FMLN and this section outlines the important roles women took in organising these activities and ensuring the security of the communities.

Despite the efforts by the FMLN to protect the civilian population in the regions under their con-

trol, the continual attacks by the government forces created an enormous refugee problem. Additionally, a huge internal refugee problem was generated as a result of the the military's attempts to depopulate areas held by the FMLN. The final section, "To See our Homes Again", addresses some of the issues resulting from the refugee problem and contains testimonies of women who became external refugees and of women who were uprooted from their homes and moved to the capital, San Salvador. Additionally, there are statements from women involved in organisations devoted to providing assistance to refugees.

The editors of this excellent book are to be congratulated for compiling this compelling collection of testimonies, narratives and documents, and for providing a coherent organising scheme and linking account. Although there would be problems in using this volume as a sole textbook, it clearly has much potential in combination with other texts for a variety of courses. Linked with Jenny Pearce's *Promised Land*, it could provide an excellent history of the Civil War in El Salvador told from the viewpoint of participants. It could also be used more generally in courses on Central America or Latin America during the twentieth century. It could also be used on modules concerning gender relations, especially those concerned with the situation of women in the developing world.

One problem with its use is that in one sense it is rather dated. This is not a problem with the book, published in 1989, but a consequence of reviewing it in 1996. Events have moved on in El Salvador and the political struggle has entered a new phase. The 'final offensive' launched by the FMLN in November 1989, although initially successful, was finally repulsed by government forces. In the resulting stalemate, it became clear both that the FMLN was not able to provide the spark for a popular uprising and could not achieve a military take-over, but also that it could not be defeated by government forces. Finally the

government agreed to talks leading to a peace accord which was signed in January 1992. This launched a peace process, supervised by the UN, which is still not complete. This peace process involving the de-mobilisation of both sides and the entry of the FMLN into the democratic process raises many new issues concerning the role of women and the policies of the FMLN. One question that constantly arises during the reading of *A Dream Compels Us* is where are these women now, what is their interpretation of the turn of events, and are they still compelled by a dream? Perhaps it is time to consider a second edition.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

Citation: Steve Hobden. Review of Carter, Brenda; Paley, Grace, eds. *A Dream Compels Us: Voices of Salvadoran Women*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. April, 1996.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=417>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.