High Risk Feminism in El Salvador: Women's Mobilisation in Violent Times

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Violence against women in El Salvador — a country made fragile by a vicious Civil War and the subsequent burgeoning of murderous youth gangs —lies on the knife's edge between public and private (Hume 2009). Women's experiences of violence are often invalidated by wider society for violating a normalised culture of 'patriarchal privacy'. Yet despite widespread violence, Salvadoran women have created opportunities and avenues for mobilisation in defense of their safety and well-being. This article showcases these efforts, with an eye towards the various forms of agency that women adopt, create, modify, and employ to counteract fragility in their daily lives. It will introduce High Risk Feminism (HRF) — an original framework that applies a gendered lens to a composite of social movement theories — in order to highlight the uniquely gendered dimensions of women's mobilisation in El Salvador.

Keywords: Violence Against Women and Girls, El Salvador, High-Risk Feminism, Mobilisation, Resistance, Gender Inequality

Introduction

El Salvador is a country plagued by devastating levels of violent crime. In the face of the high risks of ubiquitous violence, it might seem logical that women turn inwards for protection and safety. Instead, the Salvadoran women's movement is very much visible in the streets. During a 2013 research visit to El Salvador, I saw posters at bus stops reading: '*¡Viviendo el Feminismo! Defiendo la Vida y la Libertad de las Mujeres' (*Living Feminism! I defend Life and Freedom for Women). This advertising campaign is one of many championed by autonomous women's groups; currently, women in El Salvador are making their claims increasingly public? What can gender and development researchers, policymakers and practitioners learn from this mobilisation?

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) in El Salvador — a country made fragile by a vicious Civil War and the subsequent burgeoning of murderous youth gangs — has been described by one commentator as lying on the knife's edge between public and private (Hume 2009) – that is, it is part of women's experience both within the home and family, and outside in streets, workplaces and rural areas. Women's experiences of VAWG include physical violence, feminicide [1], psychological and emotional violence, sexual violence, economic violence, and symbolic [2] violence (ISDEMU 2011). The women who suffer violence of various forms and speak out about it often encounter hostility from wider society for violating a normalised culture of 'patriarchal privacy' around VAWG (Hume 2009). Meanwhile, state and donor-led violence-reduction strategies use homicide rates, among which men predominate, as a proxy for levels of violence in society, and hence render VAWG largely invisible.

Yet despite these realities, Salvadoran women are creating opportunities and avenues for mobilisation in defence of their own safety and well-being. This article draws on my own

research, to explore some of these efforts. In focusing on feminist responses to VAWG in El Salvador, I hoped to illustrate the importance of working with women's movements on development and humanitarian response through an examination of the various mobilisational strategies I observed in El Salvador. I gave particular attention to the various forms of agency that women adopt, create, modify, and employ to counteract fragility in their daily lives.

My research led me to coin the term High Risk Feminism (HRF), to refer to the particular strategies used by women to mobilise to defend and secure women's rights in El Salvador. The term offers potential for use by researchers, policymakers, and practitioners focusing on VAWG in insecure, conflict-driven locations in other parts of the world, and women's own strategies to address it. These provide insights into the need to support women's activism, and meet the demands for support and resources women are asking for from the state.

Background: a history of civil war and post-war violent crime

During El Salvador's civil war (from 1980 to 1992), women played a very prominent public role in Salvadoran society, participating in a political project alongside men. The *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (FMLN) guerrilla movement conceptualised its fight as a social and economic justice project – the construction of a new society (Moodie, 2010). With the end of the war and the signing of the Peace Accords in 1992 however, the context in which women were able to mobilise changed. The years between 1990 and 1994 were witness to the creation of a plethora of autonomous organisations, many originating from the women's sections of the various arms of the FMLN, with strong feminist agendas. Also in this period, women's groups began to strategically coordinate their efforts and cooperate in their own activities.

