


Original article

The evolution of nursing in El Salvador: life stories
La evolución de la enfermería en El Salvador: historias de vida
A evolução da enfermagem em El Salvador: histórias de vida


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Abstract

Nursing professionalization in El Salvador has experienced various facets and obstacles throughout history until it has been recognized as a profession. The purpose of this article was to develop a

historical perspective of the evolution of nursing in El Salvador based on the experiences and life stories of long-time professionals. The research was qualitative, using life stories as a reference. Data were obtained through document analysis and semi-structured interviews with five nursing professionals with more than 50 years of service, considered a reference in the field at the national level. In El Salvador, the nursing history category was identified with the following subcategories: the empirical phase from 1902 to 1918, the professional phase from 1918 to 1954, the technical phase from 1958 to 1984, and the professional phase from 1994 to the present. Conclusions: The nursing profession in El Salvador emerged with the support of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul in 1924, and since then it has undergone significant changes by the educational system itself and the Ministry of Health to improve as a profession.

Keywords: historical context, evolutionary phases, nurses, nursing professionalization.

Resumen

La profesionalización de enfermería a lo largo de la historia en El Salvador ha tenido diferentes facetas y obstáculos hasta reconocerse en la actualidad como una profesión. El presente artículo tuvo por objetivo construir una perspectiva de la evolución histórica de la enfermería en El Salvador, sobre la base de las experiencias y vivencias de profesionales de larga trayectoria. La investigación fue cualitativa, tomándose como referencia las historias de vida. Los datos se obtuvieron mediante el análisis documental y entrevistas semiestructuradas realizadas a cinco profesionales de la enfermería con más de 50 años de servicio, quienes son referentes en esta área a nivel nacional. Se identificó la categoría *historia de enfermería en El Salvador*, con las subcategorías: etapa empírica de 1902 a 1918; etapa vocacional de 1918 a 1954; etapa técnica de 1958 a 1984; y la etapa profesional desde 1994 hasta la actualidad. Conclusiones: La profesión de enfermería en El Salvador surge con el apoyo de las religiosas Hermanas de la Caridad de San Vicente de Paul, en el año de 1924, y desde entonces, ha experimentado transformaciones significativas desde el propio sistema educativo y el Ministerio de Salud para perfeccionarse como profesión.

Palabras clave: contexto histórico, etapas evolutivas, enfermeras, profesionalización de la enfermería.

Resumo

A profissionalização da enfermagem ao longo da história em El Salvador teve diferentes facetas e obstáculos para ser reconhecida hoje como profissão. O objetivo deste trabalho foi construir uma perspectiva da evolução histórica da enfermagem em El Salvador, com base nas experiências e vivências de profissionais de longa data. A pesquisa foi qualitativa, tendo como referência as histórias de vida, os dados foram obtidos por meio de análise documental e entrevistas semiestruturadas realizadas com cinco profissionais de enfermagem com mais de 50 anos de atuação, consideradas referências da área. A categoria história da enfermagem foi identificada em El Salvador, com as seguintes subcategorias: fase empírica de 1902 a 1918; estágio vocacional de 1918 a 1954; estágio técnico de 1958 a 1984; e o estágio profissional de 1994 até o presente. Conclusões: A profissão de enfermagem em El Salvador surge com o apoio das religiosas Irmãs de Caridade de San Vicente de Paulo, no ano de 1924, e desde então vem sofrendo transformações significativa do próprio sistema educacional e do Ministério da Saúde para melhorar como profissão.

Palavras-chave: contexto histórico, etapas evolutivas, enfermeiras, profissionalização da enfermagem, enfermagem.

Introduction

It is known that nursing has its origins in the rise of Christianity when the care of the sick began to be entrusted to the lower classes. Those who had the devotion to serve provided care to socially marginalized individuals, such as prisoners, lepers, or those afflicted with the plague, among others (Moreno *et al.*, 2017). According to Hernández *et al.* (1997), nursing has been described as a trade since ancient times. However, it was not until the 20th century that it began to be recognized as a profession, gaining a higher degree of autonomy and professional consolidation.

