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MILITARY PARTICIPATION AND MORAL AUTHORITY: 
WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN NICARAGUA, 1975–1995

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Abstract

The growth of a dynamic and assertive constituency of women in Nicaragua is inseparable from the most recent phase of ‘Sandinismo’ in Nicaraguan history. An examination of the complex and ever-changing relationship between the Frente Sandinista and the women’s movement is therefore a key element of the paper. The accelerated rate at which Nicaraguan women assumed a central place in national politics in the period from 1970–80 has much to do with their participation as combatants in the guerrilla insurgency of the 1970s, and the radicalisation of motherhood brought about by a combination of political, economic and cultural features of Nicaraguan society at this time. This paper seeks to provide some clues as to why the joint icons of mother and guerrillera have been so powerful in Nicaraguan society, and to examine why, since 1991, the women’s movement has broken ranks with the Frente Sandinista, and now operates as an autonomous network of organisations.

‘The revolution is a phenomenon of consciousness, not of the state’

Dora María Téllez

When the Frente Sandinista lost the General Elections of 1990, Nicaragua ceased to be world headline material. Having mistakenly predicted an easy victory, European and North American journalists now reached the equally mistaken conclusion that defeat was in fact an inevitable result of the fall of the Berlin wall. All of which was merely symptomatic of how mainstream, Western media has consistently ignored the diversity of interests present in the Sandinista Revolution, the internal dynamics of Sandinista rule between 1979 and 1990, and the level of political activism exercised by the Nicaraguan population between 1975 and 1990.

Today, unfortunately, Nicaragua is beleaguered by the in-fighting of parliamentary politicians; the Frente Sandinista has split; and the country’s economic status has rarely been more precarious.1 Recent controversy over the implementation of constitutional reforms which would limit presidential powers, has opened a rift between the executive and legislative branches of Government. Even deeper, however, is the rift that has opened between the grassroots population—worn down by the effects of ‘structural adjustment’—and the political classes.
Despite the growing scepticism of a disenchanted electorate, political commitment and activism can still be found in Nicaragua, though notably outside the National Assembly. One area of grassroots politics which has continued to function effectively since 1990 is the women’s movement. Indeed, it could be argued that one key reason for its continued effectiveness is that it broke ranks with the Frente Sandinista in 1991, and has subsequently been able to function outside the now discredited arena of party politics.

The role played by women in the anti-Somoza insurrection of the 1970s, and the representation of women’s interests under the Sandinista Governments of 1979-90, have attracted substantial analyses by social and political scientists, economists and anthropologists. How women became mobilized in the anti-Somoista struggle, and the nature of their activism throughout the 1970s and 1980s, have been described in considerable detail by Collinson, Chinchilla, Mason, Molyneaux and Rodríguez. In keeping with the general loss of interest by international media in Nicaragua, however, little attention has been given to the ways in which political participation by women has evolved since 1990. This paper will focus on two specific aspects of political participation by women between 1975 and 1995: their role as armed combatants in the guerrilla campaign that led to Somoza’s flight and Sandinista victory in 1979, and the ways in which women have chosen to organise politically since the Sandinista’s defeat in 1990. What interests me about these two areas, is that they illustrate two very different kinds of relations between gender interests and the state.2 As guerrilleras, women enacted the supreme identification of self with state; they were prepared to die for the ‘new Nicaragua’; they were also confident that gender and national interests were perfectly confluent. Many aspects of Sandinista Government throughout the 1980s disrupted this confluence—not least the excessive identification of the Frente itself with State institutions.3 One result of this tendency, is that since 1990 women have mobilized to represent gender interests outside the parameters of both.

Studies of political participation by Nicaraguan women to date have, rightly, emphasized economic factors as determining the extent and nature of their mobilization in the late 1970s.4 Since 1979, women’s economic status has, if anything, worsened generally, but this economic entropy has not produced a corresponding degree of political stagnation. Quite the contrary. While class certainly constituted a vital component of women’s politicization in the late 1970s, I would argue that other, less obvious factors also set the stage for their extraordinary radicalization at this time. For this reason, I feel it is important to locate women’s experiences in Nicaragua in the specific cultural and religious context of Catholicism. The Catholic dimension is fundamental to any understanding of revolutionary Sandinista ideology, and whether through contact with Sandinismo or with the Church itself, Catholic iconography undoubtedly fed into the modes of political action and activism pursued by women in the insurrectional period. It is in the context of shared Catholic-Sandinista ideology, therefore, that I will address the nature of women’s political participation in the insurrectional and post-Sandinista periods. As the title of the paper suggests, my focus will be on military participation and moral authority; the precise questions I wish to raise are the following: why the unprecedented extent of military participation by women in the Sandinista revolution became such a controversial issue for the Revolutionary Government in the 1980s? And whether the structural
changes in the women’s movement since 1990 indicate a quest for new sources of ‘moral authority’ that lie outside the shared moral base of the Catholic and Sandinista traditions?  

