

Mobilizing Women:  
Gender, Revolution, and Counter-Revolution in Nicaragua since the 1970s

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**MOBILIZING WOMEN:**

**GENDER, REVOLUTION, AND COUNTER-REVOLUTION IN NICARAGUA SINCE THE 1970S**

*Now we can already see the Masaya Volcano and its smoke  
and its smoke  
rising from the crater, and the Masaya Lagoon, green,  
further on, the Apoyo Lagoon, very blue,  
the Sierra Mountains and the mountain ranges, sky-blue  
out to the distance, the truth is  
that our land is sky-blue,  
still further on, you see it? The Pacific,  
almost pure blue under the sky,*

*the truth is that we're in heaven and don't know it...*

*-Ernesto Cardenal*

By: Laura Bunten

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**INTRODUCTION: A RESEARCH PAPER FOR AÍDA**

*"I would love to do a research paper; I need to learn how to take an issue or a problem, analyze it, gather information, and use my own head to come to my own conclusion."*  
--Aída Gutiérrez<sup>1</sup>

Commotion and chaos radiated throughout Managua on July 19, 1979. Nicaraguans flooded the plaza, climbed the Cathedral, tore down statues, and sang in revelry. Gioconda Belli, a Sandinista, wrote that the plaza "became one giant, exultant smile, and the celebratory mood was so contagious, the energy of the crowd so jubilant and electrifying...I will never forget the eagerness, the hope, the joyous optimism of those faces."<sup>2</sup> The *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (Sandinista National Liberation Front, or FSLN) had toppled the 42-year long Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua. Guerilla fighters, barefoot children, weathered farmers and old women rejoiced in what was arguably the most revolutionary grassroots victory in Latin American history. The insurrection had not only rid the country of its oppressive ruler, but had also liberated its people—notably, its women—into a world of new opportunities. Nicaraguan women had already mobilized through the insurrection, yet their presence and participation grew with the revolution into a series of movements by the end of the decade. While the country's instability has hindered these movement's efforts and political setbacks have contested their rightful progress at times, their achievements only become more striking in the face of these obstacles to change. Scholars and citizens alike may debate the levels of success of the women's movements in Nicaragua, but Nicaraguan women clearly have experienced drastic changes in their opportunities, their accomplishments, and how they view themselves and their life chances.

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<sup>1</sup> Denis Lynn Daly Heyck, *Life Stories of the Nicaraguan Revolution* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1990), 335.

<sup>2</sup> Gioconda Belli, *The Country Under My Skin* (New York: First Anchor Books, 2003), 246-7.

María Lidia, at 68 years old, reflected at the time of the insurrection: “July 19—the bells tolled for joy when the kids won the war. It seemed like a dream, a dream come true. But not anymore—there’s so much to be done.”<sup>3</sup> In their first four years in power, the FSLN (known as the Sandinistas) established organizations and implemented policies which involved a large portion of the population: some examples include a Literacy Crusade, new health centers, and Sandinista Defense Committees in numerous rural communities. The FSLN also provided many new opportunities to long disenfranchised sectors of the Nicaraguan people with remarkable speed.<sup>4</sup> Previously, most Nicaraguan women were not free to participate in political or social organizations, but did so to such a large extent during the insurrection (1977-79) that they became a pivotal force in a larger revolution. As the revolution’s dynamism waned in the late 1980s, women’s movements also lost ground as the country suffered from civil war and a plummeting economy.<sup>5</sup> Few have noted, however, the substantial change that women’s movements achieved during this chaos and again under President Violeta Chamorro’s administration in the 1990s.<sup>6</sup> Much attention, rightfully so, has been given Nicaragua’s continuing social backwardness and poverty. Yet women have achieved levels of participation in democratic, representative politics and in civil society that were unthinkable before 1979. Their roles and participation in the economy and the workplace have changed dramatically over the last thirty years. The Sandinistas helped create and foster a new, participatory female community through the widespread participation of women from all sectors of society—levels of

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<sup>3</sup> Margaret Randall, *Sandino's Daughters: Testimonies of Nicaraguan Women in Struggle* (Vancouver/Toronto: New Star Books, 1981), iii.

<sup>4</sup> Heather K. Thiessen, “Nicaragua” in Barbara A. Tenenbaum, ed. *Encyclopedia of Latin American History and Culture*, Volume 4 (New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1996), 182-9.

<sup>5</sup> Helen Collinson, ed. *Women and Revolution in Nicaragua* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 1990), 1-7.

<sup>6</sup> Karen Kampwirth, *Feminism and the Legacy of Revolution* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Research in International Studies), 47. It is common in Nicaragua to refer to people in positions of power by their first names. The current president, Daniel Ortega, is often called “Daniel.” This the purposes of this thesis, I have referred to both Nicaraguan citizens and political figures by either their full or first names.

participation, which have survived the volatility of the 1980s, the decline of the FSLN, and the return of conservative rulers since the early 1990s.

### **A BRIEF HISTORY OF NICARAGUA**

Nicaragua's history has been plagued by dependency, mismanaged potential and underdevelopment. Since 1979, however, Nicaragua has built democratic institutions, experienced some macroeconomic growth and survived serious military conflict.<sup>7</sup> In spite of these dramatic political transformations, Nicaragua has the third lowest per-capita income in the Western Hemisphere and the nation is plagued by widespread poverty, malnutrition, unemployment and the ill-distribution of income.<sup>8</sup> Tragically, despite the emergence of democratic politics Nicaragua still suffers from continuing poverty and underdevelopment. The inherent nature of this problem can be traced to Nicaragua's history of foreign exploitation and oppressive leaders. These abuses have caused the country to suffer from extreme class stratification, backwardness and economic dependency, which all have helped to prevent Nicaragua from shedding its third-world condition and to achieve substantial economic progress.<sup>9</sup>

The longest standing Nicaraguan dictatorship, that of the Somoza family, displays the interplay between dictators and foreign involvement that has long taken place at the expense of the majority of Nicaraguans. The dictatorship passed through the hands of three men: Anastasio Somoza García and his two sons, Luis Somoza Debayle and Anastasio Somoza Debayle, and officially spanned 42 years. Although Anastasio Somoza García virtually controlled the

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<sup>7</sup> John A. Booth, Christine J. Wade and Thomas W. Walker, *Understanding Central America: Global Forces, Rebellion, and Change* 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*; Tom Barry and Deb Preusch, *The Central America Fact Book* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1986); Thiessen, "Nicaragua" in Tenenbaum, ed., 182-9.

government as commander of the National Guard,<sup>10</sup> he formally became president (with dictatorial powers) in January 1937. After a poet assassinated Somoza García in 1956, Luis Somoza Debayle assumed power until his younger brother won the presidency in February 1967. Luis died from a heart attack later that year.<sup>11</sup> Although his father and brother had both ruled aggressively, Anastasio Somoza Debayle pushed this coercion and exploitation to a new level.

Throughout their control, the Somozas succeeded in enriching their family circle, widening the economic gap between the rich and poor, utilizing the National Guard as a brute military force and worsening economic dependency on powers like the US, to which Somoza always submitted. While the Somozas had no land when they rose to power, “dictatorship is good business,” and they owned the *most* land in Nicaragua by the 1950s.<sup>12</sup> Also, each yielded to U.S. interests; as Franklin D Roosevelt famously remarked, “Somoza is a son of a bitch, but he’s *our* son of a bitch.”<sup>13</sup> The National Guard kept the Somozas in power and prevented the rise of any serious opposition to the regime.<sup>14</sup> Created, trained, and equipped over decades by the United States, the National Guard was deeply connected and committed to the Somozas and the United States.<sup>15</sup> Over four decades, the Somozas had enriched their family and inner circle of supporters at the expense of most Nicaraguans, in the process deeply stratifying Nicaraguan social structure.<sup>16</sup> When the Sandinistas took control, they inherited a country suffering from extreme economic inequality and social injustice.

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<sup>10</sup> Richard Millet, *The Guardians of the Dynasty*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1977). The National Guard was Somoza’s armed forces, first created with help from the United States and infamous for their brutality and corruption.

<sup>11</sup> Thiessen, 186.

<sup>12</sup> Tenenbaum, 272.

<sup>13</sup> Belli, 8.

<sup>14</sup> Booth, 71.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 72.

<sup>16</sup> Booth; Thiessen.

## THE FSLN AND THE INSURRECTION

The first serious armed opposition to the Somoza dynasty emerged in the 1960s. In 1961 Carlos Fonseca Amador, Silvio Mayorga, and Tomás Borge Martínez, founded the FSLN to foment rebellion based on the guerilla tactics of Augusto César Sandino. In the 1920s and 1930s, Sandino had organized over 5,000 insurgents in opposition to U.S. military presence in Nicaragua. The National Guard assassinated Sandino in 1934, allegedly on Somoza's orders, making him a martyr for the people and the FSLN's principal symbol and namesake.<sup>17</sup> Although a relatively small organization during the 1960s, the FSLN emerged in the 1970s as the major opposition group to the Somoza dynasty through the mobilization of increasingly larger sections of the population. As the Sandinistas gained support and credibility, they forged more formidable rebellions against Somoza and his National Guard. After a massive earthquake ripped through the heart of Managua on December 23, 1972, Somoza withheld hundreds of millions of dollars of foreign aid from the suffering people and distributed it among his family and elite supporters. Although antagonism to Somoza had long existed, the reaction to these events marked a turning point in the rebellion's development.<sup>18</sup>

Opposition to Somoza swelled to a new level on January 10, 1978 when the prominent editor of *La Prensa* (the main newspaper in Nicaragua), Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, was allegedly assassinated, allegedly on Somoza's orders. The news enraged Nicaraguans. *La Prensa* reported that Pedro Joaquín's life had "ended in a patriotic martyrdom."<sup>19</sup> The Nicaraguans from all sectors of society rose in protests, rallies, strikes and other forms of protest; groups of students,

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<sup>17</sup> Thiessen, 185.

<sup>18</sup> Belli, 177.

<sup>19</sup> Robert S. Leiken and Barry Rubin, eds., *The Central American Crisis Reader: The Essential Guide to the Most Controversial Foreign Policy Issue Today* (New York: Summit Books, 1987), 178.



women, workers, peasants, and upper class alike accelerated their opposition to Somoza.<sup>20</sup> From peasants to businessmen to former Somoza supporters, Nicaraguans ultimately joined with the FSLN in a united fight against Somoza.

The Sandinistas waged a “war of liberation” for two years, facing intense opposition from Somoza, divisions within the Frente itself, and a high mortality rate. The FSLN had separated into three divisions (the *Proletarios*, the *Guerra Popular Prolongada* and the *Terceristas*)<sup>21</sup> prior to Pedro Joaquín Chamorro’s assassination, but reunited under the Joint National Directorate (*Dirección Nacional Conjunta* or DNC), a twelve-person group of leaders (*Grupo de los Doce*).<sup>22</sup> Between FSLN attacks and spontaneous citizen action against the National Guard (oftentimes not organized by the Sandinistas), the guerrillas wore down Somoza’s troops until the final insurrection in July 1979.<sup>23</sup> Somoza fled the country in July 1979 and the Nicaraguans paraded into Managua to celebrate the end of the dictatorship.

As historian Mike Gonzalez notes, the revolution “represent[ed] something dramatically important [...] in a period of world recession [...] falling living standards and structural employment [...] at that moment the Nicaraguan revolution took one of the most stable and secure of all military tyrannies and overthrew it.”<sup>24</sup> The insurrection embodied the passion and ideals of Nicaraguans committed to social justice, and accomplished a rare feat for impoverished countries by overthrowing such a corrupt dictator supported by powerful foreign interests. In the 1980s, the Sandinistas constructed a democratic electoral system on the ruins of dictatorship, but they were then peacefully voted out of power in 1990 and replaced by U.S.-backed presidential

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Barry, 273.

<sup>22</sup> Booth, *Understanding Central America*, 75.

<sup>23</sup> In Nicaragua, the final struggle from 1977-1979 is referred to as the ‘insurrection.’ The entire FSLN administration, from 1979 until 1990, is referred to as the ‘revolution.’

<sup>24</sup> Mike Gonzalez, *Nicaragua: What Went Wrong?* (London: Bookmarks, 1990), 111.

candidate, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro—the widow of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro. This stark change in public sentiment against the Sandinistas has been credited to both Sandinista internal disintegration as well as American economic and military intervention. Violeta's administration began a conservative counter-revolution that attempted to re-strengthen the traditional, Catholic values of Nicaraguan society. The first woman president, therefore, initiated a new stage in Nicaraguan politics by ironically bringing back the country's repressive traditions.

### **THE ARGUMENT**

The FSLN succeeded in forging the most revolutionary and grassroots-based movement in the history of Nicaragua—indeed, one of the most revolutionary in twentieth-century Latin America—which experienced a wealth of popular fervor at its outset. Its failure a decade later, partly due to the lack of this popular support, was widely debated among scholars in the 1980s and 1990s. This project examines how women's movements, many initiated by the FSLN, transformed into autonomous movements, committed to the fundamental changes the revolution fostered. I argue that this transition, although fraught with complexities that contributed to their struggle, created unprecedented participatory opportunities for women and helped forge new gender relations in Nicaragua.