While women's organisations were seeking autonomy and beginning to define their goals and strategies in society, levels of crime were growing exponentially in El Salvador. Indeed, the country's 'official "peace"... did very little to help [most Salvadorans] confront the task of daily living, to strategise survival in unpredictable times' (Call 2003, 828). The country remained characterised by human rights violations, increased homicide and intentional injury rates, a spike in armed robbery, and domestic conflict. Charles Call notes that 'citizens' primary concern after the country's transition from authoritarian rule was crime, and in 1999, some 55 per cent cited crime as a justification for the toppling of democracy' (ibid.). This crime wave is said to be the product of the peace process itself, in which thousands of former combatants returned home without prospects for employment, and thousands of weapons still circulated in civilian hands. Both of these circumstances led to the 'social habituation of using violence as a means of resolving conflicts' (ibid., 843).

A reading of the literature surrounding women's movements in El Salvador focuses on women's groups' roots in the guerrilla forces of the past; 'revolutionary feminism' is a term used to explain women's post-war mobilisation by Julie Shayne (2004). My experiences talking to members of women's organisations in El Salvador, however, revealed that experiences with attempted revolution [3] are no longer the reference point for women's organisations. If nothing else, many of the members are young enough to have few memories – and no direct organisational experience – of the Civil War.

My research began with the goal of accurately describing contemporary women's mobilisation under high-risk contexts. The data that resulted in the creation of the HRF framework were gathered over a summer spent in El Salvador in 2013. I used methods including semi-structured interviews, participant observation, process tracing, qualitative data analysis, and archival/newspaper research. Upon return, I transcribed my interviews and classified the different strategies women discussed into the four pillars that now form the HRF framework. 26 interviews were held over a three month period with organisation leaders, members of municipal government, NGO workers, feminist academics, and community members in various parts of El Salvador.

For the purpose of safety and anonymity, I am assigning all interviewees pseudonyms.

A contemporary story of high risk: painting a gendered picture of violence

Although the articulations of violence have changed in El Salvador over the years, the country inarguably remains a location of high risk for women. Simply being a woman in El Salvador – let alone mobilising to challenge the treatment of women in society – remain dangerous. Violence – including violence against women – is a daily occurrence in El Salvador. The rate of feminicide (in most recent statistics) is 14.4 per 100,000 (Geneva Declaration 2015, 93) – the highest in the world. In 2012, the Interamerican Commission on Women declared El Salvador's feminicide rate – which was 2.2 points lower at that time – consistent with the definition of a pandemic (de los Reyes 2013). Moreover, the country experiences high levels of sexual and intrafamilial violence, as can be seen in the Organisation of Salvadoran Women for Peace (ORMUSA)'s [4] online violence observatory (see http://www.ormusa.org/, date accessed: 9 June 2016).

In El Salvador, youth gangs are a prime manifestation of 'protest masculinities', amidst socioeconomic and political exclusion (Baird 2015, 113). Women are present in the lives of gang members; as mothers, sisters, girlfriends, and friends. When exclusion from political, economic and social power leads to emasculation, gangs engage in (re)masculinising behaviours. They adopt is a form of hyper *machismo*, an identity rooted in gender inequality and a predilection to violence. When it comes to these gang members, part of regaining and asserting one's masculinity is concerned with sexual access to women (ibid). In entering a relationship with a gang member, women and girls are guaranteed respect, protection, and gifts. In El Salvador, it is common practice that gang members choose (often underage) girlfriends and force them into relationships with threats of harm or death if they resist.

Yet for the girlfriends of gang members, gaining protection from a relationship with a gang member is accompanied by a risk of being targeted for violence by other men. In the context of El Salvador's brutal gang-war, girlfriends, as well as female family members of gang members, are high targets for violence and murder. *Pandillas* and *Maras* (both translate to mean 'gang') are examples of extremely socially violent groups that want the population at their service [4]. For them, women become objects. In an interview with me, Silvia (ORMUSA) said that when men kill each other, they shoot each other and the event is over quickly. On the other hand, when men kill women, they use sexual violence, degradation, torture, and humiliation (interview, San Salvador, 14 August 2013).

