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Cover Page Footnote

This article is from an earlier iteration of *Diálogo* which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."

Women's Advocacy and Healing in

EL SALVADOR

By Ann Folwell Stanford



Women in the department of Cuscatlan, El Salvador, have organized to fight domestic violence and promote healing from the trauma caused by it, as well as the traumatic aftermath of living through a brutal, U.S. funded, 12-year civil war (much of which was fought in Cuscatlan), a massive earthquake in 1986, and two equally devastating earthquakes in 2001. The *Asociación para el Desarrollo y Defensa de la Mujer* and *Capacitar*, located in the small village of Suchitoto, represent inspiring grassroots organizing on behalf of women. Indeed, both groups incorporate organizing and advocacy with psychological counseling and intensive bodywork such as massage, acupressure and even aromatherapy, but each has its special focus.

The *Asociación* was founded as a way to bring together many efforts in the Suchitoto municipality that were splintering after the signing of the peace accords in 1992. With the help of Srs. Pat Farrell and Peggy O'Neill, the Women's Movement of the Communities of Cuscatlan was formed. Later it became the Concertation of Women of Suchitoto. From the Concertation grew the *Asociación*.

Aracely Alvarenga, the current coordinator of the *Asociación* notes that the Concertation's early tasks focused on the rights of women ex-combatants, promotion of women's literacy, intervention in and prevention of domestic violence. The Concertation worked with women ex-combatants from the FMLN to contest post-peace accords land reform that gave the women short shrift. As they worked to address domestic violence, which had significantly increased after the signing of the peace accords, they formed the *Asociación* to deal with it exclusively.

The *Asociación* was organized to address family violence through legal, psychological, and educative processes. Each woman's situation is assessed individually, says Alvarenga, whose work often includes accompanying the woman to offices of police, courts, or other places where she can take action to defend herself. "Often I help women find the legal aid they need to secure child support, file legal complaints, and process separations and divorces," she adds.¹

The *Asociación* also pays attention to mental health, offering individual counseling and consciousness-raising workshops in the office as well as in the rural communities. The goal is empowerment and knowledge and the workshops address such topics as self-esteem, gender equality, sexual and reproductive health, and domestic violence. "I consider the work we do to be extremely important. The women . . . have no resource in this area that is similar to the *Asociación*. Clearly, there is

so much more to be done to address the machismo that has affected women in this country for generations. But we can see that just the presence of a place where women in situations of domestic violence can turn has made an impact in this zone. . . . We live in an extremely violent culture that has suffered wars and massacres and where women continue to suffer family violence to an even greater degree than before the war," Alvarenga says.² Farrell adds that, "the presence of the *Asociación* in the Suchitoto area is an ongoing sign of hope for the women and sends a strong deterrent message to abusers."³

The women of the *Asociación* have recently become legalized and incorporated. Financial survival is a daily struggle. With minimal finances, they have undertaken Herculean tasks. They have plans to train young men and women in gender issues and non-violent relating as a way, says Alvarenga, "of creating a future in which we all work together for the equality we so desire."⁴

Located near the *Asociación's* office is the site of *Capacitar*, a rambling Colonial-style building. A holistic healing model, *Capacitar* was developed in Nicaragua by a North American woman engaged in the political and social struggle of the 1980s. Working with her Nicaraguan friends, Patricia Cane developed the theory and methodology of *Capacitar*, which means in Spanish, "to empower, to encourage, to bring forth." She notes that while in Nicaragua during the Contra war, she had been working on a folkloric festival. To relieve stress, she practiced Tai Chi and

acupressure on herself. "At one point my Nicaraguan friends said, 'Your artwork is great, but when are you going to teach us how to do that? We want to learn ways to take care of ourselves in the midst of the violence in our lives.' This simple comment led to my first workshops in the barrios of Managua." From there, Cane went on to develop *Capacitar*, which teaches that each person has within her- or himself the means of a "natural wisdom of body, mind, and spirit and the power to heal and return to balance and well-being."⁷

In 1995, Pat Farrell invited Cane to El Salvador to conduct workshops with some of the religious who had been living in the country throughout the war and had seen first hand the effects of devastating violence on the women in their communities. After several more workshops, a team formed and two years ago the work of the clinic began and has, as Farrell says, "mushroomed ever since." The team consists of two psychologists, Farrell (a clinical social worker), and five women with varied involvement in health issues who have been trained by *Capacitar* locally. Most are Salvadoran; one is a former client of the program. "I love this work," says Farrell; "it is a privilege to provide holistic healing services to people who

otherwise would have no resources for recovery from trauma."⁸

Capacitar offers two workshops a week, two days a week of clinical attention in the rural areas of Suchitoto, and ongoing counseling and bodywork in the clinic. Since February 2001, they have given 75 workshops around the country, teaching holistic methods to treat trauma. They have also worked with teachers who had classrooms full of children traumatized by the recent earthquakes, and with crisis workers—the Red Cross, personnel of the psychiatric hospital, *Medicos del Mundo*, multidisciplinary teams for crisis intervention, and community health promoters. The team hopes to develop a model of community healing that expands the work now begun in the rural areas, continuing to train other Salvadoran women in methods of trauma intervention and healing. As Cane argues, "With materials in the hands of grassroots leaders, the healing work can multiply more quickly and effectively, as people become subjects of their own learning and healing process."⁹ In a land that has known great suffering and grief, this difficult work and that of the *Asociación* provide sure beacons of hope.

1. Alvarenga, Aracely. Interview with Sr. Pat Farrell, August 2001.
2. Ibid.
3. Farrell, Pat. Interview with author, November 2001
4. Ibid.
5. Cane, Patricia Mathes, Ph.D. *Trauma, Healing and Transformation. Capacitar, Inc.* 23 E. Beach St. Suite 206, Watsonville, CA 95076. capacitar@igc.org. (9)
6. Cane, *ibid.*
7. *Capacitar* Programs and Vision Flyer
8. Farrell, *ibid.*
9. Cane, *ibid.* (10)

