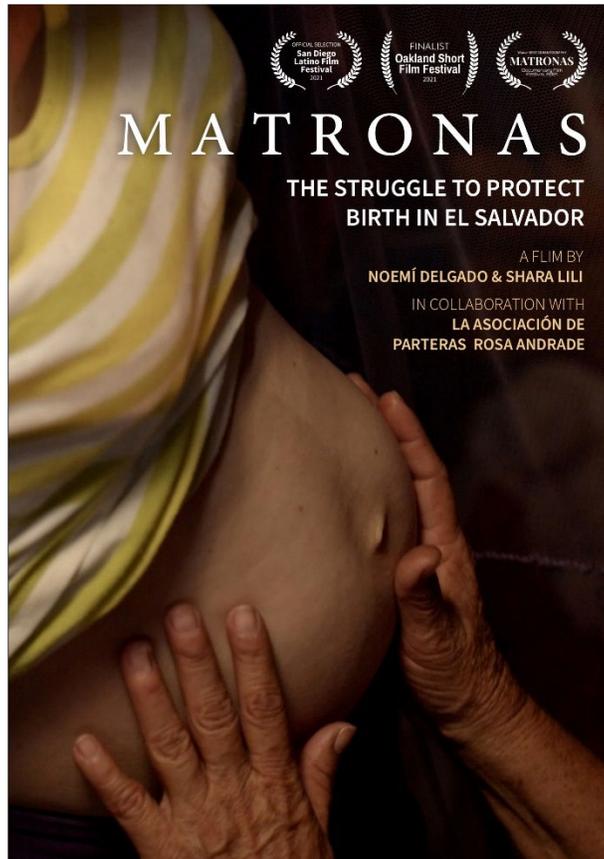




MATRONAS



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Matronas

Salvadoran midwives, who delivered babies even during the Civil War, now fight to protect their ancestral role in the face of government repression. As people in El Salvador lose their right to give birth at home, dehumanizing hospital experiences become the standard way of ushering life into the world. The caretaking traditions of these midwives are at risk of being lost to future generations.

About El Salvador

El Salvador is the smallest country in Central America, and one of the most densely populated. It borders Guatemala, Honduras, and the North Pacific Ocean. Its capital city is San Salvador. It has a population of about six and a half million people. The country was a Spanish colony from 1528 until 1821. After that, it was briefly part of the Federal Republic of Central America, until it finally achieved full independence in 1841. Today, El Salvador has a democratic government, with a president and a legislative assembly.



El Salvador is mountainous, with a number of volcanoes across the center of the country. It also experiences a large number of destructive earthquakes. For example, in 2001, it was struck by both a 7.7 magnitude earthquake, and a 6.6 earthquake only a month later, which killed hundreds of people, left tens of thousands homeless, and caused billions of dollars in damage.

The country also has a high level of crime and violence, with widespread criminal gang activity. The Borgen Project explains, “Most of the crime committed is gang-related and, with the involvement of an estimated 60,000 members, gangs run rampant in practically every

community.”¹ Many El Salvadorians migrate to other countries, including the United States, in an attempt to escape that crime and violence.

The CIA World Factbook lists El Salvador’s maternal mortality rate at 46 deaths per 100,000 live births, ranking it 95th out of 184 countries in the world, and its infant mortality rate at 12.38 deaths per 1,000 live births, which is a ranking of 118 out of 227 countries.²

Civil War

The El Salvador civil war began in 1979. It was between a left-wing guerrilla group called the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), and the government of El Salvador, which was led by a right-wing military group. El Salvador’s government was backed by the United States.

There was widespread violence throughout the country during the war. According to the Center for Justice & Accountability, “Throughout the 1980s, the war between government, guerilla and paramilitary forces continued to produce systematic human rights violations, subjecting civilians to torture, mutilation, forced disappearance, extrajudicial killing and mass rape. Some 75,000 Salvadorans were killed by massacres, summary executions, landmines and indiscriminate bombing.”³ The CIA estimates that 75,000 people died during that time.⁴ The war ended in 1992 with the signing of peace accords mediated by the United Nations.