A gang truce was agreed in 2012, between the Mara Salvatrucha (MS13) and the Barrio 18, El Salvador's two largest gangs, and brokered by the Salvadoran government (Gude, 2015). Since my research was conducted, the truce has broken down (Cruz and Duran-Martinez 2016). Yet as Carolina told me, even during the truce, women still bore the brunt of the violence: "the *tregua* (truce) is a pact amongst men. They aren't killing each other any more, but they are still killing each other's women. Women are now the objects of the violence" (Interview, San Salvador, 18 July 2013). While it is no longer true that they are not killing each other, the fact that even during a truce, women were still the objects of violence is telling about gendered power dynamics more broadly.

Feminicide: violence from patriarchal domination by individuals and institutions

The gang violence and its impact on women seems to be widely seen as a post-civil-war phenomenon, and hence a change in the context of violence against women in El Salvador. What has not changed, however, are the historical roots of a culture of *machismo* that permeates almost all Salvadoran institutions, including the government, the police, the judicial system, and civil society, as well as the fabric of social life more generally. There exists a long tradition of a culture of marginalisation and mistreatment of women. One female police agent in La Libertad admitted that if a woman calls the station with a situation of domestic abuse, her male colleagues will often refuse to answer the call, saying that there is no transport or personnel available. She believes that many of her male coworkers see the man as the *dueño* (the owner) of his wife, and that he therefore has a right to mistreat her (de los Reyes, 2013).

It has been asserted that 'male domination and the reproduction of the patriarchal model reach exaggerated proportions in gang culture' (Aguilar Umaña & Rikkers 2012). This violence, it should be noted, does not end with the perpetration of the crime. The gendered power relations that violence creates, reinforces, and perpetuates mean that being a woman living in a violent community involves being exposed to a high risk of violence. In addition, institutions that are supposed to protect human rights often rule against women.

Silvia, in my research, gave an example: of 63 cases of feminicide that ORMUSA registered in the sixteen months after the Special Laws (discussed presently) were implemented, only 16 were classified by judges as feminicides as opposed to homicide, given the judges' refusal to implement the Laws (interview, San Salvador, 14 August 2013). Some judges she questioned about this openly stated that they will not apply them. Judges express the feeling that ruling in favour of women means ruling against men – a game of winning and losing that caused Silvia to express the view:

they do not even have the most elementary idea of what equality is, nor democracy...a country that forgets about, ignores, and shows different treatment towards women for the sole reason of being a women cannot call itself democratic.

(ibid.)

Researching High-Risk Feminism: distinguishing four mobilisation strategies

In terms of collective identity and action, women's organisations are working towards a level of national solidarity against VAWG which unites all women, regardless of class, ethnicity or other aspects of difference. Such empowerment focuses both on holding the state responsible for fulfilling its legal responsibilities, and on holding society accountable for the situation of violence against women. The creation of collective identity and social capital empowers women to claim their rights in a way that they hope will lead to a societal paradigm shift regarding attitudes about violence against women.

Women choose to mobilise against the pernicious violence that affects the 'everyday' in El Salvador in many ways. In the sections below, I divide these into four categories: collective identity creation, social capital building, (legal) framing, and acts of certification (see Figure 1). Taken together, these elements can be described as High Risk Feminism, responding to VAWG in a risky and fragile environment.

Feminism is a generalised collective identity that places value on challenging gender hierarchy and changing women's social status. For women living in violent contexts, the personal is undoubtedly political, and conversely, the political becomes personal. Of course, not all women in El Salvador or elsewhere self-identify as feminists, or see their strategies as feminist (although some wholeheartedly do). In my own research, I found that the majority of women's movement members (particularly poor, rural women) do not identify with this label. However, the actions and demands made by mobilisers are defined by many as feminist in nature; women are directly tackling gender inequality and violence and hence acting as feminists even if they do not self-identify as such (Alvarez 1999).