These changes developed in three main stages. The Sandinista Revolution and subsequent revolutionary shifts in Nicaraguan society created the opportune atmosphere for women to jumpstart feminine movements. The FSLN facilitated this surge by supporting women's organizations and participation throughout the first half of the revolution. In the late 1980s, however, the FSLN struggled from economic issues and civil warfare, while women had become increasingly liberal. The party drew back its support and attention to women's rights, provoking

many female Sandinistas to leave the party and refocus their efforts in women's organizations. Therefore, the lack of the FSLN's support for the very movement it had helped start remobilized women into autonomous groups, bolstering their movements' growth. Finally, as the FSLN left power in 1990, Nicaragua elected its first female president, Violeta Chamorro. Ironically, Violeta reintroduced conservative politics which suppressed women even more than the waning Sandinista government. These policies also backfired by uniting women's movements in opposition to the traditional government. Nicaragua's political shifts in the last quarter of the twentieth century created a unique environment that fostered the inception of women's movements and their subsequent stability.

Opposition may have strengthened women's movements in the long run, but women have met many obstacles due to Nicaragua's traditional heritage and political volatility. As the FSLN failed to establish policies and institutions with the flexibility and strength to survive civil war and foreign opposition, women's movements, too, suffered their fair share of setbacks. Division and debate within the movement has at times overshadowed their accomplishments. Nevertheless, the FSLN pinpointed the exact channels (education and healthcare, for example) that succeeded in fomenting widespread participation among Nicaraguan women. Women's enthusiasm funneled into constructive action that triggered a cultural shift in Nicaraguan society—the new opportunities for these women to participate in social reform changed how they viewed themselves and the suffering in their lives. Even with the divisions and contentious debates, there are clear signs of women finding new voices and taking actions to promote social and cultural change that would have been unthinkable before 1979. This thesis argues that within the ongoing deliberation over the success of women's movements in Nicaragua, revolutionary

changes occurred amidst the turmoil, and these changes have survived and continued to produce new opportunities in politics, society, and the workplace for Nicaraguan women.

The thesis consists of five chapters and a concluding section. The first chapter briefly discusses the history of women's movements and their formal beginning in the late 1970s. It also highlights the major trends in women's movements during the 1980s and 1990s to establish an overarching framework for these movements. The following chapters pinpoint four principal examples of women's struggles. The second and third chapters discuss the significance of civic community organization in the movement, highlighting women's roles in education and healthcare, respectively. Women's development in formal and informal labor is analyzed in the third chapter, which focuses on women in the national economy. The fourth chapter addresses how women have broken into the political scene, exploring what women have gained and lost through legislation and their roles in politics since 1979. Finally, the fifth chapter connects this community and political participation to the larger issue of gender relations. It considers the dynamics of women's own attitudes toward themselves, men and their rights, in light of their new feminine consciousness of their reality. Through testimonies, interviews and poetry, Nicaraguan women have revealed their thoughts and views on their role in the revolution, and these voices are the central focus of this thesis.

Although the political leadership in Nicaragua has changed many times in the past 30 years, Nicaragua's traditional social structure has, to a large degree, persisted and even worsened in some respects. Even as Nicaragua's turbulent past has been followed by the last 17 years of peace and democracy, perpetual poverty and class discrimination remain critical problems in the country. This thesis argues, however, that Nicaraguan women have provided new opportunities for women and set initiatives in motion that will continue to improve female rights. These

advances have emerged amidst political and social obstacles. The FSLN Revolution created another top-down, elitist Nicaraguan government, *but* it sparked female participation. Violeta Chamorro's administration instituted a traditional counterrevolution, *but* women's movements adapted into autonomous organizations and initiatives, creating even stronger movements.

Therefore, Nicaraguan women offer an exception to the typically backward and underdeveloped image of Latin American countries, especially Nicaragua. The distinct elements of revolution, counterrevolution and civic participation allowed Nicaraguan women to achieve unthinkable advances amidst poverty, discrimination and traditional repression. Thus, studying women, their words, their participation and their actions targets the most enduring obstacle that Nicaragua, as well as Latin America, still faces today—and reveals a unique, underemphasized example of slow, but clear, change.

## OVERALL FRAMEWORK: NICARAGUAN TRENDS AND ACRONYMS

*“Paradoxically, the feminist movement can take advantage of this moment. This is a good time for feminism here. Just like it’s a good time for the Greens, the ecology people. For some movements it’s a good time; for others, it’s not so good.”*

--Dora María Téllez<sup>25</sup>

“Women’s movements” in Nicaragua refer to the overall struggle and change in which women have engaged over the past thirty years. It would be misleading, though, to call this process a single “movement.” It has played out in a mix of groups and initiatives—numerous smaller “movements” within the larger context. This thesis focuses on women’s efforts in the areas of education, healthcare, labor and politics. Different groups of women played different roles in these fields, such as in healthcare, where feminists pushed different issues than more traditional women. Additionally, as the movements evolved, Nicaragua was its own hub of revolution, conflict and progress. This chapter will lay out the framework of these women’s movements and outline major trends that affected each of the following issues that this thesis addresses.

### THE TRADITIONAL ROLE OF WOMEN

It is also important to grasp the context in which women developed in order to discern how women’s movements in Nicaragua differ from other women’s rights struggles. Nicaragua’s historically Catholic society solidified a traditional role for its women—one that emphasized motherhood and domesticity. As Spanish feminist Clara Murguialdy explains, Nicaraguan families were “constructed from the cultural clash between the indigenous model—with its strong tribal and matrilineal characteristics—and those patriarchal values imposed by

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<sup>25</sup> Margaret Randall, *Sandino's Daughters Revisited*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 260.

colonialism during more than three centuries of Spanish domination.”<sup>26</sup> The lineage Murguialdy describes resulted in a multi-layered inferiority for women. It tied them to the home in order to fulfill their duties to the family; it also made women inferior to their male counterparts. As Tomás Borge declared in a speech, women were “the first enslaved human beings on earth.”<sup>27</sup> It was a polemical statement, to be sure, but it articulated the reality of gender inequality in Nicaragua at the beginning of the 1970s.

Latin Americans call the man’s role in this traditional gender structure “*machismo*.” This term refers to a celebrated or exaggerated idea of masculinity. Its roots can also be traced to Spanish colonialism and *caudillismo*, a social structure built around a central, dominant male figure (a *caudillo*) and his loyal followers, as enforced by dictators like Juan Manuel de Rosas in Argentina or Santa Anna in Mexico.<sup>28</sup> The evolution of *machismo* still has personal, social and political consequences for Latin American women today. As scholar Roger Lancaster states, “Machismo, no less than capitalism, is a system.”<sup>29</sup> In Nicaragua, this system manifested itself through gender relations and the belief of both men and women in a preconceived “power relationship” between the two genders. In other words, Nicaraguan culture seasoned men and women to view men as monetarily and relationally stronger than women. The power of *machismo*, though, lies in people’s acceptance of its constructions as normal and inevitable.<sup>30</sup> In this thesis, *machismo* is especially important in two respects: first, to understand the ideology that women, whether feminists or “feminine,” were both realizing and trying to change. Second,

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<sup>26</sup> Claire Murguialdy, *Nicaragua, revolución y feminismo (1977-1989)* (Madrid: Editorial Revolución S.A.L., 1990), 14.

<sup>27</sup> Tomás Borge, “Women and the Nicaraguan Revolution” (speech presented at women’s rally, León, Nicaragua, 29 September 1982) in *Nicaragua: The Sandinista People’s Revolution: Speeches by Sandinista Leaders* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1985), 48.

<sup>28</sup> Victoria González and Karen Kampwirth, *Radical Women in Latin America, Left and Right* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 2.

<sup>29</sup> Roger Lancaster, *Life Is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 19.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 20.

when *machismo* works as a system in a society, it is more engrained in both men *and* women's beliefs, thereby making it a deeper, more formidable structure to change.

Women's movements attempted to break away from this traditional idea of women—to eliminate hardships due to gender discrimination and expected domestic responsibilities. Therefore, “women's rights” (as used in this thesis) include the social abilities or resources that aided women in their daily lives or against *machismo* (for instance, childcare, better healthcare, more equal pay or better job opportunities). Women's own opinions of “women's rights” differed, though. As Milú Vargas describes, “there were different groups of women. Some of us were considered more radical...others were considered more traditional.”<sup>31</sup> Radical women believed in a more revolutionary transition of women out of the house while more traditional women supported changes that would ease how women fulfilled their traditional role. Others did not support changes at all, and opposed many of the laws or rights women's movements tried to enact. In the 1990s, a sharper division between feminists and non-feminists separated Nicaraguan women. Sonia Alvarez eloquently delineates the difference between “feminist organizing” and “feminine organizing:” a feminist “seeks to transform the roles society assigns to women, challenges existing gender power arrangements, and claims women's rights to personal autonomy and equality...feminine organizing is a way of promoting women's well-being within the context of their traditional roles without directly challenging the gender division of power.”<sup>32</sup> While women themselves had differing opinions on women's rights or their roles in society, as this thesis will show, many women, of very different cultural, political, and ideological positions, strove to mobilize Nicaraguan women and create new opportunities for them at the end of the century.

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<sup>31</sup> Randall, *Sandino's Daughters Revisited*, 140.

<sup>32</sup> Sonia Alvarez, *Engendering Democracy in Brazil: Women's Movements in Transition Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 24.



## WOMEN IN THE INSURRECTION

Women in Nicaragua attempted to mobilize several times before the 1970s, but without much success. They participated in various ways, for example, during Augusto Sandino's rebellion in the late 1920s and early 1930s. They worked as messengers, managed army camps, and in some cases, engaged in combat.<sup>33</sup> In the 1932 U.S.-supervised elections, women petitioned unsuccessfully for the right to vote, finally winning the right in 1955 (although this right was virtually meaningless in the dictatorship).<sup>34</sup> A few different groups attempted to mobilize women during the 1960s, but each to no avail. The Nicaraguan Socialist Party created the Organization of Democratic Women of Nicaragua (*Organización de Mujeres Democráticas de Nicaragua*, OMDN), which never played a significant role, but several of its members became active in the FSLN and women's movement.<sup>35</sup> Gladys Báez, for one, joined the FSLN in 1966 and created the Patriotic Alliance of Nicaraguan Women (*Alianza Patriótica de Mujeres Nicaragüenses*, APMN) on Sandinista directorate orders. This group began with a meeting in which only three women attended—not quite the turnout the leaders would have envisioned. Despite an uninspiring beginning, the women still spoke triumphantly about their efforts; one attendee, María Enríquez, stated, “for the first time in our lives we had called upon ourselves to meet as women to discuss our role in Nicaraguan society.”<sup>36</sup> Contrary to María's statement, these first organizations show how the women's movement actually did not start on their own accord, but through other political groups. Ultimately, the women's movement developed inextricably through the Sandinista Revolution. This early alignment both limited and fostered the

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<sup>33</sup> Randall, *Sandino's Daughters Revisited*, 11.

<sup>34</sup> González and Kampwirth, 31.

<sup>35</sup> Randall, *Sandino's Daughters Revisited*, 16.

<sup>36</sup> Magda Enríquez, “We Women Learned What We Were Capable of Doing” (speech presented at women's meeting, San José, California, 29 February 1984) in *Nicaragua: The Sandinista People's Revolution*, 285.

movement's growth, and the extent to which has been debated between female leaders and scholars.

The Association of Women Facing the Nation's Problems (*Asociación de Mujeres ante la Problemática Nacional, AMPRONAC*) functioned as the central engine of female mobilization during the insurrection. While women's movements encompassed much larger changes than those facilitated by AMPRONAC, the organization and its leaders initiated and fostered the majority of female organization in their early stages. Also founded on the FSLN's orders, AMPRONAC kicked off in 1977 and targeted women's rights and the Revolution's causes as the organization's foundation.<sup>37</sup> In a publication entitled, *Mujer en Nicaragua*, AMPRONAC leaders published nine goals for their organization:

1. Respect for human rights.
2. Freedom of political organization.
3. Freedom for *campesino* and political prisoners detained or tried unjustly.
4. Punishment to those guilty of torture and crimes against innocent citizens.
5. International solidarity in respect to the Nicaraguan cause.
6. Equal civil rights.
7. End to the commercialization of women.
8. Equal salary for equal work.
9. Rights to the land for who works the land.<sup>38</sup>

Notably, only one of AMPRONAC's goals directly addressed women (the seventh goal). Other goals, such as "respect for human rights" or "equal salary for equal work," definitely applied to areas where women suffered discrimination, but were stated in terms that supported equal rights for Nicaragua's population as a whole, not just women. This tone reflects the egalitarian rhetoric of the FSLN and the idealistic goals championed by Sandinistas during the insurrection. They indicate how the first successful women's organization actually started as a revolutionary

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<sup>37</sup> Marc Zimmerman, ed., *Nicaragua in Reconstruction and at War: The People Speak* (Minneapolis: MEP Publications, 1985), 60.

<sup>38</sup> Asociación de Mujeres Nicaragüenses Luisa Amanda Espinosa, *Mujer en Nicaragua* (Managua: Editorial Nueva Nicaragua), 14.

organization with a feminine focus. This tie between women and the FSLN, though, created more opportunities for women. Their widespread participation in revolutionary activities, and the relationship between the two movements fostered the surge in female mobilization during the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Throughout the insurrection, AMPRONAC participated in protests, strikes, street demonstrations and marches.<sup>39</sup> As co-founder Lea Guido described, the goal in creating a woman's organization "was always to get women to participate more actively in the solution to our country's social and economic problems."<sup>40</sup> This participation helped create the necessary foundation for diverse, strong women's movements. It revolutionized women in three main ways: by addressing a wide range of issues, incorporating working-class women in large numbers, and pursuing radical changes (such as women fighting with the military). This participation was pivotal to the insurrection, but even more remarkable for women.