The political roles assumed by Nicaraguan women in the insurrectional period, which became icons of the revolution itself, both at home and abroad, were that of militant mother (*las madres combatientes*) and resistance fighter (*guerrilleras*). In the barrios of many Latin American cities, community-based groups of women have emerged as tireless campaigners on welfare issues such as food-prices, housing and health care. Managua’s *madres combatientes* emerged from the ruins of the 1972 earthquake, and organised an informal relief network to tend to the sick, and distribute what little food and water were available. When vast amounts of international aid to earthquake victims were misappropriated by the Somoza family, the mothers’ welfare-based action took a decidedly political direction, and many became involved in the anti-Somoza resistance. 

The presence of *guerrilleras* in the anti-Somoza campaign raised expectations that women would play a substantive, rather than peripheral role in the Revolution’s Programme for National Reconstruction (1979–84). Most women who took up arms did so after 1975, when anti-Government guerrilla activity was at its peak. The FSLN (Sandinista Front for National Liberation) forces attracted women from many social sectors: middle-class intellectuals, landless rural *campesinas*, university students and the urban poor. Where women had traditionally lent support to the guerrilla forces by providing safe houses, acting as messengers, and providing crucial support-structures, they now began to assume the roles of combatants and commanders of small units and whole battalions. In the battle for León, for example, four of the seven Field Commanders were women (Reif, 1986, p. 159).

Statistics vary as to the actual number of women who took up arms in the 1975–79 period: Chinchilla claims that in the final FSLN operations, up to 30% of their forces were women (Chinchilla, 1983, p. 423), whereas Vilas estimates an overall membership in the campaign as representing only 7% (Vilas, 1987, p. 168). The discrepancy is interesting in its own right, as it highlights the relative insignificance of scale when measuring the psychological impact of mould-breaking political action.

The revolutionary process brings about a fundamental change in concepts. Women are a case in point. They have participated in the revolution, not in the kitchen but as combatants and as political leaders. This creates a new framework entirely. Women also earned a tremendous degree of moral authority during the war, so that even in the home they are respected. It’s difficult for a guy to raise his hand to a woman, or abuse her, because the moral authority won by her participation extends to the entire female population and is even reflected in intimate relationships.* (Randall, 1984, pp. 56–57)  

Although this testimony proved to be overly optimistic in its projection of reduced levels of violence against women, it serves to illustrate the general conviction that all women would benefit from the accession by some to heroic roles that were previously defined as exclusively male. In her account of the *guerrillera*
phenomenon, Rodríguez rightly stresses 'the importance of the heroic space at that key stage in the nation's political and ideological development' (Rodríguez, 1993, p. 39). In the struggle to overthrow Somoza's US-backed dictatorship, and establish an independent, sovereign Nicaragua, women shared this central 'heroic space' as combatants, alongside their male colleagues. Rodríguez underlines the ways in which military participation was perceived to open new modes of political involvement for women, new ways of being political subjects, and a certain blurring of gender distinctions: if women were now 'distinguished for their discipline, their militancy, their audacity and their courage' (p. 35), then men assumed qualities more traditionally identified as 'feminine', such as abnegation and compassion.

The experiences of women combatants were not devoid of inequalities and tensions: the degree of respect they commanded from their compañeros was largely determined by the level of their own political experience and ability to make demands, and the willingness of their commanders to treat them as equals. Commandant Doris Tijerino makes an interesting geographic distinction that reflects the real bias against women in the most remote and rural areas of combat:

The Western Front relied heavily on the collaboration and support that was made possible by the level of FSLN activism in that region. The principle form of resistance was guerrilla... and in that area women stand out because they rose in the military hierarchy even after the victory. In the South the experience was very different. The women there were essentially combatants and hardly any even reached the middle range of army ranks. What's more, after the victory they were moved over to administrative posts.* (Tijerino, 1981, p. 322)