Midwives

A midwife—or *partera* in Spanish—is a person trained to help women in pregnancy and during and after childbirth. Some midwives have formal training, but others are trained more informally, for example through apprenticeships. In addition to helping with pregnancy, midwives often help women with all aspects of their overall reproductive health, including family planning and breast cancer screening. Frances McConville is a midwifery expert at the World Health Organization, and she explains that most midwives have a very strong personal connection to what they do. “These workers are proud to be midwives,” she says, “You don’t go into midwifery if you don’t want to help other women. There is an element of love here. We are clinicians, but this is about loving and caring for other women, their babies and their families at a very special time in their lives.”⁵

¹ Samantha Decker, “5 Facts About Poverty in El Salvador,” *The Borgen Project*, June 26, 2020.

<https://borgenproject.org/5-facts-about-poverty-in-el-salvador/>

² CIA World Factbook, “El Salvador,” updated June 14, 2021. <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/el-salvador/>

³ The Center for Justice & Accountability, “El Salvador,” no date. <https://cja.org/where-we-work/el-salvador/>

⁴ CIA World Factbook, “El Salvador,” updated June 14, 2021. <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/el-salvador/>

⁵ Quoted in Bulletin of the World Health Organization, “More Midwives Needed to Improve Maternal and Newborn Survival,” 2013. <https://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/91/11/13-021113.pdf>



In addition to looking after women's health, in many parts of the world midwives provide numerous other important services within the community; services that are often not being provided by the government. Midwife Marie Lynne Tyndall explains some of the many different roles of the midwife. She says, "They look after sick children; they clean and suture machete wounds; they teach family planning methods and give out condoms; they lend a hand to women enduring domestic violence; they support adolescent girls who find themselves pregnant; and they find food for hungry families. Around their kitchen tables, stories are told, advice is sought and given out, and hearts are mended."⁶ During El Salvador's civil war, all of these services were in even greater demand because even in places where health care facilities existed, most people were unable to travel to them. Tyndall explains, "The people of El Salvador lived under a state of siege and no one dared travel to a hospital; they were filled with war victims and the risks of traveling from the countryside to the city were too great."⁷

There is widespread evidence that when midwives help women throughout their pregnancies, there are usually less complications overall. Petra ten Hoop-Bender is director for reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health at the Instituto de Cooperación Social Integreab in Spain. She explains that women who see a midwife throughout their pregnancies are more likely to have a pregnancy without complications. She says, "When midwifery is in place, there is much less need for emergency interventions because problems requiring prompt attention are managed or referred before they become a life-threatening complication."⁸

⁶ Marie Lynne Tyndall, "Stories of Extraordinary Central American Midwives," *Midwifery Today*, Autumn 2019. <https://midwiferytoday.com/mt-articles/stories-of-extraordinary-central-american-midwives/>

⁷ Marie Lynne Tyndall, "Stories of Extraordinary Central American Midwives," *Midwifery Today*, Autumn 2019. <https://midwiferytoday.com/mt-articles/stories-of-extraordinary-central-american-midwives/>

⁸ Quoted in Bulletin of the World Health Organization, "More Midwives Needed to Improve Maternal and Newborn Survival," 2013. <https://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/91/11/13-021113.pdf>

Violence Against Women in El Salvador

Violence against women is a serious problem in El Salvador. According to the United Nations, the country has one of the highest rates of violent deaths for women worldwide. It reports, “The violent death rate for women in El Salvador is 13.49 for every 100,000 women, one of the highest in the world, according to data from the National Civil Police.” Overall, it says, “According to the National Survey of Violence against Women 2017, 67 out of every hundred Salvadorans over 15 years of age have suffered some type of violence throughout their lives, but only 6% report it, while the rest do not do so because of fear, out of shame, or because they thought they wouldn't believe them.”⁹