AMPRONAC's role as an FSLN organization was especially effective in sparking large-scale women's movements because it created so many new opportunities for Nicaraguan women.

The president of the Nicaraguan Women's Movement organization (*Movimiento de Mujeres Nicaragüenses. MMN*), Francis Blandón, pointed to two main reasons why women became involved in the Revolution: they wanted to leave their domestic roles and explore other opportunities, and their economic problems provoked or necessitated them to do so.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, while most Nicaraguan women did not have the "luxury" of time or money to fight for women's rights, they were pushed to address problems such as hunger or lack of medical resources. In the context of the Revolution, these women were remarkably productive. They set up underground

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<sup>39</sup> Lorraine Bayard de Volo, *Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs: Gender Identity Politics in Nicaragua, 1979-1999* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 25.

<sup>40</sup> Randall, *Sandino's Daughters: Testimonies of Nicaraguan Women in Struggle* (Vancouver/Toronto: New Star Books, 1981), 4.

<sup>41</sup> Ada Julia Brenes, et al, *La mujer nicaragüense en los años 80* (Managua: Ediciones Nicarao, 1991), 22.

first-aid courses and used their homes to host “clinics” to tend to injured guerrillas. They established neighborhood grocery stores as “covers” for storehouses with rice, beans and other basic foodstuffs. They even wrote letters to wives of the National Guard insisting they tell their husbands they were destroying their own country.<sup>42</sup> Through these initiatives, women created a growing network of cooperation. Saida Rugama, a secondary school teacher in Managua, remarked, “we did whatever we could to protect, to strengthen, to unify the people...we did what we could to resist Somoza.”<sup>43</sup> This common opposition and the opportunities to engage in the Revolution created the fundamental framework for women’s movements that reached more women than ever before.

Women engaged in more combative roles as well. In one demonstration, Lea Guido described how opposition troops threw canisters of tear gas at the women, who “threw the canisters right back at them.”<sup>44</sup> After Pedro Joaquín Chamorro’s assassination, women organized with other protesters outside his office, shouting through megaphones.<sup>45</sup> As opposition to Somoza escalated, the women joined with the Association of Rural Workers (*Asociación de Trabajadores Campesinos, ATC*) in a massive hunger march in Diriamba in April 1978. This march showed how women were incorporated in the larger movement.<sup>46</sup> Maribel Duriez, a young revolutionary, remembered that when her friends organized a demonstration in the community, “all the townspeople participated, too [...] that was when I decided to work clandestinely for the Frente [the FSLN].”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Randall, *Sandino’s Daughters*, 23.

<sup>43</sup> Alvin Levie, *Nicaragua: The People Speak* (South Hadley, MA: Bergen & Garvey Publishers, Inc., 1985), 14.

<sup>44</sup> Randall, *Sandino’s Daughters*, 6-7.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>46</sup> Zimmerman, 61.

<sup>47</sup> Denis Lynn Daly Heyck, *Life Stories of the Nicaraguan Revolution* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1990), 154.

Despite this revolutionary rhetoric, the creation of the main women's organization under the FSLN caused intrinsic contradictions within AMPRONAC. Generally speaking, women's rights were not the primary concern of AMPRONAC, and the organization also simplified women into one group under the pretense of a unified goal. After the insurrection, the organization continued under FSLN leadership, but changed its name to the Association of Nicaraguan Women "Luisa Amanda Espinosa" (*Asociación de Mujeres Nicaraguenses "Luisa Amanda Espinosa,"* AMNLAE).<sup>48</sup> Ruth Herrera, the Labor Party adviser to the National Workers' Front (*Frente Nacional de Trabajadores,* FNT) explained that "the [FSLN] always had the AMNLAE leadership more committed to its membership in the party than to its leadership role for women...The tasks carried out by AMNLAE placed a higher priority on the party than on women...The FSLN listened to us, but they never took our demands seriously."<sup>49</sup> Considering AMNLAE's identity as an organization created by the FSLN party, this prioritizing of party over gender makes sense. It still is significant, however, because it created inherent complexities in the birth of women's movements—the movements were technically created *by* men and supported a male-dominated party at the outset. This problem became clearer as the 1980s ended and the party suffered increasingly from its own political struggles. Issues that the FSLN had made an effort to support before, such as women's rights, took a backseat to the more pressing needs of economic downturn and warfare. This "inferiority" infuriated many of AMNLAE's leaders and led to AMNLAE's disassociation from the FSLN.

Likewise, AMNLAE simply could not represent all of women's diverse demands in a single organization. As the women's movement grew, the organization could not defend "the

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<sup>48</sup> Helen Collinson ed., *Women and Revolution in Nicaragua* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1990), 140. Luisa Amanda Espinosa was the first woman to lose her life in combat during the insurrection.

<sup>49</sup> Erica Polakoff and Pierre La Ramée, "Grass-Roots Organizations" in Thomas W. Walker, ed., *Nicaragua Without Illusions: Regime Transition and Structural Adjustment in the 1990s* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1997), 191.

distinct and conflicting interests, experiences, needs, identities, and allegiances” of all women, and, at times, AMNLAE was accused of only representing the middle-class properly.<sup>50</sup> As a result, AMNLAE adopted the slogan “*Somos AMNLAE*” (“We Are AMNLAE”) in December of 1981 as an effort to better include all women. The leaders of the organization believed that “AMNLAE could be everywhere.”<sup>51</sup> This all-encompassing representation did not pan out as women became frustrated that the organization could not meet or prioritize their needs. Therefore, AMNLAE lost female support in the late 1980s, and women pursued other avenues if they sought to continue participating in the women’s movement.

#### **MAJOR TRENDS IN WOMEN’S MOBILIZATION**

These changes addressed some problems, but the movement went through several significant transitions through the 1980s and 1990s. After the insurrection, the movement traversed four principal stages: growth through the FSLN from 1979 to 1984; struggling and a decline in participation from 1985 to 1987; restructuring from 1988 to 1991; and the growth of an autonomous movement that took hold in 1992. Each of these stages addressed the movement as a whole, and the development in specific fields did not always follow these guidelines. These general trends, however, are important in conceptualizing the movement on a larger scale, and assessing the dynamics of certain issues and whether they follow the general development of the movement.

The early 1980s were characterized by a surge in civic participation throughout Nicaragua, and especially so in the revolutionary participation of women. The FSLN declared women’s emancipation as a goal of the Revolution, and worked with leading women to

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Randall, *Sandino’s Daughters Revisited*, 29.

incorporate more women in the workforce and provide better resources for women's health, education, and overall well-being.<sup>52</sup> While this mobilization was still rudimentary in its efficiency and goals, women were involved socially and economically in a capacity they had never been before.<sup>53</sup> In the mid-1980s, however, civil war and economic issues consumed the FSLN's attention and displayed cracks in the party's ability to fulfill its goals. While the organization had championed issues like women's rights in the beginning, they increasingly abandoned these programs to fight larger national problems, such as the civil war (called the Contra War), economic strangulation and tense international relations. As Michele Najlis describes, "the Nicaragua in which we lived beginning around 1985 had changed considerably from the Nicaragua of 1979. You heard the same rhetoric, but the reality was very different."<sup>54</sup> Much of the progress made by women—increased civic participation, access to healthcare and education, political gains—slowed or even reversed in the late 1980s. Women who had previously supported AMNLAE also turned away from the organization, dissatisfied with its ability to continue improving women's rights. By the end of the decade, therefore, many women had withdrawn support for both AMNLAE and the FSLN.

In 1990, Nicaragua elected its first female president, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro. Ironically, Violeta only increased opposition to women's movements by reasserting traditional gender ideology, through both rhetoric and legislation. This move, however, was a blessing in disguise for the women's movement because it united women against a common enemy. As support for a single women's organization waned, numerous women's organizations and

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<sup>52</sup> Tomás Borge. "Women and the Nicaraguan Revolution."

<sup>53</sup> It is difficult to assess exact numbers to measure women's mobilization or even membership in organizations. Helen Collinson, in *Women and Revolution in Nicaragua*, referenced meetings held by AMNLE in 1985 throughout Nicaragua and recorded attendance by 40,000 women (143). Unfortunately, the extent of activities women engaged in and the large number of women's organizations by the 1990s makes a concrete number estimate for women's participation unavailable.

<sup>54</sup> Randall, *Sandino's Daughters*, 56.

initiatives formed during the beginning of the 1990s. As women's leader Vidaluz Meneses believed, "the proliferation of organizations working for women in Nicaragua today is significant...I believe the different sectors of Nicaraguan women have been attracted to the various groups that exist."<sup>55</sup> As another female leader, Doris Tijerino, expressed, the women's movement in the 1990s pursued a "decentralization" that resulted in a number of different organizations and projects.<sup>56</sup> So, as this restructuring took place, women emerged in the 1990s with the beginning of autonomous movements. This change was fundamental because women broke from their previous dependence on a political party, as had characterized their movement throughout the 1980s, and used this opportunity to build independent movements. While it is easy to focus on either the progress or the continued discrimination against women in Nicaragua, the actual balance between this forward and backward evolution best defines the women's movement as a whole.

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<sup>55</sup> Randall, *Sandino's Daughters Revisited*, 163.

<sup>56</sup> Autoridad Sueca para el Desarrollo Internacional, *Descripción de Organizaciones y Proyectos para Mujeres en Nicaragua* (Managua: July, 1986).



### EDUCATION: A REVOLUTIONARY PRIMER

*"I saw how parents were kissing and hugging  
their children who were saying: 'I'll be back soon.'  
Everything was laughter and weeping.  
The streets seemed to be left isolated,  
The neighborhoods alone.  
My sister Rosibel made her goodbye and cried;  
I was calm. she carried her joy with her to that place  
Where she would teach the people to read..."*  
--Manuel Adolfo Mongalo, "The Brigadistas"<sup>57</sup>

The dramatic changes in Nicaragua's educational system have epitomized the struggles over both political and gender issues during the past 30 years. In the 1980s and 1990s, the desire to learn and teach helped shape the women that triggered this transformation in Nicaraguan education. The changes in curriculum instituted by various administrations, however, showcased the battle over gender roles in Nicaragua. In retrospect, education was a prime field for this maelstrom to play out. First, the system was in shambles: in the 1970s, the illiteracy rate ranged from 60%-90% in rural areas and only one in twenty children completed primary education.<sup>58</sup> Also, in the early 1980s the FSLN-dominated Ministry of Education viewed education as a tool with which the "popular masses" could acquire the "first instruments needed to develop awareness of their exploitation and to fight for liberation."<sup>59</sup> Finally, twentieth-century stereotypes typically identify women with work in the field of education. The Literacy Crusade in the early 1980s helped bring some influential women to national prominence. Education, therefore, was a key vehicle that suddenly brought women into the national limelight.

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<sup>57</sup> Marc Zimmerman, ed. *Nicaragua in Reconstruction & at War: The People Speak* (Minneapolis: MEP Publications, 1985), 184.

<sup>58</sup> Robert Arnove. "Nicaraguan National Literacy Crusade of 1980," *Comparative Education Review*. Vol. 25, No. 2. (Jun., 1981), 245, and Helen Collinson, ed., *Women and Revolution in Nicaragua* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 1991), 122.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 245.

While Nicaraguan women still face pressures that challenge their right to education, they have played a central role in the evolving field since the 1970s. In 1971, for example, 42.9% of women were illiterate, only slightly more than 42% of illiterate men.<sup>60</sup> Illiteracy rates remained almost equal throughout the twentieth century. By 2000, 35.8% of women, close to the 35.6% of men, could not read and write.<sup>61</sup> Costa Rica boasts similar trends, but El Salvador and Guatemala, for example (countries that share Nicaragua's history of economic and political instability), show a much larger disparity between men and women.<sup>62</sup> When compared to other Central American countries, then, these rates display a remarkable equality. The portrayal of women *within* educational material, however, has not always followed this progressive trend. Especially in the 1990s, women battled the government against the portrayal of women in traditional female roles in schoolbooks and curriculum resources. This traditional imagery in learning resources strongly contradicts women's movements, representing the government's opposition to women's rights.

#### EARLY IMPROVEMENTS IN EDUCATION

The FSLN's greatest achievement was the National Literacy Crusade in 1980. Called the "Year of Literacy," an estimated 225,000 Nicaraguans volunteered to teach 722,000 illiterates to read and write.<sup>63</sup> In less than a year, these volunteers reduced the illiteracy rate from roughly 50% to 13%.<sup>64</sup> While all sources cite a crusade of this magnitude, none specifically outline what the term "literacy" measured—most likely, these statistics were exaggerated and not measured

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<sup>60</sup> James W. Wilkie, Eduardo Alemán and José Guadalupe Ortega, eds., *Statistical Abstract of Latin America*, Volume 37 (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center Publications, University of California, 2001), 184. These statistics apply to women and men 15 years and older.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Arnove, "The Nicaraguan National Literacy Crusade of 1980," 249.

