

WOMEN IN WAR

THE MICRO-PROCESSES OF
MOBILIZATION IN EL SALVADOR

JOCelyn VITERNA

Women in War

THE MICRO-PROCESSES OF
MOBILIZATION IN EL SALVADOR

JOCELYN VITERNA

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide.

Oxford New York
Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in
Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press
in the UK and certain other countries.

Published in the United States of America by
Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

© Oxford University Press 2013

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a
retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior
permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted by law,
by license, or under terms agreed with the appropriate reproduction rights organization.
Inquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights
Department, Oxford University Press, at the address above.

You must not circulate this work in any other form
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Viterna, Jocelyn.

Women in war : the micro-processes of mobilization in El Salvador / Jocelyn Viterna.
pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-19-984363-3 (hardcover : alk. paper)—ISBN 978-0-19-984365-7

(pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Women in war—El Salvador—History—20th century. 2. El Salvador—
History—1979-1992. 3. Women guerrillas—El Salvador—History—20th century.
4. Insurgency—El Salvador—History—20th century. 5. Civil war—El Salvador—History—
20th century. I. Title.

HQ1919.V57 2013

972.84—dc23

2013008397

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

Women in War

Recent Titles in

**OXFORD STUDIES IN CULTURE AND
POLITICS**

CLIFFORD BOB AND JAMES M. JASPER, GENERAL EDITORS

*Ethnic Boundary Making
Institutions, Power, Networks*

ANDREAS WIMMER

*Fire in the Heart: How White Activists
Embrace Racial Justice*

MARK R. WARREN

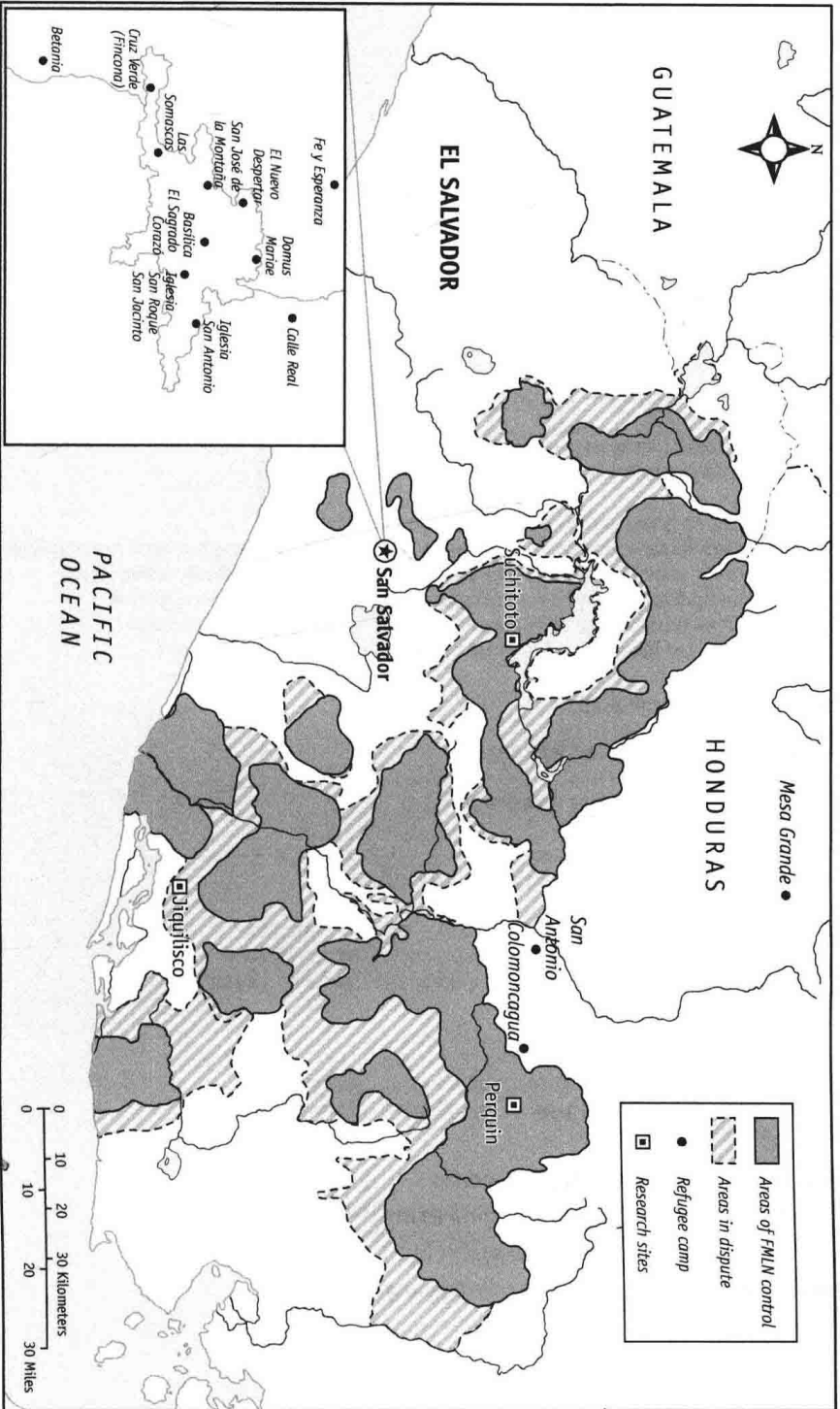
*Nonviolent Revolutions
Civil Resistance in the Late 20th Century*