On their accession to power in 1979, the policies adopted by the Frente Sandinista acknowledged the centrality of women's participation in the Revolution, and the value it placed on their support at this time. One of the first Statutes passed by the Interim Revolutionary Government in September 1979, banned the exploitation of women's bodies as a means of marketing or advertising. In the party itself, women represented 24.3% of total membership and occupied 31.4% of leadership positions (Reif, 1986, p. 159). However, after the initial years in office, distinct Party responses began to emerge towards the different forms that political participation by women might take. For example, the mothers of combatants killed in the insurrection were venerated, and the 'Association of Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs' was established to lend financial and emotional support. Essentially, the madres de héroes y mártires constituted an externalization of the Party's conscience and even of its grassroots consciousness; they became a veritable Sandinista institution in the 1980s, and a powerful symbol of political commitment. The degree of consensus surrounding the place of the madres combatientes in the new state did not extend to those women who had taken up arms. Attitudes to the guerrilleras whose military participation had both contributed to toppling Somoza, and helped to forge Sandinista policy on equality for women, proved to be more problematic. As aggression from the Contra forces escalated, it was decided in 1983 that despite their previous experience in combat, women were to be excluded from the draft. While they were encouraged to enrol as volunteers in a 'Citizens Defence Militia', they would not be sent to the front. Rodríguez gives a detailed account of the public debate surrounding this decision,
and concludes that ‘effectively, women were demobilized, pushed back to the rear guard, decommissioned from “Patriotic Military Service” and enlisted for military service of a voluntary nature’ (p. 39).  

AMNLAE, the Luisa Amanda Espinosa Association of Nicaraguan Women, named after the first woman combatant to have died in the guerrilla campaign, responded vociferously and denounced the decision to exclude women from the ‘heroic space’ of defending the nation as a betrayal of the principle of equality.  

Strategic gender interests, however, were not a priority of the state at this time, and the decision can be explained in familiar, pragmatic terms: the need for a stable workforce to ensure the continuation of production throughout the Contra War, and the Government’s recognition of the key role played by women in revolutionary socialization. After all, if Vilas’s statistics are accurate, then 54% of combatants in the anti-Somoza campaign were born out of wedlock; 47% came from families headed by a woman; and 71% of those killed in combat were between 15 and 24 years old (Vilas, 1987, p. 168). All of which tells us something about the nature of socialization in those families headed by women, which departed from traditional models in both their constitution and their radical politics. Far from seeing women as a potentially conservative force, then, the Sandinista Government evidently felt their political activism could be better deployed at home than at the front, ensuring continued support for the war-effort, and for the revolutionary project itself.

Added to these state priorities, was the influence of the Church. The Sandinistas had come to power aided by a spirit of social activism which was largely inspired by the teachings of Liberation Theology, and had enjoyed the unambiguous support of many thousands of devout Catholics. After their 1979 victory, however, the Sandinista Government encountered a Church hierarchy increasingly entrenched in its opposition to the Revolution’s social policies. It is arguable that military service by women became, at this point, a testing ground for how rigorously the Sandinista Government would implement—or not implement—its own policies on gender equality. The fact that the Government seemed to be prepared to ignore the wishes of AMNLAE in order to appease elements within the Church, can be read as a fairly accurate prediction of how strategic gender interests (Molyneaux, p. 232) were to be disconnected utterly from that privileged ‘heroic space’ that was the defence of the Revolution, and consequently from the very Revolution itself.

What interests me about women’s exclusion from the draft, is less the question of political pragmatism, than the ways in which Sandinista thinking may have been influenced by Catholic iconography and, specifically, the Christian narrative of redemption through sacrifice. Throughout this century, Latin American revolutionary ideology has drawn extensively on the messianic model of salvation: Castro ‘came down from the mountain’ like a latter-day prophet, and Che Guevara’s formulation of the guerrillero as ‘new man’, is founded on the Christian moral code of self-sacrifice for the good of the collective. The most relevant messianic model for Nicaraguans, however, was their own Augusto César Sandino, who, with his ‘barefoot army’, led a guerrilla campaign against the occupying US marine forces between 1927 and 1932. Sandino could be seen as an early prototype of the utopian Latin American revolutionary: born out of wedlock in Niquinohomo in 1895, he came into contact with the syndicalist movement as a
migratory worker in post-revolutionary Mexico, and returned to Nicaragua with the object of organising resistance to US intervention. The marines departed in 1932, and Sacasa, a Liberal candidate, was elected President; in 1933 Sandino signed a peace accord with the new Government, and in 1934 he was assassinated on the orders of Anastasio Somoza, the first of the Somoza political dynasty.