In my research, in addition to members of ORMUSA, I talked to members of many other women's organisations and groups, including: IMU (the Institute of Research, Training and Development of Women), Las Dignas (the Women's Association for Dignity and Life), Las Mélidas (the Movement of Women 'Mélida Anaya Montes'), CFPA (the Feminist Alliance Prudence Ayala), MSM (the Movement of Salvadoran Women), CRIPDES (the Association for Salvadoran Development), and SHARE (Salvadoran Humanitarian Aid, Research, and Education Foundation).

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

Collective identity creation

The moment in which I conducted my fieldwork was important, I was informed by interviewees, because of the passing of a Special Law; the *Ley Especial Integral para una Vida Libre de Violencia para las Mujeres* (LEIV) (The Special and Comprehensive Law for a Life Free from Violence for Women), was approved on 25 November 2010, and entered vigilance on 1 January 2012. The LEIV is a law passed by the government of Mauricio Funes, who was elected President of El Salvador in 2009, and re-elected in 2014 [5].

The idea for the LEIV was conceived by ORMUSA, and then written by a conglomeration of organisations, calling itself *RED Feminista,* including Las Mélidas, Las Dignas, and ORMUSA. According to ISDEMU (Salvadoran Institute for Women's Development) – a formal state institution – this law is an answer to the escalation in diverse forms of violence against women

(2012, 3). One publication focusing on the LEIV is printed in cartoon form to ensure accessibility for people with varying levels of literacy. It opens with a character saying:

this law is the product of the fight of diverse institutions – principally of organisations of women and feminists – that safeguard women's rights.

(ISDEMU 2011, 3).

The fight for a life free from violence (as outlined in the law by the same name) is for *las Mujeres* – the women – as a whole. Salvadoran women's organisations, on the whole, do not draw class distinctions in terms of their target audience. Some organisations have regional, or urban/rural foci, but the overall impression is that they seek to strengthen women's rights for all *Salvadoreñas*. This includes women with experiences in the Civil War, and women too young to have memories of this time. Through encouraging and promoting women all over the country to organise themselves, women's organisations expand their mobilisational base in a way that allows for concrete benefits to be derived from the LEIV.

The LEIV operates as a law, but its existence has also enabled a process of awareness-raising about women's rights and the need for collective action around these. A Facebook status from the ORMUSA page reads: 'it is important for women to know the [LEIV] – in this way they will come to value their rights and put a stop to all forms of violence' (ORMUSA, 2014). Catalina told me that her organisation (CRIPDES) believes that if women do not organise themselves, nothing will get done; 'when women do not organise, they do not know [about the law], they do not denounce' (interview, San Salvador, 12 August 2013). The biggest challenge, she told me, is that women do not know about their own rights to safety, and thus do not know what to do when confronting a situation of violence.

Juana and Elena told me that their organisation (CRIPDES) is educating women about the LEIV (especially in rural zones), and aims to give them the skills necessary to feel confident to use the law when they see that their rights are being violated. The practical challenges of translating law into actions which actually protect women are well-known. In their view, without expanding the women's movement to include community organisations of women (and not just the formal, well-established organisations in the nation's capital) the LEIV will continue to lack substantial meaning.

Social Capital

Women who lack safe spaces develop ways of mobilising in relation to their lived experiences of violence. Once more, this is a very familiar feminist way of working. Women in El Salvador aim to create safe spaces, be these community groups or physical buildings. From these safe spaces, women are empowered by the social capital generated through interpersonal bonds and support. Social capital is defined by Caroline Moser (2001, 43) as the 'rules, norms, obligations, reciprocity, and trust embedded in social relations, social structures, and a society's institutional arrangements that enables its members to achieve their individual and community objectives'.