SHARON ERICKSON NEPSTAD

*Democracy in the Making
How Activist Groups Form*

KATHLEEN M. BLEE

*the world of academia; and for my parents,
Marty and Larry Viterna, whose unwavering
support helped make this book a reality.*



Preface

"Cuidese! ¡Que le vaya bien!" Juan, a friend and Salvadoran advisor, gave me a warm hug and a customary Salvadoran kiss on the cheek, and then got into his truck with his fifteen-year-old daughter. As I stood waving goodbye on the side of the busy highway, I had to chuckle. I was approaching my fortieth birthday, and had just completed my ninth visit to this tiny Central American nation. I had logged nearly three years of total time living in the country. Nevertheless, Salvadorans still insisted on worrying about me. Juan and his wife Lupe, whose house I had slept in the previous night, feared that I would get lost on the way to the airport. They therefore roused their daughter Lupita at 5:30 in the morning so that Juan could lead me to the familiar Comalapa highway before he took her to school. Juan pulled over to the side of the highway, and I pulled behind him. "Ya ubicaste, ¿verdad?" he had asked. "You know where you're at now, right?" I assured him that I did, and thanked him sincerely for his extensive collaboration in my research and his extraordinary hospitality during my visit, then watched him drive away.

I got in my rented car and merged onto the highway again. Even at this early hour, El Salvador was alive with activity. Large, brightly painted buses that had once served school children in the United States competed with smaller, faster "microbuses" for the patronage of the Salvadorans waiting along the side of the highway. It was cane season, so huge, lumbering trucks loaded with cane stalks—burnt, and then cut by hand with machetes—joined the fray. Small pickups with homemade metal fences around the back transported dozens of standing Salvadorans—men, women, and children—to their destinations. Still other small pickups overflowed with nonhuman cargo: coconuts, oranges, bananas, used furniture, bottled water, propane gas, and more. A multiplicity of passenger cars and small motorbikes, often with three or four passengers on one small seat, completed the scene.

Pedestrians lined the sides of the road. Some were setting up roadside stands to sell their produce and handicrafts. Others were walking their uniformed children to a bus stop. Still others were entering factories where they would work for a minimum wage that, although a remarkable improvement over those in the informal economy, would not come close to covering the basic necessities of life

for even a single person, let alone for a family. I marveled at how even very poor Salvadorans always seemed well put-together. Their clothes were perhaps old or used, but they were almost always clean and ironed, their hair carefully cut and combed, and the women generally wore make up and beautiful shoes. My own relatively ugly, yet serviceable, shoes had become a longstanding joke between my Salvadoran friends and me.

