

8-30-1991

## Interview: America Sosa, Board Member Of Women's International Network For Development & Democracy In El Salvador

Deborah Tyroler

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

---

### Recommended Citation

Tyroler, Deborah. "Interview: America Sosa, Board Member Of Women's International Network For Development & Democracy In El Salvador." (1991). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/6000>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [amywinter@unm.edu](mailto:amywinter@unm.edu).

## **Interview: America Sosa, Board Member Of Women's International Network For Development & Democracy In El Salvador**

*by Deborah Tyroler*

*Category/Department: General*

*Published: Friday, August 30, 1991*

[In the following interview, America Sosa, board member of the Women's International Network for Development and Democracy in El Salvador (WINDS), discusses the emerging Salvadoran women's movement. Sosa believes El Salvador is ripe for feminism. She notes that during 11 years of war, Salvadoran women were forced by necessity to move from their traditional domestic roles to the public sphere to feed their families, to denounce the repression, and, "to claim their own space as women." In El Salvador, Sosa was a leader in the Christian base communities movement. She fled to the US in 1985 following the assassination of her husband and disappearance of one of her sons, and received political asylum in June 1990. Sosa continued her political work in the US, opening a COMADRES (Mothers and Relatives of the Disappeared) office in Washington, DC, and more recently working to promote WINDS. Sosa recently concluded an international tour Geneva, Switzerland, Holland, Germany, Soviet Union, Japan and Hong Kong to promote WINDS and seek funding for women's self-development projects in El Salvador. Projects sponsored by the new organization include women-owned small businesses and cottage industries, day care centers, and family planning and leadership training programs.] LADB: WINDS promotes itself as a feminist organization. What does feminism mean in the Salvadoran context? SOSA: It means the struggle for equal rights and responsibilities for men and women. Feminism is the battle to break with the traditions which assign specific activities to men and women. Thus, women are no longer present solely to support men in their activities, but participate as well. Salvadoran women are getting rid of the myths about what they can and cannot do. The movement is about developing women, creating means of self-sufficiency and women's survival. But, it is a very difficult task and these women are really struggling. LADB: What kinds of problems do feminists face in El Salvador? SOSA: First of all, men and other women accuse them of being lesbians. They say [feminists] are fighting for lesbianism and not feminism. They don't understand that the gender struggle is about self-knowledge, about learning that you are competent and that you can develop your capabilities. The women are educating other women about knowing themselves and knowing their rights. They are teaching them that they can do things. When women say "that is for men," [feminists] say "no, it's also for women." [Examples are] construction work, or participation in political movements, or holding a high level position. Society says women are incapable of these things, that they are for men. [Feminist women say,] "No, women can do these things, too." [Feminists] point out that women...have done things much harder things which are never taken into account. At the beginning, some of the women separated from their husbands or companeros because the men opposed their participation in women's groups. As time passed, these men observed there was nothing wrong with the work. Some couples were able to work their problems out and get back together. LADB: Are the women WINDS works with working class for the most part? SOSA: Yes, because these are the women most in need of education and development agricultural workers, women who work in the markets, factory workers. But we are also working with professional women. The movement WINDS is most closely associated with in El Salvador is called "Women for

Dignity and Life." This movement, launched in July 1990, is a very broad-based group. For instance, Women for Dignity and Life is working with a group of professional women teachers, lawyers, doctors and such who participate in workshops and seminars and give talks on specific themes.

LADB: Do women's groups working to legalize or decriminalize abortion exist in El Salvador? SOSA: The women working in this area are fighting for informed choice. Women's groups assert that abortion is not murder as the Church says. Women who choose abortion do so because there is no other choice for them, no other option. They do not feel they can bring another child into the world. They are not going to be able to feed it. That is the most worrisome thing for a mother... Because abortion is illegal most women do it with herbs or pills which provoke a violent abortion. Many of these women become ill and get cancer, and many also die from infections. They are afraid to seek medical assistance because they fear they will be castigated for having had an abortion. There are doctors who don't want to treat a woman who has had an abortion. There is a lot of discrimination and the government doesn't care at all. Our position is that abortions should be available for women who are in difficult situations, and that women are fully capable of deciding for themselves whether or not they can bring another child into the world.