Much of this violence against women goes unnoticed and unpunished. In 2018, filmmaker Almudena Toral travelled to El Salvador to help document the situation for TIME and Univision News. She reports that violence in general is so common in El Salvador that most people there don't even notice it how much violence against women there is. “El Salvador is a country with so much gang violence, so much brutality, so many murders, that nobody pays attention to violence against women,” she says, “It's invisible in this huge ocean of violence.”¹⁰

Abortion in El Salvador

In 1998, El Salvador completely banned abortion. This includes cases where the life of the pregnant woman is at risk, or where the pregnancy was the result of incest or rape. Under the ban, women can be convicted of homicide not only for having an abortion, but also for a miscarriage or other emergency where the fetus dies. Amnesty International gives an example. It says, “Evelyn Beatriz was admitted to a health center in Cojutepeque, north of San Salvador, on April 6, 2016 after she fainted at home. She was in labor but unaware she was pregnant. Local organizations say Evelyn had been raped months earlier but that she had not reported it to the authorities due to fear.” According to Amnesty International, “Staff at the hospital reported Evelyn to the authorities. She was taken to court and on July 5, 2017, was sentenced to 30 years in jail for an ‘aggravated homicide.’”¹¹

El Salvador's ban on abortion is one of the strictest abortion laws in the world and is widely criticized as a violation of women's rights. The Citizen's Coalition for the Decriminalization of Abortion on Grounds of Health, Ethics and Fetal Anomaly explains exactly how it violates the rights of women, stating, “The criminalization of abortion . . . has deprived all women of their freedom to decide about their own bodies.” It says, “We may ask ourselves . . . whose freedom is being respected if a woman faces serious risks to her health and to her life from a complicated pregnancy, and she is not allowed to ask that her life should be saved rather than continue with

⁹ <https://news.un.org/es/story/2018/04/1431372>

¹⁰ Quoted in Ciara Nugent, “Violence Against Women in El Salvador Is Driving Them to Suicide — Or to the U.S. Border,” *Time*, May 14, 2019. <https://time.com/5582894/gender-violence-women-el-salvador/>

¹¹ Amnesty International, “El Salvador Rape Survivor Sentenced to 30 Years in Jail Under Extreme Anti-Abortion Law,” July 6, 2017. <https://www.amnestyusa.org/press-releases/el-salvador-rape-survivor-sentenced-to-30-years-in-jail-under-extreme-anti-abortion-law/>

the pregnancy. In El Salvador, in these cases, women are considered to be morally incapable of making such a decision, which denies them their status as human beings and violates their right to life – as granted in the Constitution of El Salvador.”¹²

Midwifery in El Salvador

In 2011, the government passed another law impacting women’s reproductive rights. Under the “National Strategic Plan for the Reduction of Maternal, Perinatal, and Neonatal Mortality,” it mandated that all births take place in the hospital. This means that women are no longer allowed to give birth at home under the care of a midwife. Noemí Delgado, who is a doula and health educator living between California and El Salvador, explains that the government has a number of reasons for wanting to control the way women give birth in El Salvador. She says, “The state has a vested interest in birth: reporting low maternal mortality statistics qualifies El Salvador for ‘aid’ and monitoring pregnant people makes it easier to criminalize abortions.” She says, “Suppressing partería is the government’s way of commanding birthing bodies under the guise of protecting them.”¹³

Despite pervasive violence and severe laws restricting their reproductive freedom, midwives and women throughout El Salvador continue to fight for their rights. They are supported by many organizations and individuals in other countries throughout the world.



¹² Citizen’s Coalition for the Decriminalization of Abortion on Grounds of Health, Ethics and Fetal Anomaly, El Salvador, “From Hospital to Jail: The Impact on Women of El Salvador’s Total Criminalization of Abortion,” *Reproductive Health Matters*, December 30, 2014. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1016/S0968-8080%2814%2944797-9>

¹³ Noemí Delgado, “Territory of the Moon Not the State,” *ATM Magazine*, <https://www.atm-magazine.com/issue-1-wicked/territory-of-the-moon-not-the-state>

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