During one of my first visits to the country, I noticed that people often stared at my comfortable shoes. Most women of financial means in El Salvador wore fashionable shoes, usually with a heel. So, wanting to blend, I purchased a pair of small heels and wore them to the bus stop. When my bus slowed (but never truly stopped) I struggled more than usual to get my heeled foot onto the platform. The *cobrador* (fare collector) grabbed my arm with a look of humor and literally flung me onto the bus. I carefully made my way to the back and found a place to stand, holding onto the bar overhead, and feeling quite proud of my small accomplishment. Suddenly, the driver stepped on the brakes, and my new heels slid out from under me. I skated down the aisle of the bus on my bum, coming to an unceremonious halt on the leg of the *cobrador*. This time, he didn't even try to cover his laugh. I quickly dismounted, flagged a taxi, and went directly home for my walking shoes. Now a professor with better financial resources, I can forgo my graduate-school reliance on public transportation and the occasional hitchhiking, but I never again tried for foot fashion in El Salvador.

El Salvador? Why do you want to study El Salvador? I get this question a lot from both academics and nonacademics. Prior to my first visit in 1995, I never imagined that I would spend the next eighteen years studying Salvadoran people and politics. I was a senior at Kansas State University, and my pre-law advisor, Nancy Twiss, told me about a peace and justice group that was heading to El Salvador for seven days over the January break to start a "Sister City" program. She thought an international experience would look good on my resume, and she knew I had been following the news in El Salvador. I eagerly agreed to go. The group paid for half of my trip; my parents helped me with the other half.

A Salvadoran guide met our small group at the airport and whisked us directly to the tiny "sister city" village north of the capital city. The dirt road from the main highway to the village was not passable by vehicles because huge bombs had left it full of craters large enough to swallow a truck. Suitcases in tow, we walked the last mile into the village, circling reverently around the sites of deadly impact.

The next few days were transformative. I wondered at the Salvadoran work ethic. My host community woke at 4:00 A.M. with the roosters. The men took the cows to pasture. The women lit fires and started the arduous process of grinding corn for the morning tortillas, then pressed school uniforms with irons heated

by hot coals, and washed children from buckets of cold water brought from a nearby pond or the one village spigot. During the day, the men tended their fields of beans and corn; planted, watered, and harvested by hand. These crops would feed their families the usual meal of beans and corn tortillas for the entire year. The men also cooperatively cared for a communal cane field, hoping to earn a bit of spending money with the cash crop. The women tended to the homes and children—gathering fire wood, grinding corn, making tortillas, preparing beans, making small cheeses or breads, gathering eggs, feeding chickens, and occasionally going to market to sell farm goods and buy notebooks or shoes so their children could attend the local three-grade school.

In the evenings, we would gather around a kerosene lamp to hear their stories and plan our sister city venture. "The war is over, but the revolution is just beginning," one elderly man told us quietly and matter of factly. I watched as the barely literate village council gathered around an old, strike-key typewriter and collectively filled out an application for aid from a Belgium organization to repair the destroyed road. I listened to their plans to petition the new Salvadoran government to expand their three-grade school to six grades. And I watched with interest as the two Salvadoran women on the village council insisted on telling their war stories to us foreigners, just like the men, even as the men rolled their eyes in exasperation. I listened to their histories of recruitment to guerrilla camps, of giving birth under enemy fire, and of confronting soldiers alone at home with their children after the men had run to the mountains to join the guerrillas. I was struck by how sharply these stories contrasted with much of what I had previously read, stories which overwhelmingly celebrated women's achievements in the FMLN guerrilla forces.

I returned to Kansas reluctantly, feeling that there was much more I wanted to learn about El Salvador. And yet the end of my college career, and with it my free pass to study interesting things, was rapidly approaching. My pre-law advisor listened to my dilemma, then told me about something that profoundly changed the direction of my life: Graduate School. Within a few years time, I had thrown away my law school applications, secured a spot in the Indiana University graduate program in Sociology, and was living in El Salvador again with the help of a pre-dissertation grant.

In El Salvador, the contradictions I perceived in Salvadoran women's lives continued to intrigue me. On one hand, Salvadoran women lived with powerful, institutionalized gender inequalities. El Salvador is clearly a *machista* society. Men's violence against women is culturally allowed and legally almost unsanctioned. Men are expected to have multiple sexual partners while women are expected to remain monogamous. Men have access to higher paying jobs, have greater educational opportunities, and control most of the political power in

the nation, while women remain the primary caregivers and are held to double standards in courts, in the workplace, and in the home.