The benefits of social capital as part of the women's movement in El Salvador can be illustrated through an anecdote from fieldwork: an unplanned trip to Chalatenango. I drove

with a development organisation to the tiny village of Ignacio Ellacuría, where a group of women participate in a food security project, *huertos caseros* (vegetable gardens) [7]. I spent the afternoon going between four different houses, and speaking with women who are members of the *huertos caseros* project. The women are given seeds, as well as technical training and tools to plant their own vegetable gardens. In total, 210 women in the region are part of the programme. Women in each town come together in workshops to discuss their ideas about the gardens. Although this organisation is not blatantly political upon first glance, it definitely has gendered, political undertones in the context of El Salvador. For many of these women, leaving the house to meet with other women is a big step in gaining independence; many of their husbands and partners were not initially pleased with their participation.

Organisation around gardens has led to organisation around other issues. Beyond the nutritional value, having a garden means that women do not have to take the bus to the nearest market town to buy food. Selling surplus vegetables generates a little extra income for the women involved, and they have created a local community savings bank. While they do not save large amounts of money, the bank can provide loans in times of need (for example, to travel to see a sick relative, or to afford medication). Participants highlighted to me that this women's savings group meant that they no longer had to rely on men for providing emergency money. The women have recently bought an abandoned house, and plan to repair it to create a community space for women. They told me that one of the biggest problems they encounter is that many women do not want to leave their homes. They hope that a communal meetinghouse will provide a safe space that may persuade these women to leave their houses and participate in community meetings.

When I asked how the garden project has changed their lives, one of the women answered that it has taught them the value of organisation: 'Without organisation, there is no development' (Interview, Chalatenango, 11 August 2013). Interviewees said that women's organisations have seen increased membership since women began to organise to discuss their gardens. Women are now 'informed about what goes on', in the words of one woman I spoke to; and they have an increasing desire to deal with pressing issues like VAWG, and the attempted influence of the *pandillas* even in rural regions. The women were well-informed about the Special Laws. In fact, the women who led me around the town told me that they had been to a special workshop about the Laws, and had come back to the community to disseminate the information. They laughed and told me that the men knew not to hit their wives any more, as there are 'laws against that sort of thing now'. While such thinking does not necessarily represent a change in social attitudes towards violence against women, it does mean that knowledge of the Laws is spreading, and at surface level, being taken seriously in rural parts of the country.

It seems that the men and women of Ignacio Ellacuría take the Special Laws seriously in part because of the increased involvement of the women who participate in community organisations, leading to shared goals, stronger social capital, and a focus on both economic and social issues. The group in this town is a small living example of what other organisation leaders told me they were trying to create in San Salvador: in order to reduce violence against women and fortify women's rights, women need to organise themselves to gain strength.

The leap from growing vegetables to denouncing perpetrators of violence and demanding

rights from the state may seem exaggerated. With that said, the progressive nature of women's thinking in a tiny, rural community in the north of the country shows that as women organise and fortify the reciprocity and trust of social relations, they are able to tackle both the long term goals of achieving gender equality in society, and also the more urgent goals of decreasing violence against women. Many of the house facades in Ignacio Ellacuría bear a spray-painted sign: 'I make my house a space free from violence'. This is both an individual statement, and also a community promise. It draws on the courage to act, the courage derived from social capital to defy social and cultural norms.

(Legal) Framing

A 'frame' is a way for individuals to locate, perceive, identify, and label occurrences within their life space (Goffman 1959). The women in El Salvador involved in my research elect to use a frame of legal rights and responsibilities to publicly highlight their mobilisation and the situation of violence against women and gender inequality more broadly. By this, I mean that one strategy they adopt is framing the situation of violence against women as being against the law, the repercussions of which involve both punishment of perpetrators and the responsibility of victims to denounce the violence as a protective mechanism to prevent further violence in the future. By denouncing, I mean taking claims to the relevant local authorities, usually the police, in order to being a process of legal retribution for crimes perpetrated.