<sup>64</sup> James W. Wilkie and David Lorey, eds., *Statistical Abstract of Latin America*, Volume 25 (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center Publications, University of California, 1987), 148.

under any set of strict standards. However, the scale of women's participation and the initiative taken is more important than the specific numbers in this project—the Literacy Crusade served as a transition between the insurrection and the revolution. Robert Arnove wrote that “wherever I went...people were teaching and learning...in barns while chickens and pigs, chased by children, scurried about; on front porches; in the living rooms of adobe huts, while babies slept in mothers' arms...”<sup>65</sup> The Crusade was simultaneously the first, most successful and most widespread operation of the FSLN government—and notably, women made up 60% of the teachers who volunteered to participate.<sup>66</sup> After the FSLN incorporated so many women in the insurrection, the Literacy Crusade became an opportune transition for many of these motivated women into a new era of Nicaraguan society. Instead of returning home, many women organized for civic issues—at least 135,000 for education—a lasting skill that allowed the movement to eventually survive beyond the FSLN's years in power.

One teacher from Estelí, Mercedita Talavera, remembered, “we worked from sunrise to sunset, classes for kids in the morning and for adults in the afternoon and evening, and even at weekends we'd do things like decorate the room we used for classes...”<sup>67</sup> Mercedita clearly committed herself to the crusade and her words reflect the dedication of women to the Literacy Campaign and the quality of their work. Their accounts, even years after the crusade, swelled with an idealistic sense of hope and success. In the late 1980s Verónica Cáceres, a *brigadista* who taught in Río Blanco, Zelaya, declared that “the crusade was something marvelous, when I hear the anthem...I can still feel the same emotion I felt at the time. We reached so many people.

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<sup>65</sup> Arnove, “The Nicaraguan National Literacy Crusade of 1980,” 247.

<sup>66</sup> Helen Collinson ed., *Women and Revolution in Nicaragua* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1990), 124.

<sup>67</sup> Collinson, 124. Dania was interviewed in 1987 by Stephanie Williamson.

and the dedication, motivation, enthusiasm of the young people was phenomenal.”<sup>68</sup> Verónica’s participation continued to move her, even at the end of the decade when the Crusade’s success began to erode. Her optimism displays changing attitudes that affected so many female volunteers. Many participants spoke of a tangible sense of achievement that invested them with a positive idea of what women could accomplish in civic organizations, one that women had rarely experienced under Somoza.

This sense of accomplishment motivated these women to continue their involvement in community organizations *and* to better themselves. Dania Buitano Colema volunteered in the Literacy Crusade as a young teenager. While it is remarkable that Dania chose to teach at such a young age, she also stated that, “while teaching, I myself studied. I read the works of Sandino, Fonseca, Marx, and Lenin.”<sup>69</sup> In the midst of her interview, Dania glossed over this phenomenon, but it reveals much about her. Dania had to view herself as a capable young woman who not only educated others, but also took the initiative to teach herself. Furthermore, it can be assumed that her study of Socialist thinkers reinforced her beliefs in a more egalitarian society. While the FSLN was not a Socialist party, it drew many core ideas from Socialism. Therefore, Dania’s reading displays how the FSLN ideologies actually motivated women to pursue more equal rights, another factor that led the FSLN to foster women’s movements. Dania went on to become the political commissar of an 800-person militia battalion at the age of seventeen.<sup>70</sup> The Literacy Campaign’s success helped initiate the self-confidence that spread among many women engaged in civic action in the early 1980s. As one newly literate woman wrote to *Barricada* in 1984, “already since the Crusade we working-class women have shaken

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<sup>68</sup> Denis Lynn Daly Heyck, *Life Stories of the Nicaraguan Revolution* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1990), 147.

<sup>69</sup> Alvin Levie, *Nicaragua: The People Speak* (South Hadley, MA: Bergen & Garvey Publishers, Inc., 1985), 188.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

the idea that there is nothing for women to study for; some of us want to become dressmakers, midwives...but we have also found a new occupation...before long we became...teachers.”<sup>71</sup>

This woman’s words embody the ideological shift that caused women to develop both dissatisfaction with their previous role in society and gumption to fight for new opportunities.

The Literacy Campaign not only succeeded in teaching Nicaraguans to read and write, but also moved women to pursue more educational opportunities. After the Crusade, the government created Popular Education Centers (*Centros de Educación Populares, CEPs*), programs that aimed to continue educating Nicaraguans. Women dominated this effort, making up 95% of the teachers.<sup>72</sup> AMNLAE played no small role: 400 of the organization’s members worked as CEP coordinators and it also created 196 Mother’s Literacy Committees.<sup>73</sup> These groups of women provided food, clothing and other staples for CEP workers and even constructed 42 rural mini-libraries.<sup>74</sup> This remarkable organization of women, inside and outside the AMNLAE, showed how the Literacy Crusade triggered Nicaraguan women’s civic participation. As scholar Katherine Isbester stated. “finally, [the Literacy Crusade] empowered women by breaking the silence on women’s reality.”<sup>75</sup> Most importantly, it broke the silence for the women themselves.

## GROWING OPPOSITION AND THE NEW CURRICULUM

Not all women felt this enthusiasm for education, and they especially split along generational lines. Liseth Mena, a twenty-three year old living in Managua in the early 1980s,

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<sup>71</sup> Collinson, 124.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Katherine Isbester, *Still Fighting: The Nicaraguan Women’s Movement, 1977-2000* (Pittsburgh: The University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), 51.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

studied psychology for five years at the University of Central America. “My life is full,” she explained, because she attended university and also worked full time, “Don’t ask me when I sleep.”<sup>76</sup> Her mother, Marina Isabel Mena de Cano, expressed the opposite: “Me? I have no recreation, no social life. The only enjoyment I have is four or five mornings a week I go to my exercise class.”<sup>77</sup> Unlike her daughter, Marina only expressed discontent with her life. She never hinted at the possibility of changing it, instead, she only “[had] worries, many worries.”<sup>78</sup> Marina’s discontent probably resulted from her need to work, many responsibilities and less idealism than many younger Nicaraguans had. Liseth exuded confidence as she discussed her desire to study at the University of Mexico or in East Germany. She recognized money as “a consideration,” and she was “working very hard to get a scholarship.”<sup>79</sup> Marina, however, was more realistic: “[Liseth] wants to go on—to continue her schooling in Mexico. But for that you need dollars. Who has dollars?”<sup>80</sup> Liseth’s perception of her mother highlights the generational differences that separated women in the 1980s:

My mother—she’s a good person and we respect each other’s views. She’s a good woman, and she has many problems, financial and otherwise. But she comes from a different time. She is a strong individualist. She sees everything from a very personal point of view. She has not yet developed a collective outlook. So it is very difficult for her. Maybe she’ll change. For her happiness, I hope so.<sup>81</sup>

Liseth’s belief in a “collective outlook” mirrors the Socialist foundations of the Sandinista party, a tendency that was also carried by many of the leaders of the women’s movement. Since so many of the women’s movement’s leaders aligned themselves with the Sandinistas politically, this ideology was reflected in many young female students (such as Dania and her socialist

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<sup>76</sup> Levie, 34.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

reading). This new thinking broke from older women who still held traditional values, opening another complexity in women's unity. These generational differences continued, but reveal how the Sandinista's collective values promoted young women's involvement in revolutionary activities to promote community development.

By 1990, however, the revolution's energy had waned and education suffered from the struggle as well. While enrollment rates had increased, 150,000 children still did not attend school and only 22% of those who entered primary school in the first grade completed the sixth grade.<sup>82</sup> Sources estimate that by 1987 the illiteracy rate had risen to 23%,<sup>83</sup> and by 1990 it had reached 37.2%.<sup>84</sup> This increase in illiteracy could be credited to a number of reasons: less children in school learning to read, or different standards could have been used to measure literacy, as examples. Women especially suffered the effects of this stalled improvement in education. Many teachers were forced to abandon their jobs because their salary did not support them and their families.<sup>85</sup> Women, therefore, suffered disproportionately because teaching was an overwhelmingly female profession: at the end of the 1980s, women composed 70% of primary level teachers, 75% of secondary level teachers and 55% of university level teachers (in addition to the aforementioned 95% of CEP teachers).<sup>86</sup> By the end of the 1980s, the organization of CEPs began to fall apart. Clearly, many women suffered from the job loss and pay cuts.

Veronica Cáceres taught classes in psychology at the Autonomous National University of Nicaragua (*Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Nicaragua, UNAN*) during the revolution. In a

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<sup>82</sup> Robert Arnove, "Education as Contested Terrain in Nicaragua," *Comparative Education Review*, Vol. 39, No. 1, Special Issue on Education in Latin America (Feb., 1995) 4.

<sup>83</sup> Collinson, 125.

<sup>84</sup> Wilkie, *Statistical Abstract of Latin America* Volume 37, 184.

<sup>85</sup> Arnove, "Education as Contested Terrain in Nicaragua," 4.

<sup>86</sup> Collinson, 132.

late 1980s interview, she expressed her desire to stay in Managua to take classes and teach at the university, but “life in Managua is very difficult for me in my situation, because I have a two and half year old daughter...the problem with the preschool is that it does not last all day...I have no one to take care of her in the afternoon.”<sup>87</sup> While the fact that preschools existed suggests a positive improvement, it seems peculiar that Verónica could not find an afternoon daycare in Nicaragua’s largest city. This struggle between maternal and career responsibilities hinders women everywhere, but many Nicaraguans did not have access to the appropriate resources (such as daycare) to ease the problem.<sup>88</sup> As Verónica concluded, “for me, child care and work arrangements will soon become nearly impossible if I stay here.”<sup>89</sup> This dilemma affected women during Somoza’s dictatorship, bettered considerably when the Sandinistas took power, and became a problem again in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Many women faced economic struggles, lack of childcare and other problems that redirected their attention to traditional problems and dulled the momentum of women’s movements.

Ironically, though the FSLN had made education their top priority in 1980, they mobilized many higher institutions and universities for defense purposes at the end of the decade.<sup>90</sup> Maribel Duriez, a bright young student of UNAN, had been a Sandinista revolutionary since the age of fourteen. In 1981, the FSLN sent her to Facultad Preparatoria, an accelerated high school program, but “in 1982 they called me up in the army again... they mobilized me, so I had to quit the Preparatoria.”<sup>91</sup> Maribel’s experience reflects the changing dynamics of the relationship between the FSLN and women’s movements. While the Frente promoted many of

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<sup>87</sup> Heyck, 148.

<sup>88</sup> While the number of daycares was insufficient in Nicaragua, women made a large effort to create more during the 1980s and 1990s. This initiative will be further discussed in the Labor section, the fourth chapter of this thesis.

<sup>89</sup> Heyck, 149.

<sup>90</sup> Arnove, “Education as Contested Terrain in Nicaragua,” 4.

<sup>91</sup> Heyck, 160-1.



the changes for women and arguably initiated these very movements, the FSLN consistently drew back their support as pressure on the government created mounting problems in the 1980s. As Maribel concluded, “many students now do not share my political commitment. I am unusual, not the average, I realize.”<sup>92</sup> Maribel’s perception of her peers outlines the disconnect that arose between Nicaraguans and the FSLN. The transition between the 1980s and 1990s ushered in difficult times for men and women, but this growing disillusionment with the FSLN especially affected women. Drawing back from the political party led them to a growing sense of autonomy, which developed over the next decade and resulted in a much stronger overall movement.

Ironically, Violeta Chamorro’s 1990 election brought drastic changes in Nicaragua’s educational system, ones that challenged the foundation of women’s movements. The National Opposition Union (*Unión Nacional de Oposición. UNO*), Violeta Chamorro’s party, criticized the FSLN for using the educational system as an instrument to strengthen support for the revolution. Violeta even accused the FSLN of recruiting thousands of Literacy Crusade volunteers by mixing drugs in the teachers’ sodas.<sup>93</sup> While that idea clearly has never been substantiated, the FSLN did include strong revolutionary rhetoric in their curriculum materials. The texts frequently referenced Augusto César Sandino and other Sandinista figures, and a third grade math text, for example, posed this question: “The ANS [the Sandinista youth organization for primary school children] honored the children of a school with 300 mascot scarves and 97 *Carlitos* [named after FSLN founder, Carlos Fonseca Amador]. How many scarves did the school distribute?”<sup>94</sup> Violeta’s administration replaced this revolutionary focus and re-

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<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*, 162.

<sup>93</sup> Karen Kampwirth, *Feminism and the Legacy of Revolution: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas* (Athens: The Center for International Studies, Ohio University, Ohio University Press, 2004), 52.

<sup>94</sup> Armove, “Education as Contested Terrain in Nicaragua,” 33.

implemented traditional Catholic values. Twelve million dollars and seven million new textbooks later, the new government had completely altered Nicaragua's educational materials with conservative, anti-FSLN ones in less than a year.<sup>95</sup>

The new textbooks, called the Morals and Civics series, posed problems for women who sought new opportunities and a new image for themselves. Illustrations in the books showed women dressed in aprons in the kitchen and as happy mothers scrubbing the floors, while men rested at home in "stuffed chairs" or employed in paying jobs.<sup>96</sup> The fourth grade text actually attempted to define women's "mission," stating that "the sexual mission of women is very tightly linked with the maternal mission. Maternity is very much the essence of being a woman as paternity is of being a male."<sup>97</sup> The field of education became a cultural battleground between the egalitarian goals of the FSLN and the UNO's efforts to restore the traditional family structure that characterized Somoza's rule. As scholar Karen Kampwirth described the conflict, Violeta Chamorro advocated a structure "in which women traded subordination for security" as opposed to female activists who fought for an "unknown future of gender equality." While the FSLN promoted notions of female liberation, the Sandinistas fell short of achieving them<sup>98</sup> Facing Violeta's attempts to reestablish traditionalism, the women's movement gradually shifted its focus to address the very ideology that was so evident in the UNO's education restructuring.