LADB: How does participation in the women's movement differ from participation in other movements such as the labor movement? SOSA: The labor struggle for better salaries, improved working conditions, etc., is a struggle between workers and management. In the feminist struggles, women are fighting at the personal level, they are looking at themselves.

LADB: How then do these women's groups differ from COMADRES? SOSA: COMADRES is an organization of mothers and female relatives of the victims of the war the disappeared, the assassinated, and political prisoners. COMADRES' task is to fight for the rights of the prisoners and for the right to know what happened to the disappeared.

LADB: So the focus is not on the women themselves... SOSA: No, their focus is not feminist. Their task is different, as well as its purpose and underlying philosophy.

LADB: How have over 11 years of war and military repression affected the status of women in El Salvador? SOSA: The family has broken down. A large proportion of mothers, between 40 and 60%, are single, either because their husband or partner died or left them, or because the men are soldiers or rebels fighting in the war. Many sons have fled the country to avoid military recruitment. Also, the extremely high rate of unemployment, 61%, has forced men to leave the country in search of work.

LADB: Has the violence caused women's status to decline at the personal level? SOSA: I think that women's status has improved in the sense that women now feel more capable. They have developed personally. Women now do things that they would not have felt able to do before.

LADB: Because they had to do. SOSA: That's right, because they had to go out in the street. They had never been to a jail or talked to a police officer, but then they had to. They lost their fear. The woman, who before was strictly a housewife and would not leave her house, now she's had to go out in the street and talk to people that she never thought she would talk to.

LADB: Do you think that has caused demands to change, that women now want things they did not want before? SOSA: Yes, they realize they can have many things, but that they have to fight for them. You are not going to be given everything just because it is your right. You have to fight for it. This means that you have to feel you can do it. I observe that most of the women are leaders in their homes and in their communities, not bossy or dominating women, but women who claim their own space. This creates better living conditions, and their boys participate more in household activities.

LADB: Would you say that military violence against women has increased in the rural areas? SOSA: Yes, certainly. Only two months ago we received a report that the army occupied a village and abused the residents. The soldiers used the people as a shield against the guerrillas. They went into the people's houses, and many of the officers raped the village women. Throughout the years, many women have sacrificed themselves in this way to protect their

husbands or sons so that they won't be taken away. And this is part of why the people despise the army. LADB: The resettlement movement began in 1987, when refugees from Mesa Grande began returning to their former communities in Chalatenango and Cabanas departments, despite the fact that the war continued in these areas. Since then, nearly all of the refugees in Honduras have returned. The majority of adults in the refugee population in Honduras and elsewhere were women. Women continue to be the majority of adults in the resettlement communities. Can you address women's roles in the resettlement communities? SOSA: The women have organized into women's committees and often there are more women than men on the community directives. These women have an incredible level of organization. In addition, they have established a set of principles for their communities which demands respect for women and children. If a man violates these principles, the women punish him. This is not to say that these things do not continue to happen, but when they do the man is confronted and severely rebuked. LADB: Does WINDS have any projects with the women in these communities? SOSA: Yes. For example, we are working with a women's committee in Santa Marta. They have a number of projects they are trying to develop. We have received partial funding for a child care center, a clinic and a bakery. LADB: How much do such projects cost? SOSA: The bakery is a small project and costs about \$10,000. We are supporting a child care center in another community, Valle Nuevo, which requires about \$44,000. LADB: I have read that a major literacy campaign was organized in the Honduran camps. Would you say that the educational level of the former refugee women is higher than that of rural women in the areas where they have now resettled? And do you think that this will affect the women's roles in their new communities? SOSA: Their leadership qualities are notable in contrast to the women who never left the countryside. The former refugee women are more active. They participate more in the community. They learned how to read and write in Mesa Grande and Colomoncagua (Honduras) and many of them finished high school (tercer grado). The government views the people in the resettlement communities as FMLN [Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front] supporters, and has militarized their communities and subjected them to constant harassment. Despite all of that, the families continue working, planting their crops, fishing, making crafts to market. These people who have returned to resettle their communities are truly the bravest people confronting the war today.

-- End --