The LEIV is a legal foundation on which women can base their claims for a life free from violence in its many manifestations. Prior to the passing of the Special Law, the ISDEMU (Salvadoran Institute for Women's Development) Report on Violence (2012, 8) included an understanding that '[violence against women] has been historically invisible and hidden', and recognises the need for a 'paradigm shift, in which violence against women stops being considered a private problem, and becomes a public problem, affecting all of society, and towards which the State must take measures'. The LEIV, according to the Report, would highlight that 'the State must make structural changes that will work towards the transformation of unequal relations of power between men and women, and the deconstruction of sexist stereotypes and myths around violence' (ibid.).

The very fact that the LEIV outlines the many different categories of violence experienced by women in El Salvador, as stated in the introduction to this article, recognises the need for a broad understanding of the many sectors in which reforms need to be made in order to rectify the imbalances that have historically limited Salvadoran women. The LEIV provides a basis for awareness-raising to take place. The organisation IMU even offers special diploma courses on capacity training and the LEIV. This facet of women's mobilisation – the dissemination of ideas and knowledge that provide women with categories of legal versus illegal, with which to frame their experiences – is a fundamental strategy in the operation of women's organisations.

Simply because a law exists does not mean that it will automatically be applied, or indeed lead to any real change in society, as we saw from Silvia's conversations with the misogynistic judges. Angelica, of ORMUSA, told me: 'just because of one law, the reality [of women] is not going to change' (Interview, San Salvador, 3 July 2013). Carolina, of IMU, a psychologist offering services to women in need, added:

we need to make the Ley Especial e Integral *just that – integral (comprehensive, holistic). People need to know it exists, and need to know how to use it properly by denouncing crimes*

(Interview, San Salvador, 18 July 2013).

As such, women leaders are framing their current mobilisation in terms of the urgency of making demands on the state with regards to women's legal rights. In my interview with Magaly (CFPA), I was taken aback by the bluntness with which she told me: 'the laws now exist, the women just need to act' (Interview, San Salvador, 16 July 2013).

This was a sentiment shared by almost all of the women I interviewed: Salvadoran women now have the platform from which to demand and secure their safety and well-being, and now it is the task (again, of *all* Salvadorans, and not just the leaders of the organisations) to act collectively such that both the state and society accept these rights and implement them fully. By framing mobilisation in relation to the LEIV, women are empowered to be the *fuerza en las calles* (force in the streets) that will facilitate the laws bearing any weight in a country wracked with impunity.

The LEIV has complex requirements, creating specific responsibilities for different ministries. For example, the Ministry of Education has to promote it at all levels of education and is required to remove any educational material that includes violence against women; the Ministry of Governance is bound to ensure that communications media such as television, radio, and press do not promote violence against women in any way; and the Ministry of Public Health and Social Assistance must ensure that it attends to the emotional and mental health of women who are victims of violence, and is also required to eliminate any barriers that may prevent a woman accessing healthcare (ISDEMU 2011). Furthermore, a number of important justice institutions (including the Attorney General's office, the District Attorney's office, the PNC, and the Institution of Legal Medicine, among others) are obligated to create separate units that specialise in providing attention to female victims.

Acts of Certification

Given that there remain deficiencies between theory and practice in relation to the implementation of the LEIV, women's organisations engage in certification processes to further push for change in a high-risk context. By certification, I refer to the ways in which women's organisations validate themselves before external authorities through public affirmations of identity. As Diana of IMU said:

one of the most important jobs of the feminists is to show that we have force, that we have power in the streets, to make the diputados hear us. You need to show your power to make your adversary talk to you and take you seriously.

(Interview, San Salvador, 7 August 2013).

To begin, the LEIV itself has shortcomings that concern some members of women's organisations. Certification acts offer an opportunity for women to highlight these grievances publicly. For example, it does not take into account some important issues related to women:

a critical example is the issue of abortion [8]. Silvia told me that reproductive rights were included in original drafts, but were removed before the law was sent through the different levels of government to be passed. There arrived a point in time at which the women's organisations had the support of the FMLN (including a group of female deputies), and they needed to take advantage of the political moment to pass the law. Strategically, women's organisations realised that a law that included the right to access abortion would not be passed, and so decided to remove this clause. Silvia highlighted that it remains an important issue, but that the women's organisations needed to wait for a more 'prudent time' before lobbying for such rights.