The history of nursing is better documented in terms of its development in Europe and the United States, vaguely covering the progress of this profession in Central American countries. Therefore, studying the history of nursing in El Salvador is essential to understand its current healthcare system, the historical contributions of the profession to its development, areas in need of improvement, and to recognize how it has served as inspiration and learning for different generations.

With the purpose of providing a perspective on the historical evolution of nursing in El Salvador, based on the experiences and life stories of long-standing professionals, a qualitative, cross-sectional study was conducted. The methodological design followed the life histories approach. Due to its scope, the study was exploratory, as it sought to inquire about the historical evolution of nursing in El Salvador and advancements in the understanding of the profession, without manipulating the variables under study.

The universe was composed of nursing professionals in El Salvador. The population included people with a well-known background and sufficient information on the evolution of nursing in the country. The sample was theoretical, non-probabilistic, intentional, addressed to typical individuals classified as key informants. A total of five nursing professionals with over 40 years of service at the public and private levels were involved.

The data was collected through the interviews and documentary analysis of evidence technique regarding the historical processes of nursing in El Salvador. The defined subcategories were interpreted and depicted through verbatim quotes from the statements given by the five interviewed professionals. Their excerpts have been identified under the following structure; for example, Interview with Sister Elba.

The study was approved by the ethics committee of the *Instituto Especializado de Profesionales de la Salud*, which approved the study after a rigorous review and analysis.

Development

Life histories: the evolution of nursing from the point of view of its stakeholders.

The interviews conducted with the five nurses who have worked in nursing in El Salvador for more than 40 years revealed that the historical development of nursing in the country was influenced by the Order of the "Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul," in which the figure of Sister Maria Teresa Lang emerged as a pioneer of nursing at the national level. She fought for the introduction of nursing as a profession. The first to take up this work were women who worked in cleaning and food preparation in the old Rosales Hospital.

The National School of Santa Ana and the National School of Rosales Hospital were founded by the Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul. The school at Rosales Hospital was founded in 1924 when our congregation cared for the patients of that hospital. Sister María Teresa Lang, a sister from Costa Rica, gathered a group of "Daughters of Mary" who worked in the kitchen and cleaning services of the hospital but showed great interest in helping others. They actively participated in the direct care of hospitalized patients, and from that year on, these young women began to interrupt their work to take shifts in the hospital services. (Interview with Sister Elba)

In addition to the fact that the first women undertaking these activities did not have a basic level of education for that time, their maintenance and training process relied on the support and assistance provided by the medical and administrative staff of the hospital, as well as the public who wished to support the new concept of the nursing school. This phase or period can be classified as the *vocational phase* of nursing professional development since the only requirement to enter this school was the vocation to serve others.

As a result of the need identified by the Sisters of Charity to have human resources that would provide care and undertake procedures, the professionalization of this career started. Doctors from Rosales Hospital, administrators, and individuals contributed financially to the nursing school. With this group of people, the nursing profession in El Salvador began laying the foundation for its professionalism.

The first individuals trained to work as nurses did not know how to read or write, but the human professionalism of the Sisters of Charity took on the task of teaching them to read and write. This group of nursing professionals later became pioneers in the development of this profession. (Interview with Sister Elba).

The first nursing graduates were seven who had completed three years of study. The methodology at that time was based on delivering theoretical lectures during the morning, while in the afternoons, students would attend to the care of patients at the Rosales Hospital. This educational program was approved by the government in 1928, thanks to the support of two American nursing professionals. The weaknesses of the health system at that time were evident in the limited efforts to sustain the professionalization of the nursing career. Consequently, when the support from foreign nurses was withdrawn, the project was discontinued, and the school was subsequently closed.

Miss Margarita Zaldívar, along with two American nurses, attempted to organize the school and develop a curriculum approved by the government, thus establishing three years of study. In 1928, seven young women successfully graduated and became pioneers in this field. It is worth recalling their names: Leonor Láñez, Cecilia Contreras, Julia Contreras, Jerónima Najarro, Carlota Rivera, Eulalia Chávez, and María Chávez.