The field of education had space for women to lead change and mobilize in large numbers. With such success and government support at the start, women gained organizational skills and confidence in a progressive move for Nicaraguan women. This confidence was even more significant because it enabled women to pursue change in other fields where men

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<sup>95</sup> *Ibid*, 33-4. The \$12.7 million was granted by USAID [U.S. Agency for International Development] in 1990.

<sup>96</sup> Kampwirth, 53.

<sup>97</sup> Arno, "Education as Contested Terrain in Nicaragua," 35.

<sup>98</sup> Kampwirth, 54.

challenged women more tenaciously. Therefore, through the mid-1980s and forward, women sought out improvements in healthcare, labor equality and political rights to bolster their movements. They built off the success and challenges of the education movement to pinpoint and highlight the core of women's issues and struggles.

## HEALTHCARE: WOMEN'S PRACTICE OF DEMOCRACY

*“For me, Dora María's most important contribution to the Sandinista overnment was her position as minister of public health. She received the ministry in disorder, and she made a list of priorities. One by one she did what she ahd to do, until that place was in tip-top shape. They say that when she handed it over everything was computerized; you could predict an epidemic anywhere in the country.”*

--Don Ramón Téllez, Dora María Téllez's father<sup>99</sup>

In the 1980s, healthcare became another central battlefield that both united and divided women. Due to Nicaragua's longstanding religious and gender conservatism, issues such as abortion, childbirth and contraception have sparked spirited debates among women's groups. Healthcare, on the whole, slowly improved throughout the 1980s and 1990s and reflected the social changes taking place in Nicaragua. As author Katherine Isbester states, “the health care movement...did not operate within the government's health care structure” and it was “well accepted that women's health was the cornerstone of the women's movement...”<sup>100</sup> The dynamics of healthcare have evolved based on many different interests, both of women and the government. In the 1980s, many women mobilized to improve Nicaraguan healthcare, and subsequently, feminine issues (midwifery, abortion and childbirth) gravitated to the center of attention. Due to its distinct relevance to both civic and feminine issues, healthcare debates highlight nuances of the changing gender relations.

### WOMEN AND GENERAL HEALTHCARE

When the FSLN took power, women's healthcare seemed almost primordial. “The birth of the children was sad,” remembered Doña María, an elderly woman during an interview in the early 1980s. As she described, “the children were born at home in bed, and I'd get up from there

<sup>99</sup> Margaret Randall, *Sandino's Daughters Revisited*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 246.

<sup>100</sup> Katherine Isbester, *Still Fighting: The Nicaraguan Women's Movement, 1977-2000* (Pittsburgh: The University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), 150.

to look for food. Six of my children died as babies. The neighbors helped me when I gave birth...the fathers left me.”<sup>101</sup> Prior to the revolution, only 20% of pregnant women received any type of medical treatment.<sup>102</sup> Due to this blatant inadequacy, the FSLN created the Ministry of Health (*Ministerio de Salud, MINSA*) in 1979, an organization which focused on women and changed healthcare. After witnessing the early successes of the Literacy Crusade, MINSA began to incorporate health education into the literacy program. First training literacy workers in malaria prevention, MINSA built a successful health campaign that trained tens of thousands of healthcare *brigadistas* in disease control and vaccination for polio, measles and tetanus.<sup>103</sup> By 1983 polio had been “effectively eradicated,” and by 1986 malaria cases fell by an estimated 50%.<sup>104</sup> In regard to more feminine concerns, MINSA created the Maternal and Child Health program in 1979, notably the first comprehensive program the ministry established.<sup>105</sup> Shortly thereafter, Lea Guido, who had been active within the FSLN throughout the insurrection, became the Minister of Health and headed up MINSA from 1980-1986. These two examples illustrate how feminine health issues received more attention from the beginning of the FSLN administrations. In 1983, the World Health Organization recognized Nicaragua with the award for “greatest advances made in healthcare by a developing country.”<sup>106</sup> This campaign quickly became a central issue around which the women rallied, although it has been a polemical, heated and complex struggle.

Early cooperation with the FSLN created more opportunities for women to volunteer in healthcare, and established a foundation that fostered women’s later organizational techniques.

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<sup>101</sup> Dianne Walta Hart, *Thanks to God and the Revolution: The Oral History of a Nicaraguan Family*, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 34.

<sup>102</sup> Helen Collinson, ed., *Women and Revolution in Nicaragua* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 1991), 96.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.* *Brigadistas* is defined as a “participant in popular ‘brigades’ for health, literacy, coffee-picking, etc.”

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>105</sup> Richard Garfield and Glen Williams, *Health Care in Nicaragua: Primary Care Under Changing Regimes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 113.

<sup>106</sup> Collinson, 95.

They mobilized in overwhelming numbers: of the aforementioned *brigadistas*, 75% were women.<sup>107</sup> AMNLAE also assumed healthcare as one of its main goals. In a 1984 AMNLAE publication, *Mujer*, the organization called on women to extend their civic commitments to include health-related issues, such as “vaccination, hygiene and prevention.”<sup>108</sup> AMNLAE also reported the creation of nine infant development centers and thirteen infant feeding services.<sup>109</sup> Modesta Martínez, a middle-aged woman when interviewed in 1984, worked at the Child Development Center in Ocotal. She explained how, “before [the revolution], if you had no money, you could die for all anyone cared.”<sup>110</sup> Due to the health brigade in her community, “we learn first aid, we clean up places that breed sickness, we learn about the proper things to eat. The aim, you see, is to prevent sickness, so that we don’t get sick, don’t have to see the doctor.”<sup>111</sup> As Modesta’s experience reflects, these *brigadistas* reached small towns and rural areas and drastically improved health awareness, prevention and access to medicine. Women also made up the majority of the Health Worker’s Federation (*Federación de Trabajadores de Salud, FETSALUD*).<sup>112</sup> These organizations invited women to participate in civic actions in a revolutionary capacity for Nicaragua. This participation led to the significant effect women had on healthcare in the 1980s, and this success encouraged later mobilization for women’s health.

While women’s participation was paramount in healthcare campaigns, the traditional female role as primary caregiver provoked criticism that the focus on healthcare trapped women in this stereotype. Helen Collinson noted that despite progress, “it could be argued that these campaigns did not fundamentally alter the social relations of healthcare, in so far as they

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<sup>107</sup> Jane Deighton, *Sweet Ramparts: Women in Revolutionary Nicaragua* (War on Want and Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign: London, 1983).

<sup>108</sup> AMNLAE, *Mujer en Nicaragua* (Nueva Nicaragua: Managua, 1984), 15.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> Alvin Levic, *Nicaragua: The People Speak* (South Hadley, MA: Bergen & Garvey Publishers, Inc., 1985), 111-2.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> Collinson, 98.

reinforced the idea that the caring element of healthcare is primarily women's responsibility."<sup>113</sup>

Women formed a majority of the campaign's volunteers, but *not* as full-fledged doctors. As Belli explained, "my dream was to study medicine. But it didn't take my parents long to convince me that medicine was 'inappropriate' for a girl...and I bought it—hook, line and sinker."<sup>114</sup>

Although Belli realized this inequality and how it played out in her childhood, other women were still limited and subjected to this traditional gender construction in Nicaragua. Some interpreted women's widespread involvement in healthcare as a mere extension of their maternal duties.

Yet women exercised a revolutionary confidence and fortitude in their participation.

Women *wanted* to improve healthcare because it was particularly relevant to their lives and needs. Magda Enríquez,<sup>115</sup> a public leader for the women's movement, declared in a speech that,

For us, this is the practice of democracy. When women decide where the child-care centers are going to be built, we are participating. When we the women decide we need a hospital to deal with specific gynecological problems, and we get that hospital, we are practicing democracy. When we are able to vaccinate 200,000 children over a weekend and eradicate whooping cough, measles, and polio for the last two years using volunteers, we are building democracy.<sup>116</sup>

Women did not take the issue of healthcare lightly, but as a pivotal means to social equality. Women's work in a "care-related" sector suddenly merited attention from the national government and their specific medical needs also became a national priority in the 1980s. As improvements in general healthcare continued, more women turned to focus on feminine health issues. Through previously taboo subjects such as contraception, sex education, childbirth and abortion, women engaged in debate and civic action. Therefore, as women broached these particularly feminine concerns, they set in

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<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>114</sup> Gioconda Belli, *The Country Under My Skin* (New York: First Anchor Books, 2003), 171.

<sup>115</sup> Magda Enríquez was one of the three women who founded the Patriotic Alliance of Nicaraguan Women (*Alianza Patriótica de Mujeres Nicaraguenses, APMN*) in 1966, one of the first attempts to establish a women's organization.

<sup>116</sup> Magda Enríquez, "We Women Learned What We Were Capable of Doing" (speech presented at women's meeting, San José, California, 29 February 1984) in *Nicaragua: The Sandinista People's Revolution*, edited by Bruce Marcus (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1985), 285.

motion a series of movements and debates in the 1980s that yielded mixed results but also a clear feminine voice by the mid-1990s.

### CONTRACEPTION AND SEXUAL EDUCATION

In a predominantly Catholic country like Nicaragua, the right to contraception has become a controversial cultural problem. Susan Cookson, a doctor who worked in a Jinotega health center, spoke of a twenty-year old mother of four children. Although the woman had taken birth control, she was “terrified that her husband would find out.” Instead, she asked for an intrauterine device (IUD), but as Cookson described, “she insisted that I must cut the string too short. If she can tell that the IUD is intact, so can her husband. What should I do? She can’t handle another pregnancy, but she would be beaten or abandoned if he knew she used contraception.”<sup>117</sup> This conflict did not play out solely between women and men, but among the women themselves as well. In 1985, for example, 38% of women in a national survey said that “family planning,” or using contraception, “was against the will of God.”<sup>118</sup> As these two situations show, amidst the need for better contraception in Nicaragua and a surging feminist movement, many men and even women upheld traditional Catholic values that affected gender roles.

Despite some women’s traditionalism, the use of contraception grew in the 1980s. Hospitals gave information about contraception to “high-risk” patients—women with health issues, multiple abortions and various other problems. The FSLN at least aimed to improve family planning, addressing the idea multiple times in the health goals they published while in

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<sup>117</sup> Garfield and Williams, 114.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid*, 118.



office.<sup>119</sup> Users of contraception (mainly through birth control pills) grew from an estimated 20,000 women before 1980 to 260,000 in 1986.<sup>120</sup> Due to the country's instability, these numbers grew inconsistently in the late 1980s, but still reached 320,000 women by 1990.<sup>121</sup> As women and the FSLN worked to make contraception more readily available, many more women began to use it. The question of contraception brought forth complexities in the women's movement between those who favored traditionalism and those who needed birth control. This multi-faceted issue involved both conservative and radical women in debate, a conversation that would have been unimaginable in the 1970s and that was mobilizing women in the 1980s.

In addition to contraception, sex and childbirth education presented similar complexities in the 1980s. The absence of information on these issues is blatant: in a 1986 survey conducted at the popular Berta Calderón women's hospital, an overwhelming 95% of women said they had not received any type of sex education, 84% had not used contraception, and the majority had their first child before the age of 18.<sup>122</sup> To explain why these numbers are so staggering, Berta Calderón mainly treated rural and peasant women where these conditions were widespread—but they are clear indicators of the absence of sex education in those communities. Leticia, a young mother in Estelí during the revolution, said that, “a friend of my mother's...told me that labor sometimes began when the water broke and sometimes with blood” as she discussed her first birth.<sup>123</sup> In the drama that was her labor, this simple sentence is easily forgotten. Her ignorance of the childbirth process *while* she was pregnant is not only astounding, but led to many problems when she had her child. The FSLN attempted to address this lack of education by

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<sup>119</sup> Karen Kampwirth, *Feminism and the Legacy of Revolution: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas* (Athens: The Center for International Studies, Ohio University, Ohio University Press, 2004), 51.

<sup>120</sup> Garfield and Williams, 118.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>123</sup> Hart, 45.

airing an 18-part series in 1985 on sexual maturation topics. It quickly became the second most popular show on TV, but sparked a backlash of parental anger and complaints as the programs became more controversial. The programs had to be re-scripted. The episode on homosexuality, for example, changed from a sympathetic portrayal to one that regarded homosexuality as a mental illness.<sup>124</sup> Sexual education suffered the same cultural barriers as contraception. An obstetrician named Marta Norory expressed, “in my opinion we can’t have a sexual education campaign like the literacy campaign; you can teach people to read in a few months, but you can’t change a whole culture.”<sup>125</sup>

## CHILDBIRTH

The issue of childbirth also provided a field where women were motivated to organize themselves, and thus developed a taste for increasing personal autonomy. In the 1970s, more than one-tenth of Nicaraguan children died during childbirth.<sup>126</sup> Leticia, mentioned above, described her fear of giving birth: “I was afraid, not because I wasn’t brave enough to have a child—I was brave enough—but it was because I had seen many terrible things happen in hospitals to women.”<sup>127</sup> As she continued, she outlined the disarray of Nicaraguan hospitals and how women especially suffered from maltreatment: “the nurses said, ‘You’re a fool if you think you know when you’re going to have the baby. You aren’t going to have it now.’ Then the woman had her baby alone in bed...At times they didn’t even change the sheets: they wrapped people up in sheets soaked in blood.”<sup>128</sup> Leticia highlighted an unnerving failure of the

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<sup>124</sup> Garfield and Williams, 125.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>126</sup> Collinson, 96.

