

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND UES DIALOGUES

“Crimes like rape and incest, especially in the countryside, are rampant. But the biggest issue facing women is their lack of self-esteem, compounded by the fact of the ever-present machismo among men. And the fact that most women are illiterate.”

At 6:45 Thursday morning, Sinclair convened a “power breakfast” to go over the two scheduled sessions for the day. The first, a meeting with Maria Esther Chamorro, a women’s rights activist, would serve as an introduction to issues surrounding the role and status of women in El Salvador. Primarily, this would be an interview session. The second meeting, scheduled for the afternoon at the UES, was more complicated.

“The university people are looking for experimental dialogues,” he said, “and are hoping for more significant academic exchanges at a later date.”

The proposed meetings, set up in three sessions, would investigate four broad areas: anthropology and history, marketing for agricultural cooperatives, alternative media and communication channels, and issues affecting women in education. Members of our group could decide which of the four areas they felt most qualified to discuss. The first session would entail a sharing of concerns; the second session would arise out of the first session; then a third part would be set aside for participants who wanted to draft proposals for a follow-up.

“I tried to define agendas,” Sinclair said, “but I’m not sure what is going to happen. So there’s no pressure to participate in these meetings. I wouldn’t want you to feel that way. Any of the meetings could be cancelled. So this is not something you have to prepare for. If the meetings don’t pan out, there would be no hard feelings.”

Stomach cramps hit with a vengeance soon after breakfast, the result of something I had eaten or drank the night before, so when the group left to meet with Chamorro I stayed behind, hoping to pull myself together for the university sessions in the afternoon.

“No matter how thirsty I am,” Torriera said, “I always put the iodine pills in first, and wait ten minutes, and then take a drink. And so I am not sick.”

Willison, Spence, and myself were supposed to get together with journalism faculty, and before the group left for the morning session, Willison said if I wasn’t feeling better, he could pinch hit for me that afternoon. “I was a journalism major,” he said, “and served as advisor to a high-school newspaper.”

Back upstairs I tried brainstorming ideas to hand over to Willison, but faced questions with no answers. What was the role of the student press in a atmosphere of fear and repression? What about UES students and faculty being jailed? And death squads roaming the streets? Was freedom of the press even on the table?

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The morning session took place at 11 A.M., and covered a far-ranging set of issues facing women in El Salvador, including problems with self-esteem, illiteracy, rape, harassment, children born out of wedlock, and overcoming resistance to change. The session was taped, and later transcribed.

Maria Esther Chamorro Talk

I am very sad that my English is not so good, because I have not spoken very much for a long time. I visited the

United States when I was a little girl, from three to eight years old, in California. I learned the language when I was so little.

I studied in Connecticut, in 1960-1961. I went to Connecticut College for Women in New London, Connecticut, and I was in an exchange student program. Here I have been teaching in many schools. Secondary schools. And I also studied at the International University.

Right now I am involved in a women's project which is called "The Women's Citizens." This is a new project which works with women in the community and helps them defend their rights, and helps them participate in an affirmative way in the new democratic life of the country. It is not possible yet because we are in the planification stage, and a new person is going to come now to start to manage some of the problems.

I am very sad that my English is so bad. Now it is a little bit rusty because I haven't practiced very much. Sometimes when I practice a lot, it is too much like my own language Spanish, because I learned it when I was so little.

I was in the National University in the 1970s. There is a big difference in the National University from 1973 to 1975 and the way it is right now. They had a lot of military intervention, and fighting inside the university. It is very sad what happened.

And right now the new rector is Fabio Castillo. I think he's a good man who can bring back the university to what it was before, several years ago. He's a very strong man. He is really working. He's very strict. And I think that he can really bring back the university, and that is why it needs a lot of support. I want to give support to the university. And I am still thinking of taking part in it because they were my companions years ago, and they gave a lot of their support.

At this point, Torriera mentioned the donation she planned to make to the UES.