Sandino’s messianic sacrifice has been immortalised by Nicaraguan poets and song-writers, and his guerrilla campaign inspired periodic resurgences of resistance to the Somoza dictatorships throughout the 1950s and 60s; the FSLN, named after him, was founded in 1960. Ernesto Cardenal, the poet and priest who served as the Sandinista’s Minister for Culture, dramatised the conflict between Sandino and the US-backed General Moncada as a battle between cynicism and messianic self-sacrifice:

‘Anyone who sets out to be a saviour winds up on a cross’, says Moncada. And Sandino replies to Moncada:

‘Death is quite unimportant’.

Zero Hour, written in 1954-56, following Cardenal’s own participation in the failed ‘April Conspiracy’ against Somoza, predicts the return of the redeemer, promising a new dawn after the dark night of dictatorship: ‘But the hero is born when he dies/ and green grass grows from the ashes’.

It is against this backdrop of a strong messianic tradition in Nicaraguan nationalism, and a shared Catholic and revolutionary eschatology of redemption through sacrifice, that I wish to consider the roles assumed by women in the insurrectional period, 1975-79. Many saw their children sacrificed, and indeed took comfort from their analogous relation to Mary, but unlike the Catholic marian icon, the madres combatientes did not perceive themselves as handmaidens and instruments of another’s will; through their political and military participation they helped to determine the timing and results of a collective sacrifice. In a sense they rewrote the marian role in the narrative of national redemption, and embodied a double annunciation—heralding the approach of deliverance from Somoza, and from the traditional subordination of their sex.

Others departed from the roles allotted to them by Christian and Guevarist scripture, and the psychological and political resonances of military participation by women are possibly best understood when viewed in this light. When they took up arms as guerrilleras, women appropriated for themselves the messianic role in the Christian/Revolutionary redemptive narrative of bodily self-sacrifice. In doing so, they transgressed all manner of taboos and gender boundaries, because, essentially, they were acting out the role of Christ. Though sacrificial love is clearly the moral foundation of the New Testament, two kinds of sacrificial love co-exist there: Mary’s sacrifice of her son, and Christ’s sacrifice of his own flesh. It could be said, therefore, that where the two central roles in the narrative of redemption were traditionally defined by gender, they now fused in the figure of the guerrillera. Interesting, too, is the fact that the erosion of gender definition was mono-directional: while transgressing the exclusively male nature of the saviour role, there was no equivalent transgression of the female definition of the mother’s.
Plate 1. Mother and child at meeting of young co-operativists, Waswalito, Jinotega, 1984.
There were inherent contradictions, nonetheless, in the fusion of mother and saviour icons, as those guerrilleras who had children had to leave them in order to mobilize. This tension is perhaps part of the compelling attraction of one of the Sandinista's most exported icons—the photograph of a young campesina who, rifle at shoulder, holds a baby at her breast. The image was captured by photographer Orlando Valanzuela in 1984, at the height of the Contra War, and is the very incarnation of that fusion of the roles of mother and guerrillera. In fact it appeared on the title page of 'Somos', AMNLAE's supplement of the Sandinista daily, Barricada, in 1985, and was widely distributed by solidarity groups abroad. 14 The lasting appeal of the image, and its continued association with Sandinismo (or is it Sandinismo's continued quest for a way of integrating these roles within its own ideological framework?) is suggested by the reproduction of the same photograph in the same paper in March 1993. The resurrected image is accompanied, second time around, by an interview with the photographer, a 'Where is she now?' plea for the subject to identify herself, and an interpretation of the young mother pictured as 'the revolution, smiling as she feeds Nicaragua, with a rifle at her shoulder as a guarantee of the defence of the new nation'*. 15 The image seems to belie the Sandinista Government's own policy to demobilize women in 1983, but authenticity is seldom a prerequisite for the creation of icons. Is it important that the actual subject was minding her compaño's firearm, and was not even a member of the civilian militia herself? 16 Probably not. The power of the image is that it represents an ideal inspired by the Revolution, which outlived subsequent changes in Sandinista policy.