<sup>127</sup> Hart, 45.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

government to provide for women's needs, one that pushed women (with the FSLN's collaboration) to act during the 1980s.

AMNLAE assumed the leading role. The organization established health clinics that offered better hospital conditions for pregnant women.<sup>129</sup> Some AMNLAE members worked with the government on improving medical care for women and children, notably Dora María Téllez who ran the Ministry of Health from 1985 through 1990. In an early 1990s interview, she addressed the difficulty of managing Nicaragua's healthcare. "the ministry was enormous...and people made huge demands upon it. It was also a very difficult moment, with the war heating up. But I had a great deal of support, people were very supportive."<sup>130</sup> These efforts yielded progress at first: infant mortality rates dropped from about 120 deaths per 1,000 births in the 1970s to about 83 deaths in 1983 and 60 in 1992.<sup>131</sup> Puerperal healthcare visits also rose from around 8,000 in 1981 to over 60,000 in 1990.<sup>132</sup> The percentage of births in health care facilities rose from 37% to 43% between 1979 and 1983 and continued to rise throughout the 1980s, although the number of children born actually rose faster, dimming this improvement a bit.<sup>133</sup> These statistics show that women took advantage of opportunities for medical treatment when they became available. But these changes were not linear, and healthcare especially shows the inherent contradictions between traditional and progressive views of gender roles.

Traditional midwives in Nicaragua have experienced social and political opposition, but have remained a pivotal resource for women in childbirth. Before the revolution, doctors

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<sup>129</sup> Collinson, 100-2. Some examples include the Natural Childbirth Centre in Estelí, the Ocotol Mothers' House, the Puerto Cabezas Maternity House and Masaya Women's Centre.

<sup>130</sup> Randall, *Sandino's Daughters Revisited*, 246.

<sup>131</sup> Teresa Valdés Echenique and Enrique Gomariz Moraga, eds., *Mujeres latinoamericanas en cifras* (Santiago: Instituto de la Mujer, Ministerio de Asuntos Sociales de España y Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, 1993), 75.

<sup>132</sup> Garfield and Williams, 117. These numbers rose consistently 1987 and 1988 when they dropped slightly, most likely due to the weakening FSLN government. However, they rose again in 1989 and 1990.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid*, 115.

“shunned” these *parteras*<sup>134</sup> and viewed them as “superstitious old women.”<sup>135</sup> Due to this stigma, only 10% of women who gave birth outside of a hospital admitted to using a *partera* in 1978. The Sandinistas, however, reconsidered their role in 1979 and Tomás Borge even referred to *parteras* as a symbol of Nicaragua as “the land of babies.”<sup>136</sup> In this new environment more women admitted to using them, reportedly 50% in 1985. Scholars Richard Garfield and Glen Williams, two Nicaraguan healthcare scholars, outlined the debate that ensued about midwifery in Nicaragua after the revolution:

A variety of new attitudes toward *parteras* emerged among physicians following the revolution. One group, including some revolutionaries, wanted to pass laws making such work illegal. Others jumped on the populist bandwagon to speak well of *parteras*, while quietly working to restrict their activities and eventually eliminate them. A third group believed in the *partera* system so much that they thought doctors would have little to teach them, but much to learn.<sup>137</sup>

This discussion surrounding these traditional birth attendants exemplifies how women’s issues emerged in medical and political debates, although they had never received such public attention before.

Despite some opposition, *parteras* still were used as a tool to improve rural healthcare especially (where hospitals were less available) and were preferred by women, as well. Mirna Cunningham, a woman from the Atlantic coast, expressed her preference for traditional birth methods, “It’s still a dream, but next year...I want to plant the herbs and have my own little hospital where I can heal in the traditional ways.”<sup>138</sup> Many Nicaraguan women like Mirna upheld and pursued traditional ideas. Throughout the late 1980s, many more *parteras* were being trained and were training themselves. One training manual for *parteras* read: “In bringing the traditional

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<sup>134</sup> *Partera* is the Spanish term for a midwife.

<sup>135</sup> Garfield and Williams, 123.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.* Tomás Borge was one of the three founders of the FSLN in 1961.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> Randall, *Sandinino's Daughters Revisited*, 83.

birth attendant into the heart of the health system...we are giving her the opportunity to be a participant in the solution of the health problems of her family and of her people.”<sup>139</sup> This resurgence of traditional birth attendants helped women without hospital access give birth, but also reasserted traditional methods. Anti-modern solutions, ironically, improved the state of childbirth in Nicaragua—seemingly contradictory to the revolutionary, feminist efforts. On the other hand, using these methods hearken back to a pre-existing women’s culture that could be viewed as an independent, autonomous move ushered in by women themselves. Midwifery, therefore, embodied inherent tensions in Nicaragua women and gender identity: these revolutionary women asserted themselves to better female lives, but in the traditional ways of *parteras*.

#### 1990s COUNTER-REVOLUTION IN HEALTHCARE

The FSLN’s progress, while not substantial, halted after Violeta Chamorro’s 1990 election. Her administration completely dropped post-childbirth contraceptive education in hospitals in 1990. The MINSA’s master plan to reduce maternal and infant mortality from 1991 through 1996 never even addressed contraception as a means to this end.<sup>140</sup> As contraceptive availability and education diminished, a survey in 1992 ironically reported that 58.3% of Nicaraguan women in childbearing years did not desire any more children,<sup>141</sup> yet Nicaragua still boasted the second-highest birthrate in Latin America during the 1990s.<sup>142</sup> The inconsistencies in these trends reveal a need for efficient family planning in Nicaragua, yet women have been unable to advertise that need. The “taboo” reputation of this issue demeaned women’s

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<sup>139</sup> Garfield and Williams, 124.

<sup>140</sup> Kampwirth, 51.

<sup>141</sup> *Mujeres latinoamericanas en cifras*, 82.

<sup>142</sup> Kampwirth, 51. Nicaragua was second to Haiti.

willingness to discuss it, and contraception is one of the least-addressed issues in healthcare by women (and in general). It also reveals the root of gender problems, in that women feared offending men. As Susan Cookson has noted, this submission and fear affected women's health and was an obstacle in changing female healthcare. Therefore, the prevention of unwanted pregnancies became a major flaw in the modernization of healthcare in Nicaragua. Richard Garfield and Glen Williams put this problem into simple terms: "many women seeking contraception at health centers are turned away. By the time they return, they are looking for ways to end their pregnancies."<sup>143</sup>

As the number of unwanted pregnancies rose, the traditionalism of Violeta Chamorro's administration also became evident through its treatment of abortion. Abortion has been an especially controversial and taboo subject in Nicaragua, and abortion has always been illegal. Although the FSLN never legalized abortion, abortions became more available and accessible during the revolution.<sup>144</sup> The FSLN even organized councils to judge therapeutic abortion cases at hospitals and clinics—these councils understood therapeutic abortions as special cases in which a pregnancy endangered the mother's life, making an abortion legal.<sup>145</sup> Two main issues were associated with abortions: their high cost and mortality due to unsafe procedures. According to Dora María Téllez, an abortion cost about four to six months wages for a poor worker.<sup>146</sup> In a study conducted at the Berta Calderón Hospital and published in Nicaragua's daily newspaper, *Barricada*, 10% of attempted abortions ended fatally.<sup>147</sup> Due to these conditions, many of Nicaragua's leading women advocated for the legalization of abortion. Doris

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<sup>143</sup> Garfield and Williams, 119.

<sup>144</sup> Lois Wessel, "Reproductive Rights in Nicaragua: From the Sandinistas to the Government of Violeta Chamorro," *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 17, No.3 (Feminist Studies, Inc.: Autumn, 1991), 542.

<sup>145</sup> Heath Luz McNaughton, Marta María Blandón, and Ligia Altamirano, "Should Therapeutic Abortion be Legal in Nicaragua: The Response of Nicaraguan Obstetrician-Gynaecologists." *Reproductive Health matters*, Vol. 10, No. 19, Abortion: Women Decide (May, 2002), 112.

<sup>146</sup> Collinson, 120.

<sup>147</sup> Leonel Urbano, "El aborto: drama social que hay que solucionar." *Barricada*, November 19, 1985.

Tijerino, for example, wrote in *Barricada* (Managua's daily newspaper), "I am for abortion—not just as a woman, but also as a police officer. The current law restricts the civil rights of the woman by denying her the right to freely determine maternity."<sup>148</sup> Not all women supported abortion, though, and in 1986 AMNLAE reported that "our women are not ready for the legalization of abortion, we must concentrate our efforts on sex education and family planning."<sup>149</sup> The issue exposed inherent divisions within women and varying degrees of revolutionary and religious beliefs. Abortion was not legalized during the Sandinista Revolution, but the FSLN took measures to discourage and reduce the risks of unsafe abortions.

Violeta's administration, however, repealed several of the policies that curbed unsafe abortions for unwanted pregnancies. Violeta and her Minister of Education, Sofonias Cisneros, called for sex education not to be taught in schools, but rather at homes.<sup>150</sup> Therapeutic abortion committees, such as the one at Bertha Calderón Hospital, closed, diminishing the number of therapeutic abortions allowed. Violeta herself remarked on a Catholic Radio interview that one of her main goals at the start of her administration was to close private clinics that performed abortions.<sup>151</sup> The fear from her threat alone worked to end abortions in many of these clinics. Though the government opposed abortion and discussion of it vehemently, pro-abortion women clamored for it even louder. The issue has become an example of how Violeta's traditionally Catholic and family oriented politics attempted to silence revolutionary women. While the law did not support these feminists, it did not suppress women's discussion and the taboo quality of abortion has diminished considerably. The debate grew heated again in 2000, when anti-abortion

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<sup>148</sup> Doris Tijerino, "Educación sexual debe ser material escolar," *Barricada*, December 9, 1985.

<sup>149</sup> Collinson, 121.

<sup>150</sup> Wessel, 546.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

organizations lobbied for eliminating therapeutic abortions.<sup>152</sup> As therapeutic abortions were eventually outlawed, the debate has only become more heated and controversial.

Women immediately took a leading role in healthcare improvements after the insurrection. The FSLN initially provided the direction that active women needed by implementing reforms such as increased access to vaccinations, medicine and hospitals. As political and economic instability took the place of the government's social reforms in the late 1980s, the women took the opportunity to grow their own organizations and clinics. While women's large involvement in healthcare could have reinforced their image as "care-takers" and mothers, it also gave them a firmer foundation with which to implement their own programs. As a traditionally appropriate field for women to become involved (as nurses or aids), women successfully built upon this start to achieve the more revolutionary results they wanted in contraception, childbirth and general healthcare. Unfortunately, women did not have this same leverage in fields such as labor or politics, where men had dominated before the revolution.

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<sup>152</sup> McNaughton, Blandón and Altamirano, 111.



### LABOR: THE DOBLE JORNADA FEMININA SANS DAYCARE

*“In spite of the problems, we’ve kept going. We’re eating. We’re living. During my childhood I never thought I’d be able to study and become useful at something; it never crossed my mind. I spent all my time working for someone else. It was only after the revolutionary triumph that I realized we can all do something. We can advance, learn, and be useful. We can be helpful to the whole population.”*  
 --Marta López<sup>153</sup>

When compared with mobilization in both education and healthcare, women faced more formidable obstacles and complexities when they pursued labor reforms. Mainly, women were at the mercy of a quickly changing national labor market. When the Sandinistas came to power, they strove to create a mixed economy and mobilize the poor urban and rural workers. They established the Sandinista Workers’ Centre (*Central Sandinista de Trabajadores*, CST), a confederation of reorganized trade unions, and elected its leaders to supervise production in accordance with the FSLN.<sup>154</sup> Women mainly benefited from the FSLN’s efforts to employ the poor in the early 1980s, but due to the U.S. trade embargo and Contra war, dropping wages and lay-offs rose throughout the latter half of the decade.<sup>155</sup> Conditions drastically changed again in 1990 when newly elected Violeta Chamorro replaced extensive government control with a market-led economy.<sup>156</sup> While the Sandinistas had not completely nationalized the economy, the large privatization that took place in the early 1990s displaced much of the Nicaraguan labor force.<sup>157</sup> Women’s presence in the labor force, therefore, expanded when the Sandinistas first came to power, but encountered increasing obstacles as the decade ended and Violeta’s

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<sup>153</sup> Dianne Walta Hart, *Thanks to God and the Revolution: The Oral History of a Nicaraguan Family*, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 114.

<sup>154</sup> Jennifer Bickham Mendez, *From the Revolution to the Maquiladoras: Gender, Labor, and Globalization in Nicaragua* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 42.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> Alejandro E. Martinez Cuenca, “An Investigation of the Urban Labor Market Dynamics and Poverty Transition in Nicaragua,” (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 1999), 2.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

administration began. The changes made in the early 1980s, though, created irreversible changes in the female labor force which have survived the dynamics of the labor market.

### EARLY CHANGES IN THE FEMALE LABOR MARKET

As females in a conservative, repressed society, women have played a large role in the Nicaraguan labor force. In 1980, women made up 28% of the economically active population. By 1996, this percentage had risen to 36.5%, a comparatively high percentage in Latin America.<sup>158</sup> However, women suffered from discrimination, worked lower-paying jobs than men, and simultaneously managed their households without effective childcare programs. An estimated 85% of single mothers worked prior to the revolution, but almost all worked informally.<sup>159</sup> Informal labor in Nicaragua includes activities such as “domestic service, street vending, prostitution” and other tasks that women may perform for compensation, but are not “formally” employed.<sup>160</sup> As Patricia Chuchryk expressed, “although the labor force participation and union membership of women increased dramatically during the revolution, they continued to be concentrated in lower-paid, lower-skilled jobs, and union leadership continued to be dominated by men.”<sup>161</sup> So the realistic nature of these changes showed the limits of the women’s movement and areas in which women still faced obstacles.