Yet despite these institutionalized inequalities, Salvadoran women proved remarkably strong in body and in character, and they exemplified confidence in their every action. I regularly watched in awe as women answered my interview questions while washing clothes or grinding corn by hand, biceps bulging, all the while keeping their eyes on the toddlers playing nearby. I remember watching sheepishly as a middle-aged woman in plastic flip-flop shoes dismounted gracefully from a speeding bus while carrying two enormous bags filled with market goods in one hand, a young child and another large bag in the other, and putting up an umbrella to protect against the torrential rains with what I can only guess was an unseen third hand. Her grace and assurance stood in sharp contrast to my own difficulty managing the bus dismount, even in comfortable tennis shoes and with no more than a backpack to carry.

Women were my guardians in El Salvador. When I walked through a crowded marketplace feeling acutely aware of my foreignness, I would attach myself to a group of women walking in my direction. The women would invariably give me a small nod of agreement and wordlessly accept their role as bodyguard to the *gringa* until our routes separated. When my car died suddenly one evening on my way back to San Salvador, I barely had time to think before a woman and her two pre-teen daughters appeared at my back bumper and pushed me to the side of the busy highway. Despite my protestations, they stayed with me into the dark of the night in a known dangerous zone until the tow truck finally arrived. In the villages where I worked, it was in almost every case the women who regularly invited me to share their homes and their food without asking anything in return; it was the women who guided me to the homes of my chosen respondents and provided the introductions I needed to complete my interviews; and it was the women who insisted on accompanying me to new locations so that I wouldn't get lost.

The stories of the women in this book are stories of strength against incredible odds. Salvadoran women survived massacres, stood up to armed soldiers, and protected their children from death and recruitment from both the state army and the FMLN guerrillas. They armed and fed the guerrillas, carried wounded soldiers out of the line of fire and provided lifesaving treatment. They intercepted enemy codes, and developed their own code system. They generated and distributed propaganda, made speeches, and fought on the front line of the bloodiest battles.

As a sociologist, my goal is to use these women's stories to extend existing theories of gender, revolutionary mobilization, and political violence. But as a traveler and lucky observer, my goal is to do justice to the life histories entrusted to me by Salvadoran women. The most difficult aspect of writing this book has been to adequately convey the powerful gender inequalities in Salvadoran society while still capturing the incredible strength and goodness

of Salvadoran women—and for that matter, of Salvadoran men. We know from our own lives that generous, thoughtful, intelligent people regularly perpetuate norms of *machismo* and patriarchy in their daily lives, regardless of their gender. Yet somehow this complexity is frequently oversimplified in scholarly writings about patriarchal systems in the developing world. In the chapters that follow, I aim to analyze the gender dynamics in El Salvador without implying that all Salvadoran women are weak and all Salvadoran men are monsters. When I fail, I ask the reader to please refer back to this preface, and provide his or her own mental correction.

I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to many people who helped me reach these goals. I am especially grateful to my dissertation advisors—Kent Redding and Rob Robinson—for the time and thoughtful insight they invested in this project from its inception. I thank Jeff Gould for his careful reading of early drafts and for sharing his invaluable local level knowledge and contacts in El Salvador. I thank Jim Jasper for spending countless hours editing my chapters and forcing me to clarify my theoretical ideas. I thank James Cook, Peter Worger, Bharathy Surya Prakash, and the rest of the Oxford editorial team for their efficient and intelligent work in editing and producing this volume. I benefited from the wonderful research assistance of graduate students Ramaah Sadasivam and Andrea Wilbon at Tulane University and Daniela Franco, a student worker at Harvard University. I thank David Spencer and Charles Clements for answering my e-mail inquiries with expert answers that few others could provide. And I thank the team of extraordinary scholars—including David Cunningham, Hector Silva, Sidney Tarrow, David Heise, Jeff Goodwin, Kathleen Blee, Nancy Whittier, Timothy Wickham-Crowley, Paul Almeida, Val Moghadam, Jorge Dominguez, Elisabeth Wood, Stathis Kalyvas, Susan Eckstein, Elisabeth Clemens, Susan Woodward, Robin Wagner-Pacifici, Mike Gorkin, Orlando Patterson, Mary Waters, Michèle Lamont, Peggy Levitt, Frank Dobbin, Clem Brooks, Brian Powell, Bernice Pescosolido, Jeremy Freese, Matt Hunt, Danielle Lavin-Loucks, Giovani Burgos, York Bradshaw, David Meyer, Charles Ragin, Rory McVeigh, Dan Meyer, Mabel Berezin, Howard Kimeldorf, Mitch Duneier, Patricia Fernandez-Kelly, Alejandro Portes, Miguel Centeno, Ann Swidler, Suzanne Staggenborg, Jessica Greenberg, Monica Nalepa, Michele Adams, Beth Fussell, Justin Wolfe, Scott Frickel, Kate Kimmel, Brandt Peterson, Lotti Silber, Robert Fishman, Gilda Zwerman, Louis Esparza, Lorenzo Bosi, and Christopher Bail,—who all provided constructive comments on earlier presentations or writings leading to this manuscript. Sara Shostak, Catherine Turco, Kathleen Fallon, and Amy Hite earn special accolades for repeatedly sharing their exceptional intellectual insights and enthusiasm.

