

# EL SALVADOR: HOPE BLOOMS IN THE WEDGE BETWEEN WAR AND GLOBAL CAPITALISM

Cases in Hope  
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By Patrice Flynn  
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Travel and work in Mexico, South America, Europe, the Balkans, Africa, Arabia, India, and Indonesia did not prepare me for what I saw in El Salvador in 2005. I returned to the United States heartened by the power of solidarity and community building but disheartened by the short-term prospects for Salvadorans. Upon reflection, the beauty and brilliance of **Salvadoran Enterprises for Women** hit home. Let me explain . . .

Salvador is a small Central American country that sits at the southern end of the ancient Mayan empire with 6.6 million people, a \$31 billion economy, and a poverty rate of 48 percent. Salvadorans are beautiful, quiet, kind folk who are rich in joy, hope, spirit, and humor.

The nation recently emerged from a war ignited in 1968 when the Roman Catholic Church took the bold step to adopt Paolo Freire's preferential option for the poor. Many of the nuns and priests who initially implemented the policy and set up schools for the compesinas were discouraged, harmed, and brutally killed, including Archbishop Oscar Romero. The ravages of war are sobering: maimed faces, lost limbs, emotional heartache, decimated villages, displaced persons, and armed guards. Everyone has a story to tell about the war.

Today, Salvador faces the worst elements of global capitalism. Hundreds of thousands of Salvadorans leave the countryside to work in maquilas (factories) to earn \$143 a month; highways connecting raw materials with

factories pave over forests and farms; Esso, Shell and Texaco stations fuel cars that crowd noisy, polluted towns; mega malls encourage material consumption and personal debt; more than 200 young people leave the country each day in search of passage northbound; \$2.5 billion was wired to Salvador last year by family members seeking their fortunes in the United States.

Moreover, the 1993 Peace Accords provided carte blanche for the U.S. to continue managing Central American policy through El Salvador, including control of government buildings and airstrips. In 2001, the Washington Consensus convinced the government of El Salvador to give up their sovereign right to set monetary policy by adopting the U.S. dollar as its official currency. In January of 2005, U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld recommended that the Pentagon adopt the "Salvadoran Option" to train Iraqi nationalists in death squad techniques to hunt down and kill rebel leaders and sympathizers. Salvadoran men are recruited to fight in Iraq. Salvador has become a U.S. military territory without the privileges of statehood.

### *Hope*

Despite the disheartening reality in El Salvador today, I returned heartened by the power of solidarity and community building through civil society. It is no wonder that Sr. Anne Marie Gardiner and the School Sisters of Notre Dame focus on the lives of a few people in need of life's basics: food, water, shelter, employment, and pride.

**Salvadoran Enterprises for Women** is a wonderful new venture that helps women earn a little money to feed their children. Projects include sewing, candle and tile making, medicinal herb production, and chicken raising. Products are made and sold locally to ensure that the money stays in the communities where it is most needed. While developing specific skills, women also learn to work with their neighbors to improve the quality of life for everyone. Self-esteem grows as each woman is reminded that she is valuable and important to her village. Children's horizons broaden as they watch their mothers bloom. Villages take new pride in their future.

A gift of \$7 buys a plastic mold that enables a group of women to make ceramic tiles for roof tops. A gift of \$1,500 buys a water pump that brings life and refreshment to a village. It doesn't take a lot of money to help these women regain their footing. Sr. Anne Marie and her colleagues stretch every dollar to make sure donations are used wisely. Careful planning precedes the funding of each project. In many cases, the whole village is consulted and supportive, which is why projects tend to sustain themselves through thick and thin. Each gift is gratefully accepted.

When women learn, the whole community benefits. When you give, families in El Salvador benefit directly. You have my personal assurance . . . along with my hope for the future.

**Contact Information:**

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Patrice is an economist and social worker who serves on the board of Salvadoran Enterprises for Women. Patrice teaches, researches, and writes about civil society, global capitalism, and alternative economics. She lives in the Harpers Ferry National Historical Park in West Virginia. In January of 2005, Patrice was a guest of Leslie Schuld, the founding director of the Center for Exchange and Solidarity, which is the home base for Salvadoran Enterprises for Women in San Salvador.

***Cases in Hope Briefings***

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