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<sup>158</sup> James W. Wilkie, Eduardo Alemán, and José Guadalupe Ortega, eds., *Statistical Abstract of Latin America*, Volume 37. (Los Angeles: UCLA, Latin American Center Publications, University of California, 2001), 118. The term “economically active” is defined as the “people who meet the ILO definition of economically active population: all people who supply labor for the production of goods and services during a specific period. Includes both the employed and unemployed. While national practices vary in the treatment of such groups as the armed forces and seasonal part-time workers, in general the labor force includes the armed forces, the unemployed, and first-time job-seekers, but excludes homemakers and other unpaid caregivers and workers in the informal sector.”

<sup>159</sup> Helen Collinson, ed., *Women and Revolution in Nicaragua* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1990), 28.

<sup>160</sup> Patricia M. Chuchryk, “Women in the Revolution,” in *Revolution and Counterrevolution in Nicaragua* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), 148.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid*, 143.

Due to the need for manpower and production though, Nicaragua's formal labor force became much more receptive to women workers. With men leaving their homes to fight in the insurrection and then the Contra war throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, women filled many of their jobs. A largely agricultural economy with cattle-raising, fishing, forestry and traditional agriculture among the main activities, the increasing female presence resulted in the feminization of agricultural and industrial sectors.<sup>162</sup> This feminization created an irreversible shift in the female labor force that continued, although it slowed, when men returned home from the war in the late 1980s. From 1970-1990, the number of economically active women grew an estimated 252.2% -- the number of economically active men grew only 66.9%.<sup>163</sup> Warfare in Nicaragua acted as a major factor in the slower growth of men's participation, but many women benefited from the new opportunities it made available to them.

This increase in female labor opportunities, especially those in typically male-dominated professions, characterized the early 1980s. For example, middle-aged Melinda González lived in San Isidro in the 1980s. As a child, poverty forced her family to work "in the fields" until she married at seventeen and her "marriage became [her] whole life."<sup>164</sup> Then during the revolution, Melinda became a member of AMNLAE and worked as a cooperative's accountant.<sup>165</sup> Her husband had worked as a secretary of finance but had to give up this job to go back to agricultural work. As Melinda described, "I used to help him with the books, and in that way I got experience. Also, I fell in love with the job..."<sup>166</sup> Like Melinda, many women moved out of domestic work and into other opportunities that gave them a new sense of their professional potential. As Melinda asked, "it's an honor, don't you think, to be entrusted with an important

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<sup>162</sup> Cuenca, 2.

<sup>163</sup> *Mujeres latinoamericanas en cifras* (Instituto de la Mujer: Santiago, 1994), 38.

<sup>164</sup> Alvin Levie, *Nicaragua: The People Speak* (South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey Publishers, Inc., 1985), 96.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

job?”<sup>167</sup> Her reaction suggests she felt both astonished and empowered by her new position’s responsibilities. As more women worked in male-driven fields, their movement signified a shift in how Nicaraguan society accepted women into new realms of the workforce.

Some women even worked as fire-fighters, tractor-drivers and crop fumigators.<sup>168</sup> According to the Agricultural Workers’ Union (*Asociación de Trabajadores del Campo, ATC*), women only made up 42% of coffee pickers in 1983, yet they constituted 70% of coffee pickers by 1985.<sup>169</sup> Women had participated in seasonal agriculture work, but more and more women moved into salaried positions, which offered them a more stable income.<sup>170</sup> One female tractor driver from Jalapa boasted, “we women are getting on. When the men come back from the fighting we’ll all work together.”<sup>171</sup> While her conjecture was not realistic, her comment exemplifies how the women working in “male” jobs viewed changing gender lines. Many showed the same optimism that men would accept their growing labor involvement. A woman who drove a tractor differed from the women who taught children to read—both positions empowered women, but many women had not worked in more masculine jobs (like tractor-driving) prior to the Revolution. In that way, these changing labor conditions made comparisons of men to women inevitable. While these sectors of the labor force did not boast the same overwhelming participation of women as did education and healthcare, they provoked important changes in the way that some women viewed their relationship with men. The stark separation between male and female work domains began to blur in many women’s perceptions.

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<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>168</sup> Collinson, 31.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>170</sup> Asociación de Mujeres Profesionales por la Democracia en el Desarrollo, *Derechos de las mujeres en Nicaragua: un análisis de género* (Managua: Imprimatur, 1996), 40.

<sup>171</sup> Collinson, 33. Interview conducted in 1986.

This push for gender equality played out in other ways as well. A 1984 publication by AMNLAE outlined nine human rights violations as the foundation of the women's struggle, of which the last two applied to women's economic role. AMNLAE pointed to "equal salary for equal work" and "rights to the land for who works the land" as two changes women needed and valued.<sup>172</sup> Melinda, the accountant mentioned above, noted that at her job, "I became a member of the cooperative and I get the same share in our surplus as every other member. Exactly the same. No more, no less."<sup>173</sup> As Melinda demonstrated, some women received more equal pay as a result of labor reforms. The FSLN passed a statute in 1979 that called for equal remuneration and equal opportunities.<sup>174</sup> Tomás Borge, one of the founders of the FSLN, supported this statute in a 1982 speech,

To assure the effectiveness of the principle, 'equal pay for equal work,' we enacted decrees 573 and 583 for the rural sector...establish[ing] norms governing agricultural labor...and provid[ing] that everyone about fourteen years of age, man or woman, will be paid directly...but the important thing is that we watch over the execution of law the revolution has created to guarantee equality between men and women.<sup>175</sup>

The FSLN publicly made women's equality in the workforce a priority, championed by both the government and female leaders and led women to both recognize gender inequality and see the need to end it.

## THE STRUGGLE FOR EQUAL LABOR RIGHTS

Unfortunately, the ideals Tomás Borge addressed did not always play out as optimistically as he proposed. When compared to men, a 1993 study by the INEC reported that

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<sup>172</sup> Asociación de Mujeres Nicaragüenses Luisa Amanda Espinosa, *Mujer en Nicaragua* (Managua: Editorial Nueva Niaragua), 14.

<sup>173</sup> Levie, 99.

<sup>174</sup> Collinson, 29.

<sup>175</sup> Tomás Borge, "Women and the Nicaraguan Revolution" (speech presented at women's rally, León, Nicaragua, 29 September 1982) in *Nicaragua: The Sandinista People's Revolution: Speeches by Sandinista Leaders*, edited by Bruce Marcus (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1985), 54.

women 30 years and older earned 81% of what men did in the same jobs.<sup>176</sup> While this statistic suggests that women's pay did not suffer substantially when compared to men's, it does not factor in the continuing gendered division in Nicaragua labor. Even though women moved into new economic sectors, they still suffered traditional gendered division *within* new and old fields, working in lower-paying positions and few higher-level, management ones.<sup>177</sup> Leticia López, for example, attended beauty school in the 1970s but suffered inconsistent pay when she worked as a hairdresser. Though her salary was 600 córdobas a month, "there were times when [the owner]...said, 'I'll pay you later,' and went to Managua without paying me."<sup>178</sup> In this case, Leticia did not only suffer from lower wages, but from the negligence of not paying them in general. The changes proposed by the government and pursued by women were not fully effective, as gender discrimination could not completely be eradicated.

Some women lower-class women represented another element of women's movements—they mobilized in their own capacity to address the inequalities that groups such as the ATC addressed. Pushed by her need for income, Leticia opened her own salon in Managua. She expressed optimism in the revolution, "it has been backwards here in Nicaragua, but the revolution is changing the *machismo* of the earlier system. The woman stayed at home before, and the man left her with the children."<sup>179</sup> These blurring gender lines motivated Leticia to open the new salon and, literally, paid off: "I'm going to have a fixed salary, an income I'll receive monthly...today the salon is mine. It's small, but its mine."<sup>180</sup> Leticia still worked in a traditionally female profession: cutting hair and sewing clothes. Despite her stereotypically female profession, the fixed salary and changing family structure she referred to improved

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<sup>176</sup> *Mujeres latinoamericanas en cifras*, 49.

<sup>177</sup> Chuchryk, 148.

<sup>178</sup> Hart, 41.

<sup>179</sup> Hart, 106.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid*, 107.

Leticia's life drastically in her opinion. These types of changes can easily be disregarded as less revolutionary than other aspects of women's movements, but they were essential to the revolution. They indicated that poor women witnessed and benefited from women's movement, not just wealthy, privileged or feminist women.

The discrimination of women continued to occur in different forms. In March 1989 a Nicaragua food producer, OCALSA (*Importadora y Distribuidora OCAL S.A*) fired Elba Cuadra Prado because she had become pregnant. According to one of Nicaragua's main newspapers, *El Nuevo Diario*, the general manager had even criticized her for the pregnancy. Elba appealed to the Ministry of Labor who sent an inspector to OCALSA to reason with the general manager. The company's management scoffed at the inspector and rejected him.<sup>181</sup> For her part, Elba remarked that she simply "want[ed] justice."<sup>182</sup> Unfortunately, the event depicted another example of the discrimination women suffered despite the revolution's changes. While laws had been established, these laws were ineffectual in many instances, even when addressed by the Ministry of Labor. Laws and statutes could not completely reverse the long-standing preconceptions of gender in Nicaraguan society. Nonetheless, Elba's story had been covered in *El Nuevo Diario*, and she had tried to resist the mistreatment by appealing to the Ministry. The right to resist and the attention the situation received would not have occurred ten years earlier. During the revolution, more poor and rural women took the initiative to resist discrimination. Their resistance made gender discrimination a debated, public issue, a pivotal step that should not be overlooked despite the fact that these efforts many times failed. An important discussion had begun.

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<sup>181</sup> Collinson, 30.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*

The ATC especially developed this discussion among women workers. In 1983, women made up 40% of ATC membership and due to these large numbers, the ATC organized a National Assembly of Rural Women Workers with the help of AMNLAE.<sup>183</sup> The meeting aimed to increase the production of these workers but due to a dearth of knowledge on female workers' conditions, ATC organized a women's secretariat to research *campesinas* in the workforce.<sup>184</sup> A member of this secretariat, Heliette Ehlers, stated, "for these women it was the first time they'd ever had the chance to think about their own reality."<sup>185</sup> The study of female workers let women discuss many of the issues they had been silent on: pregnancy, childbirth, childcare and how they are handled in the workplace.<sup>186</sup> The secretariat hosted a number of grass-roots workshops that showed a photo essay on the realities of women's "work norm," viewed by approximately eight hundred women.<sup>187</sup> This initiative led to three more national ATC meetings (in 1986, 1987 and 1988) in which women discussed their labor conditions and options.<sup>188</sup> The discussion about women in the workforce publicized the reality of female working conditions, both for men and for women.

Many Nicaraguan women and scholars alike refer to the *doble jornada femenina* (female double shift), women's "double work day."<sup>189</sup> It represents the conflict women face in balancing the need to support themselves economically and their cultural responsibility to the home.<sup>190</sup> In 1984, the average woman living in a rural area spent 9-12 hours every day on household chores

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<sup>183</sup> Isbester, 71.

<sup>184</sup> The term *campesinas* refers to working, rural women.

<sup>185</sup> Collinson, 45.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>187</sup> Isbester, 72.

<sup>188</sup> Collinson, 46-8.

<sup>189</sup> *Mujeres latinoamericanas en cifras*, 35; Collinson, 31.

<sup>190</sup> *Mujeres latinoamericanas en cifras*, 35.



like cooking, hauling water and cleaning the house.<sup>191</sup> These chores kept women from dedicating themselves to a formal job. Their responsibility to children also posed challenges.<sup>192</sup> Therefore, women began to accommodate for the *doble jornada femenina* by providing resources to make it easier on themselves. In 1979, Nicaragua only had three formal day-care centers, but by 1988, women had established 182 in urban areas and 69 in rural areas.<sup>193</sup> María Inéz González worked at the Francisco Domínguez Child Development Center in Chinandega City during the 1980s. She addressed the problems women had in balancing home and work, explaining, “sometimes mothers carried their children to work with them in the most unpleasant, unhealthy environment. Many children were abandoned by desperate mothers.”<sup>194</sup> But with the new day-care centers, she stated, “that’s history now... we provide a full program from eight o’clock in the morning until five in the afternoon” and with a work staff of sixteen women, “that’s something, isn’t it?”<sup>195</sup> As María described, these child centers enabled more women to work in order to support their families who previously could not. With the establishment of childcare centers, the benefits were twofold: the centers employed women and simultaneously helped mothers with children but without daycare that allowed them to work a day job. While even this effort did not establish sufficient childcare, mobilization through day-care initiatives created an infrastructure that supported women’s domestic duties and financial responsibilities. Workforce statistics do not record these centers, however, they exemplify how women made changes in their economic participation by enabling women to better handle this *doble jornada femenina*.

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<sup>191</sup> Collinson, 31. This statistic refers to the *majority* of women. Many women did not hold formal professions but performed informal, domestic work, to explain why the number of hours worked is so high.

<sup>192</sup> *Derechos de las mujeres en Nicaragua*, 32.

<sup>193</sup> Collinson, 32.

<sup>194</sup> Levie, 121.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid*, 122.