The list of people to whom I am indebted in El Salvador is far too long to capture in a few short paragraphs, but I will try to at least highlight those who were especially central to the book. Daniela Fonkatz transcribed interviews, educated me on the life of rural Salvadoran women, tirelessly corrected my Spanish, and facilitated connections with the Salvadoran women's movement. Camilo Melara

and the Melara-Vides family took me into their home, cared for me like family, and facilitated my research in countless ways. Guillermo Amaya Paniagua was my first friend at the Central American University in San Salvador, and helped me through many challenges across the years, from writing course papers in Spanish, to rescuing my car from the Salvadoran criminal justice system when it was impounded for suspected theft. Leslie Schuld was my roommate and my source of knowledge for all things political. Juan Roberto Castillo and his family cared for me and provided unparalleled information about life in the Salvadoran war and its institutional ramifications today. Vladimir Solorzano, my first Spanish teacher, was responsible for introducing me to most of my social network in El Salvador—a network that I relied on heavily for support and friendship over the years. Jose Santos Guardado Bautista helped me arrange my final interviews with FMLN leaders, and continues to share with me his wealth of knowledge about Salvadoran history, politics, law and culture. Oscar Campos Lara conducted much of the archival research utilized in this manuscript. Sister Peggy O'Neill helped me craft an interview questionnaire that would get the information I needed in a way that respected the trauma that my respondents had survived, and she accompanied me on some of my very first interviews. Daniela Fonkatz, Camilo Melara Vides, Jose Santos Lopez Guevara, Lynnette Arnold, Blanca Estela Arias, Edurne Larracochea Bohigas, Jessica Trinidad, Oscar Campos Lara, and Michele Rudy helped conduct village surveys and interviews. In addition, I thank Lizardo Narvaez, Carlos Henriquez Consalvi, Georgina Hernandez, Nancy Thornton, all of the women of APDM, Topsy Page, Patricia Navarro, Xiomara Rodriguez, Maryse Brouwer, Sheila Coyle, Erick Chavez, and Nelson Menjivar. The support and friendship of this most generous group of individuals was fundamental to the completion of this book.

Most important, I thank the rural Salvadoran men and women who opened their homes and their lives to me so that I could complete the interviews for this book. University regulations do not allow me to list them by name, but I hope to one day soon return to their villages with this book in hand, so that they can see the end product of this project that we embarked upon together so many years ago.

Finally, I thank my partner, Jason Beckfield, for his eternal support and optimism, his always-excellent feedback, and his cheerful acceptance of solo-parenting responsibilities during my trips to the field. I also thank our children, Jackson and Arabella, for all the love and laughter they bring to my life.

The Social Science Research Council, the Fulbright-Hays program, the P.E.O. Scholars fund, and internal sources from Indiana University, Tulane University, and Harvard University funded much of the research for this book.

Parts of Chapter Five were originally published as Viterna, Jocelyn. 2006. "Pulled, Pushed and Persuaded: Explaining Women's Mobilization into the Salvadoran Guerrilla Army." *American Journal of Sociology* 112: 1-45.

Explaining Salvadoran Words Frequently Used in the Text

In the following chapters, I translate all Spanish quotations to English except in cases where no appropriate English translation exists. In these cases, I use only the Salvadoran word (in italics), and refer the reader to the below chart for extended definitions.