“In our department,” she said, “we are getting a brand new language lab. But the one that we have now is Sony equipment in perfect condition. I asked about donating the lab to the University of El Salvador, and was told that that was a good idea. It would be best in that university.”

“That is good,” Chamorro said. “Yes, they must be very happy.”

You know the university had a very good program to qualify their teachers. My husband in 1971 went to England to work in a program of study by the National University. It was a family program, because we went with one child. Now they need a lot of support. That’s why people from here have been connected with them. They have a group of people, national people that will help them. That is why I really want to continue our relations.

The women’s subject is a new subject. It is something that maybe has developed in the last three or four years. Maybe the last two years. Right now we have the commitment to help women in the communities. A lot of organizations come and they give their ideas.

There is a lot of sifting and prioritizing that has to be done. For example, crimes like rape and incest, especially in the countryside, are rampant. But the biggest issue facing women is their lack of self-esteem, compounded by the fact of the ever-present *machismo* among men. And the fact that most women are illiterate.

Another concern is the illegitimate birth rate, and the large percentage of births that take place in the home – either because of lack of money to pay for hospital care, or because of the distrust of hospitals. In general, there is resistance to change on the part of both men and women. But the women’s movement is a popular movement, with strong participation in women’s organizations throughout the country. They are preparing right now for the World Meeting of Latin American Women.

Among the issues Chamorro identified, the central concern, the lack of self-esteem, was the same issue Blanchard alluded to at Dolores Medina. That, plus *machismo* and an ingrained resistance to change, suggested that the struggle for women's rights demanded a nationwide cultural shift that would take years to develop.

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A few days before we left for El Salvador, Reid had received the following letter from Sinclair outlining the proposed UES sessions:

1. *Methodology of Investigative Field Work in Anthropology and History.* They would like to dialogue both about the concepts (what is the notion of anthropology, is it a science, who are the objects of study and what problems that poses, problems of prejudices of the observer, what is the purpose of anthropology) as well as what are the steps in the investigative process. Their interests are much more specific on this session (they gave me a ten-page document!) and are really looking for assistance in designing and implementing a longer training course. They are looking for donations of bibliographic material as well as support for an investigation of repopulated communities. I will go over this more with this group upon your arrival.

2. *Issues of Marketing for Agricultural Cooperatives.* The UES does technical agricultural assistance (irrigation, ag inputs, etc.) for cooperatives but little in terms of theories of finance and marketing for cooperatives. Their interest would be both about domestic markets as well as international markets. Again, they ask for more of a methodology of investigation, the steps on how they should investigate and learn, rather than compress complex theories into a short session.

3. *Developing Alternative Media and Communication Channels.* I did not meet with anyone from this group, but I imagine their concerns are with teaching journalism, photography, and video in a university setting under grave limitations (lack of equipment, lack of freedom of press). Their interests would be not only technical but also theoretical: how to use the media to open political space, the tension between advocacy reporting and objectivity, what political pluralism means within media.

4. *Issues Affecting Women in Education.* Again, I did not meet with anyone from this group, but their concerns were relayed to me. Our counterpart will be MUES [Women from the University of El Salvador]. They are very interested in learning about the struggle in the U.S. to have “Women’s Issues” become a curriculum of study in a university setting. They also are interested in developing a “University for Rural Women” to educate women on domestic production, nutrition, literacy, political organizing.

“Please,” Sinclair insisted before the group left the hotel, “do not get anxious about this. These are not formal sessions. Rather they are an attempt to bring academics together from different backgrounds to share their mutual interests.”

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The reviews on the afternoon UES sessions were mixed. Two of the first round meetings proved fruitful, while the other two ran into difficulties. Locating people, finding places to meet, then responding to the specific needs of the faculty was a struggle.