Although issues concerning legalising abortion are not included in the Law, many women are still mobilising around this issue using certification. Morena Herrera is now involved in a group that documents cases of women who are incarcerated on charges of abortion, and lobbies against the government to both free these women and change legislation on topics of abortion. On numerous occasions, she and her colleagues have protested outside courts, and at times have been threatened by citizens and/or the police for their activism. Cases like that of Beatriz [9]– a young woman with severe illnesses who was almost forced to carry an anencephalic foetus to term given El Salvador's draconian ban on abortion in all cases – are an example of how, despite high-risk conditions, Salvadoran women practice certification in order to legitimise their demands before society and the state.

The existence of the ORMUSA violence observatory is also an act of certification. The observatory, run in part by Silvia, seeks to document and publish all information related to violence against women in the country. It monitors feminicides, intrafamilial violence, social violence, sexual violence, and violence in communication media, and publishes the results of its studies (mainly online) at various intervals. Having an observatory and launching projects such as their recent anti-misogyny campaign (2014a) are acts of certification, in the sense that by being a watchdog institution, ORMUSA attempts to hold the state accountable for dealing with acts of violence against women.

In El Salvador as in other contexts, discrepancies exist between data on rates of VAWG collected by feminists including ORMUSA, and official data including national police data, showing the unreliability of official statistics in reporting violence. The existence of the ORMUSA observatory shows that women's organisations are not satisfied with the formal institutional reporting on violence against women. Instead, ORMUSA chooses to run a parallel organisation that incorporates gendered dimensions of violence into its data gathering process.

In El Salvador, acts of certification represent strategies of mobilisation in a high-risk context. Questioning the state and society on issues that challenge established systems of patriarchy necessarily incurs risk. As is explained by HRF, however, women participate in these high-risk activities in order to create a platform from which women's organisations have a voice. Gloria (of SHARE) told me at the end of our interview: '*hay que ir rompiendo*' (we have to continue breaking [the current barriers we face](Interview, San Salvador, 14 August 2013). Her use of the gerund form of the verb demonstrates her belief that the *rompiendo*, the breaking, is a process that exists on a timeline as opposed to a static point.

Simply passing a Special Law will not bring real change in terms of violence against women in El Salvador. Rather, the LEIV is a tool that creates the space in which women can begin to claim their rights. It creates a foundation based in the long-term goals of the women's movement – equality and the right to a life free from violence. The day-to-day struggles – organising women in community groups to generate *fuerza* (force) to combat daily violence, the marches and protests to save the life of Beatriz, the research organisations that publish statistics about feminicide – these are what allow the women's movement to continue operating in a context of high violence.

Individuals and collectives engaging in this type of work are sometimes at risk of violence themselves. Leaders reaching out to women in gang-controlled zones are exposed to the day-to-day violence that is now commonplace in El Salvador, for example being hit by a stray bullet during a shoot-out or being violently robbed on public transport. Those individuals who join groups express fear at walking to meetings or gatherings, worrying about being mugged or physically assaulted on the journey from home to the meeting place. In certain cases, women's husbands or partners do not like their participation in feminist groups, resulting in threats (or direct incidences) of physical violence.

Interestingly, however, leaders told me that they do not feel specifically targeted for being human rights defenders (as do their counterparts in, for example, Honduras or Colombia). The narrative explained to me was that the main perpetrators of violence (referring to gang members) are so caught up in their own gang war that they do not have the time to start targeting women's organisations. Women's groups are not seen as direct threat to gang control, and are therefore not usually the object of targeted attacked. With that said, interviewees mentioned that they try to avoid direct interactions with the gangs, in order to maintain this fragile invisibility that allows them to continue their work without incurring direct harm.