Whatever its motives, the decision by the Sandinista Government to demobilize women in the Contra War, coincided perfectly with the Catholic hierarchy's desire to return women definitively to the marian, 'motherist' role. In keeping with this trend, the image of revolutionary women promoted by the FSLN leadership throughout the rest of the decade, was that of motherhood. The FSLN leadership was aware of the benefits of appointing women to the task of revolutionary socialization in the home, and despite having fought alongside or under the command of women in the Revolution, their belief that motherhood was women's primary vocation was unshakeable. In a 1987 interview Daniel Ortega expressed such an opinion:

Sometimes women, aspiring to equality, end up denying their role of reproducing the human race, when in fact equality should be interpreted in terms of rights and opportunities. (Ortega, El Nuevo Diario, 27 September 1987)

Seen in this context, the opposition to women's military participation in Nicaragua in the 1980s was not unconnected with the opposition to the introduction of abortion in the same decade; the latter, too, was an issue on which the Sandinista Government chose not to rock the unsteady boat of hierarchical support. Both debates centred on the issue of women's control of their own bodies, their personal sovereignty, their rights as subjects in the flesh.

The Frente's representation of motherhood, like its representation of the guerrillera, was not without its contradictions, for while participation and militancy were encouraged, the rhetoric that invited them was often ambiguous, and at times indistinguishable from that of their right-wing opponents. One
infamous example of this is the address given by Tomás Borge—one of the FSLN founding fathers—on the fifth anniversary of the foundation of AMPRONAC (29 September 1982):

How could we neglect to guarantee her participation in the country's social life, in the workplace and in political leadership? How could we fail to guarantee that a woman can be mother and worker, mother and student, mother and political leader, that she can carry out all the tasks demanded by the revolution and still comply with that beautiful task of being a self-sacrificing, efficient and loving mother? (Borge, 1983, pp. 20–21)

Apart from the confusing signals emitted by Borge as to whether or not women's citizenship was defined by their political participation or their reproductive role, his evocation of motherhood differs little from the role-model promoted by such conservative figures as Cardenal Obando Y Bravo. For that matter, his description would not be out of place in the mouth of the Cardenal, when he says: 'woman may be physically weaker than man, but she is just as intelligent, and in my own opinion, from a moral point of view, she is superior to man'. Like Church leaders then, some of the Frente's leadership saw women as a key social force in their role as moral educators in the home, and defenders of public morality. This traditionalist annexation of moral responsibility to women was quite at odds with the Revolution's ethos of collective responsibility, and, I would argue, undermined it considerably.

In its representations of women throughout the 1980s, the Sandinista Government tried to simultaneously reassure conservative social sectors that traditional roles would not be eroded, while telling AMNLAE and the feminist sector that they could aspire to substantive definitions of citizenship, free of discrimination. Real progress was made in the promotion of women's interests in the 1987 Constitution, but the concessions to the right were also significant: women were effectively demobilized, abortion was not to be legalised, and a proposed 'Law on Provisions' (Ley de alimentos), designed to oblige fathers to provide a food allowance for their dependents, was never ratified. In other words, social policy that touched on the 'private' space of the home, or on women's physical self-determination—whether through military participation or abortion—continued to be impeded by conservative Catholic ideology throughout the 1980s. It should not have been too surprising, then, that in their electoral campaigns in 1990, leaders of the left and right alike retreated into traditional gender stereotypes. Ortega's campaign promoted the FSLN leader as el gallo, the fighting-cock, trading on his personal qualities of courage and persistence, and his record as a Commander in the Revolution. But while the Frente's rhetoric continued to be highly militaristic, Ortega shed his fatigues in an effort to persuade the electorate of the viability of his leadership in peace as well as war, and dissociate the party from the highly unpopular war. The result proved to be more confusing than confidence-inspiring for the electorate, and ultimately the Sandinista campaign was eclipsed by the mass appeal of a more potent Catholic icon. Not only was Violeta Chamorro the widow of a national martyr, but she dressed in white throughout the campaign, and due to the lameness caused by a bone disease, was frequently carried aloft on a chair by her followers—much in the manner that statues of saints and the Virgin are carried in religious processions. By her own admission a candidate with little political experience, she headed a tenuous coalition—the National Opposition
Union—which, as its name implies, was united only in its opposition to the Frente Sandinista, and had few clear policies. Chamorro's campaign depended heavily on the financial support of the US Government, and its pledge to stop supporting Contra aggression if the UNO coalition were successful in the elections. This, coupled with her status as Chamorro's widow, lent her an air of divine intercessor on behalf of the Nicaraguan people. As one commentator eloquently wrote: 'Pedro and God were above watching' (O'Kane, 1990, p. 29).