After that graduation, the nursing professionals who had come from the United States left the country, and Miss Zaldívar resigned from her position. In 1932, Miss Vidal was appointed as the director and restructured the school until 1987, when there began a gradual closure of the schools by Engineer José Napoleón Duarte, the President of the Republic, and the Ministry of Health under the leadership of Dr. Benjamín Valdez. (Interview with Sister Elba).

The underappreciation and demeaning of nursing and the professionals who practice it is a deeply rooted social image that is very challenging to change, even today, compared to other professions. This is because nursing is often associated with lower social classes, individuals considered "illiterate," or those perceived as lacking intellectual capacity.

There was opposition from my mother, father, older brother, and sister for me to study nursing, as they would often speak ill of nursing professionals. They said that these professionals never achieved anything and were merely servants for doctors. (Interview with Gilma Blandón de Grimaldi)

“The requirements for admission during that time were quite simple, as they sought young individuals with good intentions from a rural background” (Interview with Sister Elba).

When Sister María Teresa Lang started this profession, the requirements at the hospital were that the girls working in cleaning and kitchen duties showed attitudes of service and humanism and that they were physically fit, meaning they had no missing limbs, hands, or vision issues. Sister María Teresa, who had come from Costa Rica, gathered a group of these girls and, together with Dr. Vilanova, started working to train the first professionals in the field. (Interview with Edith de Palencia)

It is clear the strengthening of nursing professionalization in El Salvador was initially driven by religious organizations, who later transferred control to the Ministry of Health and the government of that time:

The National School of Santa Ana was founded by Monsignor José López Sandoval, followed by the Sisters of Charity, who arrived to provide support. These sisters had already been working at the National Hospital of Santa Ana. Their names were Sister Clotilde Kelly Chile (of French origin) and Sister María Antonieta Iriarte.

Starting in 1978, the Sisters of Charity handed over the leadership of nursing schools to the Ministry of Health while continuing to hold various positions themselves. Some of them became lecturers, and others were responsible for cleaning or in charge of laundry. From the 1980s onwards, secular directors were appointed in nursing schools. (Interview with Sister Elba)

It can be affirmed that the *technical phase* of professionalization of the nursing career began in the 1970s, when more defined structures were established regarding the training of these professionals.

At that time, applicants were already required to be able to read and write, among other skills. In addition, it was noted that the training was very demanding, as almost 70% of the students enrolled did not complete the career.

Since the 1970s, the professionalization of nursing has become more evident. There were already nursing assistant schools and graduate nurses. During that time, the Ministry of Health granted full scholarships to study nursing, and schools had boarding facilities. The purpose of this arrangement was to have the students' services available at any time.

As a result of this scholarship program, the requirements for those who wanted to study this profession became even higher. Young women who were 18 years old were eligible to apply. The level of education had to be basic and the required criteria had to be met. Good results in the entrance exams were required for enrollment. During this period, about 300 to 400 young women applied, but only 60 were selected. Of these 60, there were dropouts during the three years of training because they did not have the prerequisites to become nurses. Additionally, intellectual ability was assessed through an oral examination, and those who did not pass were not included in this selected group. (Interview with Nurse Elba)

Academic requirements during that time were high. There was a strong determination to work with human beings, emphasizing values, principles, and good physical and mental health. Additionally, a minimum height of 1.50 cm was required. It was considered that individuals shorter than 1.50 cm did not possess the capacity to handle and mobilize patients. (Interview with María Santiago)

This was a three-year study program. The first year consisted of an observation period in which, within the first three months, those who did not perform well or found that the profession was not for them had to either leave voluntarily or be expelled if they did not pass the courses. The program included three years of study and one year of community service. Of the 60 people who managed to attend, only 40 graduated. (Interview with Ana Vilma de Aguilar)

Initially, those interested in becoming nurses were paid a small salary, but a significant one for the time. This was to motivate young women to learn this profession. On the other hand, it is worth noting that this profession was only open to people with few economic resources.