Conclusion

This article has explored four kinds of women's mobilisational strategies in the fragile context of violent El Salvador, advancing the notion of HRF as a useful way of categorising and comparing women's mobilisation in situations of violence and conflict [11]. In concert, these four mobilisational strategies combine to form what I refer to as the HRF framework. This is a way of categorising strategies that give us insight into the way women are choosing to mobilise in the face of violence. The way they interact – the benefits of adopting an identity that lets you feel part of an in-group, the social capital generated through learning about a law and coming together as women, the legal framing of women's safety, and the strength-in-numbers that results in outward actions demanding a change to unequal gendered power dynamics – is reflexive and recursive, there can be no move backwards.

It is critical for international development organisations interested in working to end VAWG to consult and co-operate in partnership with women's organisations when it comes to aid and development work, and not just rely on government narratives about what is best for women. To demonstrate the necessity of listening to women's voices in policymaking, one only has to look at an example from El Salvador where women's voices were *not* listened to - the case of Ciudad Mujer [10]. This is a centre that was designed (to international acclaim –

[11]) by the Funes government in 2012 to centralise the services women need, including access to health services, legal services, and training programmes. Involvement from the women's movements was, however, kept to a minimum. None of the women I interviewed had been consulted during the planning stages of the programme.

Interviewees from the women's organisations involved in my research saw Ciudad Mujer as an attempt to gain votes in the presidential elections without examining the deep-rooted issues of violence against women, including those present within institutions of the state (for example, regarding reproductive rights). Had the established women's organisations been consulted – transparently and with a willingness to truly listen to women's complaints and demands – perhaps this project would have been more transformational in terms of violence reduction.

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Endnotes

[1] The term *feminicide* (as opposed to *femicide*) encompasses the idea that the crime of murdering a woman also has political implications; the murderer is guilty, but so are the state and judicial structures that normalise misogyny via impunity, silence, and indifference when it comes to prevention, investigation, and prosecution (Sanford 2008).
[2] Symbolic violence is a term used to describe messages, icons, or signs that transmit messages of domination of aggression against women. In the case of the LEIV, such violence is addressed by making the state legally responsible for monitoring television, radio, and print media to ensure that it does not promote messages of VAWG.
[3 For more on the history of the Civil War in El Salvador, and why it did not result in the revolution the FMLN hoped, see Popkin (1995).
[4} ORMUSA is a national women's organisation founded in 1985 that seeks to improve women's access to a life free from violence. For more information see http://www.ormusa.org/ or for the violence observatory, see http://observatoriodeviolencia.ormusa.org/ (Date accessed: 9 June 2016).
[5] For more about the gang war in El Salvador, see Cruz & Duran-Martinez (2016).
[6] This was the first time that his party, the FMLN, held presidential office. Despite the party's revolutionary roots its election did not represent a return to the revolutionary, transformative policies of the past.
[7] Co-sponsored by the women's arm of the Association for the Development of Chalatenango.
[8] Since 1998, abortion has been illegal in all cases in El Salvador. See *The Total Criminalisation of Abortion in El Salvador* (2015).

[9] The Beatriz case (see the Guardian report, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/04/baby-el-salvador-woman-abortion-dies, date accessed: 9 June 2016) has special significance, given the way it attracted global media coverage, and indeed, global outrage. An Amnesty International poster still hangs in the IMU office: "*todos somos Beatriz*" (we are all Beatriz).
[10] In a whirlwind of publicity, Funes did take steps towards creating a platform for women's rights. With the Secretary of Social Inclusion (his wife, Vanda Pignato) he created Ciudad Mujer. This project aims to guarantee the fundamental rights of Salvadoran women, in accordance with the LEIV, through the provision of specialised services such as: sexual and reproductive health services, comprehensive attention to gendered violence, economic empowerment, and the promotion of women's rights. Ciudad Mujer has a number of sites in different regions of the country, ensuring that women from different regions can take advantage of the services offered. The project links a number of different state institutions, including ISDEMU and the *Policia Nacional Civil* (PNC), the Attorney General's office, the District Attorney's office, and the Legal Medicine office. See Zulver (2014).
[11] For example, see UN Women (2011).

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