Campesino/Campesina Often translated as peasant, the word *campesino* or *campesina* literally means “of the countryside,” and refers to all rural dwellers whose households make their living from the land, whether as wage laborers, small landowners, or tenant farmers (See Wood 2003, 5, n2). *Campesino* is the masculine form, *campesina* is the feminine. Mixed gender groups are generally referred to as *campesinos* by rural Salvadorans, but feminists encourage gender inclusive language (*campesino/campesina*).

Colón/Colones The official monetary unit of El Salvador prior to 2001, when the nation converted its economic system to dollars. Prior to its discontinuation, the exchange rate was fixed at \$1 to 8.75 *colones*.

Compañero/Compañera This word has two common meanings in my interviews. The first refers to an individual’s life partner or common-law spouse, with whom one generally cohabitates and has children. The vast majority of rural Salvadorans are *acompañada*, not married. Even in the unusual cases where individuals are legally married, they still often refer to their partner as their *compañero/a*, or *compa* for short. In the second usage, respondents regularly refer to the FMLN combatants as the *compañeros* or the *compas*, distinguishing them from the *soldados* (soldiers) who are always understood to be government forces.

Guinda/Guindas are long, difficult walks through the Salvadoran wilderness characterized by their military urgency. In this manuscript, *guindas* usually refer to individuals’ flight from attack by the Armed Forces, but occasionally FMLN guerrillas also went on a *guinda* en route to a military engagement (rather than fleeing from the enemy). The verb form is *guindear*.

Milicia A community-based group of individuals who took up arms for self-defense during the 1980s in rural El Salvador, organized in affiliation with the FMLN.

Monte This translates directly to "mountain." Salvadorans fleeing to the *monte* often do mean that they are going up a large hill or a small mountain in search of safe haven. However, *monte* also refers more generally to a wilderness area.

Muchachos Literally "boys." Salvadorans often refer to the FMLN combatants as *muchachos* or *compas*, again, in contrast to the *soldados* (soldiers) of the government forces.

Contents

Preface ix

Explaining Salvadoran Words Frequently Used in the Text xv

Women in War 1

Setting the Stage 14

Micro-Level Processes of Mobilization 40

Recruiting a Guerrilla Army 63

Joining the Guerrillas 82

Ranking the File 117

Regulating Romance and Reproduction 151

Demobilization, Remobilization, and Retrenchment 172

Conclusions: Gender, Violence, and the Micro-Processes of Mobilization 203

Appendix A: Profiles of Women Guerrillas 221

Appendix B: Data and Methods 233

Appendix C: Factional Variations within the FMLN 247

Notes 257

Bibliography 269

Index 281

Women in War

Roxana was nine years old when the other children in her small Salvadoran village started calling her a *Sandinista*, but she didn't know what it meant. She had a vague notion that her parents were organizers for something called FECCAS,¹ but she had little idea what went on in those meetings. However, she remembers with stark clarity the night she overheard her parents talking about the need to leave behind all their possessions and flee their home because they were being targeted for assassination. She was thirteen years old; the year was 1981. "It was really painful, what I heard," she recalls.

"I asked...if I should put on my new clothes. 'Whatever—you decide,' they replied. So I put on my two best dresses and my new shoes, some 'Miss ADOC' that were super expensive, *five colones* they cost!² Then I dressed my little sister..."

Roxana recalls the great difficulty of the next few nights. She was cold, wet, and exhausted from walking, and the mosquitoes were biting ferociously. She pleaded with her parents to return home, but she was only told to be quiet, that her whining might alert the soldiers to their presence. She had seen soldiers beat an old woman to death in her own neighborhood just a few months earlier, so she was quickly convinced to quietly endure.

Roxana and her family soon linked up with the FMLN³ insurgent army as planned, and they spent the next three years traveling together as *gente de masa* (literally, "people of the masses"), the colloquial name for the civilians living alongside the militant guerrillas. Her mother tended to the sick and wounded in the more permanent FMLN camp, and her father took care of the wounded with the traveling armed units. Roxana helped with her younger siblings, assisted with the medical work, and participated in some trainings about how to survive and wage war as civilian "milicias."

In 1984, changes in the international response to the Salvadoran civil war forced the FMLN to adopt new tactics. Rather than maintaining large concentrations of soldiers as they had, the rebel army began utilizing small, mobile units of five or six people to launch surprise attacks against the enemy and then quickly retreat. This change made it impossible to maintain a large civilian