In the first year, students received 10 colones per month, in the second year 15 colones per month, and the third year 20 colones per month. This allowance was to cover the cost of personal hygiene and cleaning since the scholarship included accommodation within the nursing school. They even provided the fabric and sewing for the uniform. These young women were already considered to be part of the Ministry of Health. They spent about three months at the school receiving theoretical lectures and then were distributed to Rosales and Santa Ana hospitals, where they worked in the medical and surgical departments, taking care of patients, but still as students. (Interview with Ana Vilma de Aguilar)

I was a student at the National School of Nursing in 1958. I had a job at the school, and they paid me a salary of 10 colones the first year, 15 colones the second year, and 20 colones the third year. I was lucky enough to get a scholarship to the third National School of Nursing, which was located where the Ministry of Health laboratory is now. It was the third school that the Ministry had established and eventually closed. I entered the National School of Nursing in 1957 at the age of 17, although the age of 18 was mandatory. Therefore, those who decided to enter the National School of Nursing had to wait until they were 18 years old. The reason for this was that once you reached adulthood, you were considered more mature. When I was about to turn 18, I registered for the exams to see if I would get the scholarship and be admitted. (Interview with Edith Palencia).

From its beginnings, nursing was comprehensive. It included caring for people in their health, nutrition, and housing situations. As many of these professionals worked in the community, they traveled on horses or mules to reach hard-to-reach areas of the country. Their goal was critical: to improve health in El Salvador. Thanks to these efforts, the level of malnutrition among children under the age of 5 was reduced, nutrition education was provided to the population, and support was given to the construction of adequate housing to prevent the spread of disease.

I loved visiting the rural communities because Lidia Oliva was one of the first public health nurses. The nursing school was in Cojutepeque, where they specialized exclusively in community health, because Ms. Olivia had graduated from there and was serving the whole country. So Olivia arrived and said to me, "You have no idea of a big surprise, the mayor, the governor and the entire population will be at the market, but I lacked a control plan, and these were the visits to rural communities that I had always dreamed of." We built "huts" with bamboo poles and pieces of wood as dividers, just as she had taught us. And when I returned, we would cook a *chipilín* soup with different wild plants adding an egg and leaves from the *mora* bushes.

In the same place, we gave a nutrition course, but when I returned to the health center, I was transported on the back of a horse or mule. This resulted in the women's buttocks being filled with wild beans, which the doctor did not like very much. So he told me that he would forbid the visits. Without hesitation, I told Olivia that I was carrying out my plan and fulfilling my project, and the results were visible: the patients were better, they were gaining weight, and there were separations in the houses.

So I told him, "I'm really sorry, but I'm not going to give up even if they kill me, I'm going to keep doing it." And so I went on and took care of one hundred and twenty-five households that eventually had "huts," and I didn't do it myself, they did it. They learned to make *chipilín* soup with little tortillas, and it was really delicious. We ate a meal with two hot tortillas, and they also brought fresh milk and taught me how to make cheese. But when I visited patients in the community, when I visited patients in the city, my mother always prepared to wait for me. (Interview with Gilma Blandón de Grimaldi)

Nursing has always been a profession that requires discipline to develop its activities. Health care is a complex profession, and for this reason, even in ancient times, those who wanted to practice it had to have a clean appearance and have the appropriate and necessary work equipment to provide the necessary care to patients. This practice is still followed today, as students are checked for their uniform, suitcase with the necessary supplies and equipment to clean or bathe patients in bed before entering clinical practice.

The bell rang at 5:00 am to wake us up, because we had to be awake. At 6:00 we had to be in the dining hall, and at 7:00 we had to line up to have our equipment checked before we went to the hospital. Even our shoelaces were checked for cleanliness, and our uniforms were checked for neatness and ironing. Those who did not meet the requirements had to stay in the clinic because we had a clinic for everyone who got sick. (Interview with María Santiaga)

Historical synthesis of nursing in El Salvador: data triangulation

The results of the study allowed the identification of five phases in the historical evolution of the professionalization of nursing, named as follows: *empirical phase* (1902 to 1918), *professional phase* (1918 to 1954), *technical phase* (1958 to 1984), *inclusion of men in the nursing profession* (1984 to 1993), and *professional phase* (1994 to the present). These phases coincide with those described in the evolution of nursing at the Latin American and international levels (Group of Professional Nurses of Central America and the Caribbean, 2000; Martínez & Chamorro, 2017).

