
In Nicaragua, approximately 30% of the combatants in the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) were women. In El Salvador, women made up 40% of the membership of the Farabundo Martí Liberation Front (FMLN), 30% of the combatants, and 20% of the military leaders. In Chiapas, women were about one-third of the combatants of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN). The significant participation of women in these important revolutionary movements presents a fundamental challenge to stereotypical ideas about women in Latin America. Why did so many women join revolutionary movements in these countries? Who were they? How did their experiences as combatants change their lives? Karen Kampwirth provides compelling answers to these questions in this fascinating and well-researched book.

*Women and Guerrilla Movements* explains women’s participation as a conjuncture of macro- and micro-level factors. In straightforward prose, it describes how profound structural changes that occurred in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s affected gender relations and created opportunities for women to mobilize. The advent of export-oriented agriculture that caused mass migration from rural to urban areas split up families and dissolved existing constraints on women’s behavior. Many women gained autonomy when the men in their families left the community to look for work, and many other women migrated themselves. Moving to the cities raised women’s awareness of inequality and facilitated the formation of dense organizational networks. Changes in the Catholic Church and the spread of liberation theology proved particularly radicalizing for women, giving them a language to interpret their situation in political terms and providing them with an organizational home. At the same time, revolutionary organizations switched strategies—from *foco*-oriented military action to mass mobilization—making it easier and more appealing for women to join.
These broad changes affected many women, yet Kampwirth argues that the ones who joined guerrilla groups tended to share a set of four personal characteristics: family traditions of resistance, involvement in social networks, a high level of schooling and, finally, membership in a particular generational cohort. Kampwirth organizes these factors (ideological, organizational, political and personal) in a chart that appears in the introduction and the conclusion. She then builds upon this model and fleshes it out with historical and interview data in each of the four substantive chapters, on Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas and Cuba. The first two chapters add depth and new perspectives to familiar cases. The chapter on Chiapas stands out in relief because it differs so dramatically in terms of timing, strategy and composition of the movement. The Cuba chapter highlights the differences between “Latin America in 1959, when the guerrillas of Cuba’s 26th of July Movement overthrew the Batista dictatorship, and 1979, when the FSLN overthrew the Somoza dictatorship.” The answers highlight the importance of liberation theology and guerrilla strategy.

Kampwirth’s fieldwork is impressive. Over the course of 10 years, she conducted 205 open-ended interviews with activists, “76 in Nicaragua, 69 in El Salvador, 57 in Chiapas and 3 in Cuba” (16). Her interview subjects (all women) were primarily rank and file members of revolutionary movements, whom Kampwirth calls “midprestige women.” Unlike lower-ranking women, women in this group had highly developed organizational skills but, unlike higher-ranking women, were less likely to have been “shielded from the brunt of machismo” by their male compañeros.

This study provides a comprehensive and detailed portrait of female activists, thus redressing a serious imbalance in a literature that focuses primarily on men. The book’s exclusive focus on women means that one can only assess the uniqueness of women’s experiences against secondary accounts, but Kampwirth, admirably, does this herself in an Appendix that reviews the extensive literature on the social origins of Central American guerrillas. One of her most striking findings is that male and female combatants differ significantly in terms of their education, with women far more likely than men to be students at the time they joined. Women combatants were also far more educated than average women: in Nicaragua, 76% of Kampwirth’s subjects had attended “at least some college” (39), compared with only 3.6% of Nicaraguan women overall!

What I find most fascinating about women in revolutionary movements is what happens to women when they take up arms. Several things about this book—Kampwirth’s frequent use of the term “combatants” in the text and the cover photograph of a woman in full combat gear, for example—seem to promise explicit consideration of this issue. Yet I was disappointed to find the issue of
combat itself almost completely absent. The book focuses primarily on women’s reasons for joining the movements, and very little on what they do once they sign up. It may be that this accurately reflects the way in which women recalled their own stories, but even so it warrants some attention on behalf of the author. Kampwirth may address combat more explicitly in a second book she has in the works, “Feminism and Other Revolutionary Legacies.”

The real strength of the book lies in the use of interview data to illustrate broader patterns. The stories people tell will fascinate undergraduate students and academics alike. The book does an excellent job explaining the logic behind each of the factors she includes and spelling out the implications they have for women’s activism. As a theory of revolutionary recruitment, it is perhaps too comprehensive in that it tells us little about what factors do not lead to women’s organizing. In terms of political factors, for example, women’s activism is facilitated both by state repression (in the cases of Nicaragua and El Salvador) and by state cooptation (in the case of Chiapas).

The book is written in a lucid and engaging style. Kampwirth manages to write for experts and novices alike. She defines her terms clearly and takes nothing for granted in terms of what she expects her readers to be familiar with. Kampwirth also engages the existing literature closely, critically assessing the conventional wisdom about women’s participation and revolutionary movements in general.

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In recent years, many writers have examined the foreign interests of Nelson Rockefeller, as well as those of the larger Rockefeller family. How should one view the historic legacy of the Rockefeller family interests abroad? Should one regard Nelson Rockefeller as a self-serving figure, ruthlessly exploiting the Third World and Latin America in order to advance his own narrow business interests? Or, should one see him as an enlightened businessman, generously attempting to lift Latin American countries from poverty? In addressing these questions, scholars have adopted a number of approaches. Some studies, such as Edward Berman’s The Influence of the Carnegie, Ford, and Rockefeller Foundations on American Foreign Policy: The Ideology of Philanthropy,