Iconography apart, the Sandinistas lost the electoral support of many politically active women who were worn out by the efforts of sustaining production, constant rationing, and the emotional costs of twenty years of war. AMNLAE was essentially trapped between the mandates of the party and its constituency of women, and the war-effort not only took precedence over gender interests, but inhibited many women from making demands for fear of appearing disloyal. Dora María Téllez served as Minister of Health under the 1984-90 Sandinista Government. In a 1992 interview she isolated women's votes as a key factor in the Sandinista's electoral defeat, but in a manner that suggests that the Frente may have missed the real lessons to be learned from the experience. When asked: 'How do you see the 1990 elections? Was it an ideological vote?', her reply was—'It was a vote by housewives. It wasn't ideological'. This equation of housewives with an absence of ideology would be more comprehensible in any country other than Nicaragua. Téllez's dismissive tone betrays her unwillingness to distinguish between a lack of ideological consciousness and a loss of faith. It also suggests that the absence of class-based ideology as a primary determinant in how women voted, somehow precluded the presence of any other form of political consciousness. Her assertion that many women did not vote along the lines of party political ideology is absolutely right, but her tendency to dismiss the significance of their vote on that basis, demonstrates an inability or unwillingness to understand the reasons why. Many women—housewives and others—did vote for UNO on the basis of their immediate daily needs (what Molyneaux would call 'practical gender interests', p. 232): tired of carrying the burden of food and coffee production as well as the responsibilities of family and home, they voted for an end to the war and to rationing, and the hope of economic recovery. Many were also aware that without these preconditions the longterm, 'strategic interests' of their gender could not be furthered through legislation or investment. Téllez's comment belies both the levels of political awareness and gender consciousness among women in Nicaragua in 1990. Sadly, in doing so, she perhaps undersells one of the Revolution's greatest achievements.

The significance of a 'women's vote' in the 1990 elections, while acknowledged by the Frente Sandinista as one of the causes of their defeat, has attracted surprisingly little commentary to date (Kapcia, 1994). Significant rights and guarantees for women had been won under the Sandinista Governments of 1979-90, but the militaristic verticalism inherent in a political party which had evolved from a guerrilla fighting-force, had the effect of stifling dissent. Partly due to the immediate demands of the war-effort, but also because of the indistinguishable nature of party and state institutions, AMNLAE gradually lost touch with its constituency: far from feeding into the Frente's policies, it became another top-down party channel. Political participation by women had until this point been inseparable from the structures and policies of the Frente, having grown from the
same roots in the anti-Somocista struggle. But by 1990, many Nicaraguan women
had a clear inventory of both 'practical' and 'strategic' demands, and concluded
that neither would be furthered by association with party politics.

March 1991 saw the birth of the 'Grupo 52', an autonomous women's movement
whose agenda was to represent the 52% of the population made up of women. In
January 1992, two thousand women met to set up an infrastructure of networks,
interconnecting women who worked or campaigned in areas such as health,
sexuality, violence against women, education, the economy, homosexuality and
political organization. Their aims and objectives were spelt out in an eight-point
manifesto, presented to the National Assembly on International Women's Day
1993, followed by a mass rally. The third point of the manifesto demands a
rejection of all kinds of violence, alluding to the need for action on violence
against women and children in the home, and equally to the need for conciliation
and negotiation in post-war, post-electoral Nicaragua—a need which continues to
elude the political classes. The women's movement and some community-based
activists (el movimiento comunal) have led by example in this area, fostering co­
operation and joint projects involving both ex-Contra forces and Sandinistas.

The women's movement is one of the few popular, grassroots sectors to have a
solid and autonomous organizational expression. Reactions to its recent autonomy
have been mixed: some see the new structures as a necessary break with
Sandinista verticalism, and an expression of the heterogeneity that must inevitably
exist within 'gender interests'. Those most closely associated with the Frente,
however, fear a potential atomization of interests, and voice concern that in its
present shape—with no formal ties to political parties—women's demands can
make no impact on Government policy. However it is difficult to conceive how
any form of popular organization could influence the policies of this very
reactionary Government. Since 1990 most of the Sandinista legislation on worker's
rights (the código de trabajo) have been repealed, leaving workers in pre­
revolutionary, exploitative conditions. One result of the rise in poverty-levels and
its impact on women is the widespread re-emergence of prostitution. Corruption
and ineffectuality have infected Nicaragua's representative democracy since 1990,
and the very concept of representation itself extends no further than the practice
of self-representation and self-seeking. This became evident, when, in the
handover of Government offices and redistribution of jobs attached to state
institutions, members of both political camps seized the opportunity to line their
own pockets at the nation's expense; the free-for-all that ensued became popularly
known as the pifiata.