The life stories collected during the study confirm Palencia's (2020) statement that the nursing profession emerged in El Salvador with the support of the Religious Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul in 1924, with Sister María Teresa Lang as its precursor. It has been noted that the first women associated with this movement worked at the Rosales Hospital and received training to help doctors feed, bathe, and sanitize patients (El Salvador, Ministry of Health, 2015; Torres de Guadrón, 2019).

The Ministry of Health of El Salvador (2015) reports that the Santa Ana National School was founded in 1950 under the direction of Sister María Cecilia Arias. The school in San Salvador was directed by Lic. Zoila Fuentes. Until 1978, these schools were led by the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, then they were led by lay nurses, marking the beginning of the empirical phase of the nursing profession.

According to the information gathered, the following events are considered the most important: a) the founding of San Patricio Hospital, now known as Rosales Hospital; b) the influence of the

Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul; c) the emergence of the Midwifery School; and d) the emergence of the work of Sister María Teresa Lang.

It is significant that despite the founding of the San Patricio Hospital and Chapel in 1807, there are no records of nursing until that time. The first records date back to 1852, when patients were already being cared for by privates and soldiers.

In 1902, the Rosales Hospital was inaugurated, marking the beginning of the transfer of patients from the old hospital and chapel, where a total of 300 patients were counted. At this point, the humanitarian work of nursing becomes visible, since it was exclusively related to physical care and religious teachings.

The professional phase began with the recognition of the importance of nursing in improving the quality of life of patients. Here, the effectiveness of nursing work as an art of caring is emphasized (Rodrigo, 1993). The distinguishing characteristics included:

- a) involvement of religious women in patient care.
- b) Prevalence of illiteracy, as the study of this profession was considered offensive to the middle or upper classes of the time.
- c) An identifying uniform was adopted, which included the structure of a coat and a white veil over the head.
- d) Training was provided by physicians.
- e) There was a lack of attention to male patients.
- f) Working hours were 16 hours per day.
- g) The first graduation of seven nursing students took place at the Rosales Hospital.

The *technical phase* began with the formal recognition of the nursing profession by the Ministry of Education. Although this curriculum was at a higher level, it did not yet have university status (Bettancourt, 2011). However, this allowed the gap to be closed in order to proceed with the development of an equivalency plan that would allow these professionals to later achieve a

university level of education that paralleled the education of nurses from the private education sector (Pan American Health Organization/World Health Organization, 2015).

As expressed by the study participants and corroborated through the analysis of documentary sources, it was not a priority for nursing schools of that time to establish training related to scientific research. Instead, they focused on the capacities that professionals should have in terms of community work, professional ethics, and education in ethical and spiritual values.

The highlighted aspects of this phase are:

- a) Institutionalization of the nursing profession, as in previous stages, it was the responsibility of the religious sisters and physicians to oversee the training of these professionals.
- b) Reduction of class hours to 8 hours per day.
- c) Establishment of requirements for admission (age: 18 to 30 years old, height 1.50 cm, have the basic plan or high school, good physical and mental health, impeccable moral reputation, be single, widowed or divorced, and could not marry while a student.
- d) Establishment of the social year and approval of a handwritten work with a log of the activities carried out.
- e) Establishment of the school in San Vicente and San Miguel.
- f) Awarding the Sister Maria Teresa Lang medal as a prize for the work performed by the professionals of that discipline.
- g) Officialization of the philosophy of the Salvadoran School of Nursing.
- h) Disappearance of the official imposition of the cap (El Salvador. Asociación Nacional de Enfermeras de El Salvador, 1954).

It was not until 1972 that students with married marital status were admitted. The age of admission also underwent some changes, since it was changed to between 18 and 28 years of age. Likewise, students were allowed to marry during their training period. The study plan was structured according to the basic areas of nursing: medicine, surgery, maternal-child, psychiatry, and management; which were applied in the outpatient and inpatient field (Pan American Health Organization/World Health Organization, 2015).