Ventura’s group asked for specific information about farming cooperatives. But since he was not an authority in that field, he said he could speak only in general terms. Willison was prepared to talk about journalism and Spence thought she would be discussing film

theory and history. Instead the media profs talked about their lack of equipment and lack of editing experience, and wanted instruction on pulling together extensive collections of raw footage of the civil war. In an attempt to salvage the meeting, Spence agreed to ask Professor Rebecca Abbott, an experimental film-maker at SHU, if she would be willing to travel to El Salvador to help make sense of the wartime footage.

The "Women's Issues" meeting, attended by Kempton, Bertsch, and Sacco, met with better success. Their session held with medical and science personnel covered a broad range of topics, including enhancing the status of women and developing women's consciousness.

"You begin within yourself," said Bertsch on the latter topic, "developing a sense of your own inner worth and well-being."

As a result of this meeting, the UES women forwarded papers they had developed to the hotel for Kempton, Bertsch, and Sacco to review and comment on.

After dinner that night at the *Café de Don Pedro*, the restaurant we visited on our first night in San Salvador, the main topic was the next day's trip to Morazán and Segundo Montes City. For security purposes, we'd be traveling in two vans.

"It will be at least a four-hour trip if all goes well," Sinclair warned. "The bad news is the closer we get to our destination, the roads will be in poor shape because of past military clashes. The good news is we'll make pit stops along the way."

With several of us under the weather – Reid recovering from stomach cramps, I feeling so-so, Barker and Willison beginning to feel sick, and Bertsch's back acting up – driving to Morazán cooped up in vans for hours was not an appealing prospect. But no one wanted to stay behind.

"I wasn't able to visit Morazán before because of the fighting," Sinclair said. "We'll be based in the community, and you can expect other international visitors staying there. There will be no running water, and no electricity where we'll be staying, and we'll be housed in dorms. But the shower facilities are better," he said, grinning. "You'll have a bucket of water to throw on your heads."

Also, he mentioned that Chester Wickwire, the retired professor from Johns Hopkins we met earlier, might hitch a ride with us.

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By 11 o'clock the next morning we piled our gear in the lobby, about as ready as we could be for the junket to Morazán. Joining us, his crutches leaning against the lobby desk, Chester Wickwire stood arms folded across his chest, an embroidered shoulder bag draped over his hip, a small black EMS container hanging from his neck, wearing a cap with the insignia "This Old House WGBH."

"I've led several groups down here over the years," he said, sitting on the lobby sofa. "The Faculty for Human Rights in El Salvador is a network of academics. From 1979 we brought lawyers, doctors, and professors, especially to El Salvador in the beginning of the war. I have been going to Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Honduras. We tried to speak to people in business, the military, and economics."

"Sounds like what our group is trying to do."

"Yes. Very much. I come down here an average of three or four times a year. Basically we've tried to help political prisoners, the professors and teachers who have been thrown in jail. We were pretty effective in helping people. We worked with Congress, trying to get some changes in our government's stances on Central America. We've been pretty bad down here. I also worked in Nicaragua, taking Somoza and introducing him to Congress. And then we've done some TV shows back in the U.S."

"Maybe you could talk to us about what we should be doing when we return to the states," I said. "Part of the reason for our trip is for us to become more effective lobbyists supporting peace initiatives and human rights in El Salvador."

"I'll be happy to share ideas with you."

At that point Sinclair was explaining why we were traveling in two vans. "We're driving into the mountainous northeastern sector of the country. The two vans are for security reasons and comfort."

After the war, he said, even with the accords in place, the countryside was dangerous. Precautions had to be taken. The familiar mantra was, "Stick together, watch for anything suspicious, and don't draw attention to yourselves."

Meanwhile McAllister scanned the lead story in the San Salvador daily paper linking a Sandinista arsenal of munitions with the FMLN.

"It's not quite clear whether they discovered these arms here in El Salvador or in Nicaragua," he said. "The government forces discovered an underground cache of arms for roughly four hundred men in the house of FMLN leaders in Nicaragua."