Nicaragua's transitional process, widely considered exemplary in 1990, has
degenerated into a scramble for power and wealth. The absence of coherent
political objectives is accompanied by an equally damaging absence of moral
values:

The pifiata triggered widespread ethical laxity, a 'good guys finish last'
morality. If the 1980s were premised on solidarity and altruism, these
values were annihilated by hyperinflation, followed by the pifiata, followed
by the penury of structural adjustment.
The moral base of the Sandinista era, which promoted values such as solidarity and altruism, was essentially that of Christian morality. The role of the 'Church of the people' (iglesia popular) was fundamental to the moral ethos of the Sandinista revolution. With the moral backing of the Church, the revolution cast itself in the role of Holy Crusader against Somoza's unholy regime: where the dictator's rule represented hatred and greed, Sandinismo stood for love and self-sacrifice. This has not always been appreciated by political commentators from outside Latin America, and those who saw the Sandinista movement as another manifestation of orthodox Marxism, failed to understand that the moral authority lent by the Church was probably a more significant mobilizing force than that of class solidarity, and that the Christian definition of sacrificial love continued to motivate the Latin American revolutionary in the 1970s. Sergio Ramírez, Vice-President of the Sandinista Government from 1984-90, acknowledges this in his autobiographical account of the period, saying: 'in the Christian tradition we saw the supreme value of martyrdom, of self-sacrifice as the ultimate proof of faith' (Ramírez, 1992, p. 137). Even the title of his testimony, 'Confession of love' tells of how the Revolution perceived itself.

The necessity for collective and personal sacrifice, and the value placed on these by the Revolution, proved to be a powerful binding agent throughout the anti-Somocista campaign and much of the Contra War. But the blurring of boundaries between party and state from 1984 on, facilitated petty corruption; observing the creeping inequalities in their communities, the long-suffering populace began to doubt if sacrifice was equitably distributed in the new Nicaragua. And perhaps this was felt more acutely by women, who, denied access to the very public, heroic sacrifice of military participation, felt that their daily, private sacrifices were unacknowledged, and undermined by encroaching corruption and a lowering of moral standards. But more than this, two decades of war and privation had exhausted faith in the Christian and Guevarist creeds of salvation through self-sacrifice. The revolutionary motto of patria libre o morir ('a free nation or death'), no longer rang true. And with the loss of this absolute source of moral authority, Nicaraguan politics appears to have lost its grasp of any moral values whatsoever.

The way out of prolonged sacrifice in Nicaragua is through negotiation by interested groups in both the parliamentary and popular sectors. To date, the only transition that the political classes have managed is from shared sacrifice to its opposite—greed. Only the women's movement and a few other community-based groups have managed to make a transition from conflict to negotiation, and it is their continuing commitment to grassroots support that bestows the very moral authority and answerability lacking in the executive and legislature. The criticism made most consistently in Nicaragua today, of all political parties, is that they have lost touch with their constituency, the base. After twenty years of struggle to establish a political system that would uphold the moral authority granted by electoral support, it is worth noting that morality and political participation in Nicaragua today, only seem to meet outside of Government, and that the women's movement is one of the few arenas where the ideals espoused by the Revolution itself are still practised. If indeed, as Dora María Téllez upholds, 'the revolution is a phenomenon of consciousness, and not of the state', the state could learn from the example of gender consciousness, one of the last preserves of meaningful solidarity and activism in Nicaragua today.

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Notes

1. Between 1990 and 1994, Nicaragua received the highest per capita aid of any developing country: $182 annually, although this has now dropped to $130. However, much of this aid is used to service Nicaragua’s foreign debt: by 1994, 96% of all cash aid was absorbed in this way. The possibility of successfully renegotiating the foreign debt has been damaged by a rapidly deteriorating international image, and consequent ‘donor fatigue’. See editorial, ‘The Chamorro Administration: A Race to the Starting Line,’ Envi’o, vol. 14, no. 166, May 1995.

2. I use the term ‘gender interests’ in the broadest possible sense here, to express what Maxine Molyneaux categorizes as ‘strategic gender interests’—those ethical and theoretical criteria which assist in the formulation of strategic objectives to overcome women’s subordination—and ‘practical gender interests’, formulated ‘in response to an immediate perceived need’ (Molyneaux, 1985, pp. 230–233).