Within the context of the war in El Salvador, in 1980, the need for nursing personnel in the military hospital led to an unusual request: the training of 10 male nurses. This represented a milestone in the history of nursing in El Salvador, since, until then, the profession had been exclusively female. The National School of Nursing of San Salvador complied with this request, and at the end of the training process, nine nurses graduated (De Osegueda & De Landos, 2013).

During the same year, the Higher Education Law already included the creation of private institutions, which allowed for a greater expansion of nursing education. A year later, in 1981, the Florencia Nightingale School was founded, and in 1986, the Pedagogical University of El Salvador, the Technological Institute, and the Technical School for Health. In 1982, the School of Nursing in San Miguel reopened its doors with a completely community-focused approach. The students, now incorporated into community areas, began their practice wearing uniforms consisting of pants and sports shirts with the logo of integrating axes.

The year 1983 marked another significant advance for nursing in El Salvador. A group of nursing professionals, composed of members of the National Association of Salvadoran Nurses, the nursing unit, representatives of the Salvadoran Social Security Institute, the military hospital and representatives of private companies, proposed to the National University for a Bachelor's Degree program in Nursing. Although previous attempts were made to develop such a program, this was the first time a concrete proposal was outlined (El Salvador. Asociación Nacional de Enfermeras de El Salvador, 1954).

The professional phase is the final phase in the historical development of the nursing profession in El Salvador. It began in the 1990s and was influenced by a neoliberal economic model due to globalization (El Salvador. Ministry of Health, 1985). During this period, nursing schools were closed due to budget reductions, leading to a crisis in the training of nursing professionals, which led to the rise of private institutions for nursing education (Pan American Health Organization/World Health Organization, 2015).

The main characteristics of the period are:

- a) Increasing demand for nursing students, including women and men.
- b) Closure of the national nursing schools in 1995 due to the country's economic situation.
- c) The government assigns to the Ministry of Education the responsibility for training nursing professionals and as an attempt to relieve the Ministry of Health of this responsibility under the educational reform of 1995, which gave rise to the Higher Education Law.

Said law began to be implemented in 1996, but the oversight board recognized the changes introduced to the nursing profession in 1998, when the regulation and differentiation of academic degrees was endorsed, classifying them into bachelor's, technologist, and nursing technician professionals. In 2001, these positions were standardized in the curricular training in private institutions, which resulted in the loss of nursing assistant and graduate nurse degrees.

Conclusions

The life stories and documentary analysis of historical records and other sources of information allowed us to reconstruct a perspective on the evolution of nursing in El Salvador based on the experiences and journeys of long-standing professionals. Four significant phases in the development of this profession have been identified: the empirical phase from 1902 to 1918, the vocational phase from 1918 to 1954, the technical phase from 1958 to 1984, and the professional phase from 1994 to the present day.

The role of the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul as precursors of Salvadoran nursing is confirmed, as well as the impact of the Law of Higher Education towards the improvement and standardization of curricula in the different specialties of this discipline, strengthening the links and productions towards innovations and improvements in the public health system in El Salvador.

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Authors' contributions



Conceptualization: L.E.A.L., W.J.G.S.; Data curation: L.E.A.L., W.J.G.S.; Formal analysis: W.J.G.S.; Acquisition of funds: L.E.A.L., F.E.B.D., C.M.R.G.; Research: L.E.A.L., W.J.G.S., F.E.B.D., C.M.R.G.; Methodology: W.J.G.S.; Project Management: L.E.A.L., F.E.B.D., C.M.R.G.; Resources: L.E.A.L., F.E.B.D., C.M.R.G.; Supervision: W.J.G.S.; Validation: L.E.A.L., W.J.G.S.; Visualization: L.E.A.L., F.E.B.D.; Writing (Original Draft): W.J.G.S.; Writing (Proofreading and Editing): L.E.A.L., W.J.G.S., F.E.B.D.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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