3. Rodríguez’s analysis (1983) of the 1979–90 period is the most comprehensive to date.

4. See Mason (1992), and Reif (1986).

5. I am indebted to the work of Antoni Kapcia and his insightful observations on the ‘shared moral base’ of Church and Revolution in his unpublished paper ‘Myth, Mystique and Language: The ideology of Liberation in Cuba, Nicaragua and Latin American Catholicism’ (Kapcia, 1993).

6. Where I have translated quotations they will be marked *.

7. The precision of the verb used to describe this process in the Spanish, desinstitucionalizar, is difficult to render in translation.

8. AMNLAE was founded in 1979 by the Interim Government, to represent and promote women in the ‘new Nicaragua’, thereby succeeding Nicaragua’s first national association of women, AMPRONAC (the Association of Women Confronting the National Crisis), founded in 1977.

9. ‘... the achievement and maintenance of a role in the defence of the nation is an indispensable part of progress and fundamental to “strategic parity” between men and women.’ Extract from AMNLAE’s Plan de lucha 1984–86 (‘Plan for the struggle’), 1984, p. 32.

10. Sandino’s contribution to Nicaraguan political consciousness at the time was quite remarkable: here was an individual, unconnected with the political and/or landed classes—whether Liberal or Conservative—fighting to defend the concept of national sovereignty. See Sandino’s ‘Manifiesto Político’, 1 July 1927, in Sergio Ramirez (ed.), El Pensamiento Vivo de Sandino.


12. The emphasis on collective sacrifice in the Sandinista Revolution was one of the features that distinguished it from the Cuban: for where Guevara’s vanguardist (foujista) approach demanded that the few ‘new men’ take on the role of redeemers of the people through their self-sacrifice, in Nicaragua this model was largely transcended by the genuinely popular support lent to the revolutionary effort in its final years.

13. See ‘The Role of the Woman’ in Guevara’s thesis on Guerrilla Warfare. While admitting that women could perform on an equal footing with men in combat, Guevara emphasizes their supportive roles, whether medical, emotional—or even culinary (Guevara, 1969, pp. 98–103).

14. ‘Somos’, año IV, num. 25, 1985. The photograph was taken in Waswaltio, Jinotega, at a meeting of young co-operative members.

15. See Barricada, 3 March 1993, Section 2, p. 1B.


17. In 1985, an estimated 45% of female admissions to the Bertha Calderón Hospital in Managua were related to backstreet abortions; 10% of these died, while 25% of the survivors remained sterile (Rodríguez, 1993, p. 46).

18. Pedro Chamorro led the Democratic Union for Liberation (UDEL) in opposition to Somoza, and was editor of La Prensa newspaper. His assassination in 1977 by Government forces led to a general strike in 1978, and persuaded many Nicaraguans that Somoza would only be ousted by forceful means.
19. Dora María Téllez won legendary status in her role as ‘Comandante 2’ in the takeover of the National Palace in August 1978, and as head of the guerilla force that took the city of León in 1979.

20. The manifesto demands: 1. The right to freedom of sexual expression; 2. The right to freely chosen motherhood, with the full support of Nicaraguan society; 3. The rejection of all forms of violence; 4. The recovery of the multi-ethnic cultural identities of Nicaragua; 5. The right to a non-sexist education; 6. Access to employment without discrimination; 7. The development of non-discriminatory agrarian policies, giving women equal pay and access to land and credit; 8. A modern, non-discriminatory legislature that will recognize women’s rights in all these areas. See Barricada, 9 March 1993.

21. In an interview with Vidaluz Meneses, poet and Dean of the Arts Faculty in the Central American University, Managua, she commented that ‘The only unity worthy of note is one that recognizes different stages of development and different interests’ (Unpublished interview, 17 March 1993).


23. Antoni Kapcia identifies the evolution of the ‘moralistic impulse’ of the revolution as a ‘fusion’—of a humanist (and Guevarist) Marxism, of the inherently moral nationalist “crusade”, and, most importantly, of the influence of religion—especially the newer thinking within the Catholic Church in Latin America’ (Kapcia, 1993, p. 23).

24. ‘One gets the feeling that two countries exist. One is hard and real and daily, in which the population suffers the stabilization and adjustment measures even to the point of starvation. The other is imaginary, racked with politicking, in which the various actors in the political class engage in verbal duels, oblivious to the needs of the people. The citizenry, politically active up to 1992, has not lost interest in politics; the politicians have lost interest in the citizenry’s concerns and needs’ (Enviio, vol. 14, no. 167, June 1995, pp. 8-9).

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