Like the duality exhibited by this *doble jornada femenina*, many women's lifestyles unfortunately displayed a similar dichotomy. One woman from Ocotlán, Lulu González, portrayed this complication. She and about fourteen other women had created a cooperative in their small community which sold everything from clothing to bookmarks, called the Barrio Sandino Artesanía Cooperativa.<sup>196</sup> Lulu had a take-charge personality and micro-managed the entrepreneurial business. She discussed the relationship between prices and expenses, how to market their work, and the designs they used. Her work life portrayed a confident woman who recognized her abilities and made money as effectively as she could. Another woman in the cooperative, Joan Uhlen, told a different story. Joan revealed that Lulu's husband had left her, taken their valuable belongings with him and lived with another woman. Lulu refused to file charges, Joan explained, because "he comes around from time to time...often to beat her. He bangs her around something fierce—bruises from head to foot. He says that if she complains...he'll kill her. And she believes him."<sup>197</sup> Despite Lulu's economic success, the violence she suffered illustrates a very different situation. The control shown by her husband caused women to feel incapable of obtaining help, and that the law could not solve problems like Lulu's due to the danger of using it. Her story exemplifies how many women benefited in some ways from these transformations in the labor force, but still suffered daily from social repression and discrimination. As Joan concluded, she asked, "I don't know what to do about it. Do you?"<sup>198</sup> For a second, she revealed a helplessness that persisted despite the progress being made.

## CONSERVATISM AND DOMESTICITY

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<sup>196</sup> *Ibid*, 114.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid*, 114-5.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid*, 115.

The conservative politics of Violeta Chamorro's administration after 1990 took its toll on women economically as well. Just as Violeta's reassertion of traditional family structures posed setbacks for healthcare and education, the same occurred in the labor market. The Chamorro family owned the daily newspaper, *La Prensa*, and it became a vehicle for her government during the 1990s. On International Women's Day in 1994, an article read: "The most special, important, and urgent place that a woman should occupy today and in the future is the family, the fundamental base of society. The woman is the fundamental axis of the family, its formative base, and its stability, and it is the family that is the nucleus of society and the nation."<sup>199</sup> The schools, newspapers and Church all pushed women to return to their traditional domestic responsibilities and discouraged the progress which had been made to incorporate women into the workforce.<sup>200</sup> Even day-care centers were either shut down or deprived of economic resources.<sup>201</sup> As unemployment numbers rose, women suffered disproportionately. Violeta Chamorro's election led to the privatization of more than 400 state-owned enterprises and the elimination of over 60,000 public employee positions.<sup>202</sup> Women accounted for as much as 70% of the government layoffs between 1990 and 1992. Furthermore, the number of women in industrial jobs dropped from 39.2% in 1985 to 33.5% in 1993 and the number in service-related jobs rose from 44.7% to 50.5 % respectively. Though women's opportunities had suffered in the late 1980s due Nicaragua's civil war, Violeta Chamorro's traditionalism moved women back into domesticity: many who had obtained better jobs returned to the informal labor sector and

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<sup>199</sup> Katherine Isbester, *Still Fighting: The Nicaragua Women's Movement, 1977-2000* (Pittsburgh: The University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), 116.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>201</sup> Karen Kampwirth, *Feminism and the Legacy of Revolution: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2004), 49.

<sup>202</sup> Cuenca, 2.

women who had worked informally and benefited from community programs (ie. day-care) now suffered that absence.

Despite these evident setbacks, changes were already in motion that the government could not rewind. The organization Mothers of Estelí and Matagalpa, for example, was comprised of women who had not fought for Nicaragua but had lost loved ones in the struggle. Among other initiatives, the Mothers of Matagalpa opened a workshop where women learned skills and sold products such as clothing and food through the committee for pay.<sup>203</sup> Doña Rosaura, a rural woman who had joined the committee in the mid-1980s, worked in the Committee's used clothing store after her husband died. As she expressed, "life is very hard for me. And so we feel, or I do in particular, very grateful to the committee because I feel the support, I feel it very closely."<sup>204</sup> Many women pursued organizations like the Mothers of Matagalpa for economic help which suggests that many women resisted government-advocated traditionalism. The difficulties that previously kept government reforms from effectively helping women now allowed women to continue mobilizing despite government efforts to keep them in their homes.

The underlying shifts in perceptions of gender identity that caused women to break from the government is the most important and most lasting effect of labor reforms during the 1980s and 1990s. As some women became less daunted by resistance, some (though not all) men respected women's new rights in the workplace. In 1987, a Boaco cattle farmer stated, "'In this farm, we've got 75% women workers...Really women are almost 100% effective because they're not like us men, who go out on the streets, to live it up, perhaps end up with a hangover

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<sup>203</sup> Lorraine Bayard de Volo, *Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs: Gender Identity Politics in Nicaragua, 1979-1999* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 208.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid*, 187.

or get wiped out. The woman is a top achiever.’”<sup>205</sup> Like this farmer, some men recognized women’s ability and merits in formal labor. These attitudes sometimes moved into the homes as well. Again in 1987, a television program depicting family life in Nicaragua portrayed men helping with laundry at home.<sup>206</sup> This chore would have never been considered as a shared responsibility before the 1980s. These men were compelled to change their perception of women because so many women had changed their view of themselves. Marta López summarized these changes in a 1987 interview, exerting a remarkably optimistic attitude despite the hardships and backtracking of the late 1980s:

Things have changed. Women used to feel that they couldn’t talk at a meeting or even go to one. The man always talked in the name of everyone, and she sat there quietly. We explained to the men that women had the right to speak, and the right, not just to discuss, but to demand things. For example, there are women who lost their jobs in the business district because they were pregnant. When we saw this, we began to talk with the women and men, saying, ‘She has a right to a pre- and post-natal leave’—forty days before and forty days afterwards—and not be kicked out of a job. Instead, she’ll receive pay but be at home. So the women started waking up, talking, and demanding.<sup>207</sup>

The change that Marta described grew throughout the 1980s. When faced with Violeta Chamorro’s opposition, many women had already formed the resources and confidence to resist her efforts to return to traditional gender relations.

These shifts in labor opportunities highlight the uneven progress of the Nicaraguan women’s movements. Underlying this give-and-take, many women engaged in the struggle—if they did not receive the benefits of these economic reforms, many expressed their discontent and even acted against their specific adversaries. There were also those who mobilized on the community level, starting businesses or running daycares, taking the initiative to help women in fundamental ways. As ideological change reached more women, the need for reforms in political

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<sup>205</sup> Collinson, 43.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>207</sup> Hart, 258.

rights became more evident. Despite unprecedented mobilization, activists and women more generally realized that continued success depended on political support. Therefore, the balance between changes and traditional impediments in issues such as labor renewed the focus of women's struggles in the political realm.

**POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: FROM INSURRECTION TO THE VIRGIN MARY**

*“Well, I think you and I are hopeless utopians. We embrace one utopia after another...I believe we’re going to have to start with the central issues women have placed on the agenda... we need to be able to take power and also to transform it.”*

--Daisy Zamora<sup>208</sup>

In the 1980s and 1990s, women increased their political representation, occupied notable political positions and even passed several laws aimed to protect women’s rights. They mobilized women in Nicaragua through the process of acquiring these positions and promoting public discussion of this legislation. After the FSLN ousted Somoza’s dictatorship, the party strove to create a more participatory society with a democratic political system—as nation-wide political participation grew, women looked to political change as a pivotal sector to challenge traditional gender ideology and *machismo*. Nicaraguan scholar Helen Collinson states, “Because new laws are discussed and people participate in making them [in Nicaragua], legal changes tend to *affect* social attitudes as much as they reflect them.”<sup>209</sup> With women increasingly engaging in the political arena, previously ignored women’s issues and legislation were debated such as abortion, childcare, contraception and protection against domestic violence. Sometimes these discussions resulted in the passing of new laws or policies while other times these efforts failed. Regardless, the ensuing discussion and public awareness helped spark changes in gender attitudes and mobilized both conservative and radical women in unprecedented public debates. Political participation, therefore, raised public awareness of women’s movements and helped reshape (albeit slowly) social and gender relations in Nicaragua.

With the FSLN, AMNLAE worked as women’s principal vehicle to increase political participation. A publication on women and political parties defined AMNLAE’s role to “reflect

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<sup>208</sup> Margaret Randall, *Sandino’s Daughters Revisited*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 116.

<sup>209</sup> Helen Collinson, ed. *Women and Revolution in Nicaragua* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1990), 109.

the intertwining of women's demands and their political struggle on the global scale."<sup>210</sup>

AMNLAE held a seat on the Council of State in the 1980s, so the FSLN worked closely with AMNLAE's leadership. The Council of State functioned as the FSLN's legislative branch, to which the FSLN added fourteen new seats to the original thirty-three in order to better represent peasants and the working class.<sup>211</sup> In this new Council of forty-seven seats, AMNLAE held the only position that specifically addressed women's demands. This position provided the opportunity to pass several laws that addressed female concerns. Magda Enríquez stated in a 1984 speech, "if we were going to make a democratic government, we had to make sure that through the structuring of that government, the political will for the emancipation of women was getting its due... which is why we struggled for a seat on the Council of State."<sup>212</sup> As Enríquez emphasized, the political incorporation of women represented a clear, democratic element of the new government—oftentimes, it worked to women's advantage because the FSLN used women as an element in building their envisioned egalitarian government. AMNLAE also aligned itself with the Sandinistas, giving women access to the government and legislation. The publication *Mujeres y partidos políticos* (Women and political parties) claimed that women's fight for "emancipation" should be forged while "AT THE SAME TIME, fighting for the general demands of the Revolution."<sup>213</sup> As previously noted, this link created problems for the women's movement because the "general demands of the Revolution" trumped those of women. This union between the FSLN and AMNLAE, however, linked women to the government and enabled them to build effective organization skills and confidence. So the political relationship between

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<sup>210</sup> Patricia Vargas Fernández, et al. *Mujeres y partidos políticos* (Managua: Federación Nicaragüenses de Asociaciones Profesionales, 1989), 42.

<sup>211</sup> The Institute for Central American Studies. "The Council of State and the Mass Organizations," in *The Nicaragua Reader*, edited by Peter Rosset and John Vandermeer (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1983), 274.

<sup>212</sup> Magda Enríquez, "We Women Learned What We Were Capable of Doing" (speech presented at women's meeting, San José, California, 29 February 1984) in *Nicaragua: The Sandinista People's Revolution*, edited by Bruce Marcus (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1985), 260.

<sup>213</sup> Fernández, et al, 43. Capital letters from the original document.



the FSLN and AMNLAE again exemplifies the complexities of FSLN's role in women's movements: it both helped and them back.

### EARLY LEGISLATION

From 1979 to 1984, the FSLN enacted a number of laws and statutes that gave priority to women's issues. In 1980, an Adoption Law passed which allowed single women to adopt children. The same year, the government passed a law to promote breastfeeding and prohibited advertising for powdered milk substitutes.<sup>214</sup> In 1981, the government legally established equal responsibility between mothers and fathers for their children, whether or not the two parents were married.<sup>215</sup> This early legislation targeted "feminine" issues and gave politically active women a sense of progress. Dora María Téllez, for example, worked in Managua as the political secretary for FSLN's departmental committee and traveled to communities, fields and factories "talking to people day after day." She expressed her enthusiasm, "[the beginning of the revolution] was a very special time, because everyone was organizing."<sup>216</sup> She remembered that communities would "invite me to give political talks, to explain our political project. And people would ask thousands of questions... For the first time, people were experiencing a political process in which they could be protagonists."<sup>217</sup> When the FSLN took power, the political environment of Nicaragua became more open. Women's issues were among the first discussed in the new government. New laws aimed to alleviate the stresses of some problems, such as the *doble jornada femenina* and poor healthcare rights. They achieved the most, though, through opening opportunities for women to learn and participate in the country's political changes.

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<sup>214</sup> Collinson, 111.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>216</sup> Margaret Randall, *Sandino's Daughters Revisited*, 244.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

While these laws formally changed women's rights, they did not immediately change Nicaraguan society. Some women complained that the revolution actually made their lives harder. María Morgan, a hotel worker in Managua, stated, "as for this government, they haven't made my life better that I can see; maybe life is better for them now, I don't know, but not for me."<sup>218</sup> She explained that "there [was] much to worry about" because she had two teenage sons who still had to do military service. Also, she had recently divorced her husband to whom "I was married for a long time, but I am now divorced; we didn't do either one legally, of course, it is too expensive..."<sup>219</sup> The changes made for women in the government were sometimes invisible to women like María: she did not receive better treatment from her husband, or equal work opportunities, and she had passed child-bearing age.

A younger woman, Eva, also lived in Managua in 1984, studying to become a primary school teacher. When asked about politics, Eva simply said, "Politics? I don't know. You see, there are ten brothers and sisters in my family. And my father, he's very strict. I don't know how he feels. We don't talk about these things in my house."<sup>220</sup> Eva first shows how some women were indifferent to politics, even by 1984 when new legislation had been passed to support them. She also immediately related politics to her father, noting she did not know what her father felt about these issues. Therefore, women like María still regarded politics as a predominantly male responsibility, one in which women did not really participate. There were limits to how effective legislation was: although it affected many women, it failed to reach or engage many others. Depending on the family and situation, these laws did not always help women, much less transform the social constructions of gender during the 1980s.

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<sup>218</sup> Denis Lynn Daly Heyck, *Life Stories of the Nicaraguan Revolution* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1990), 278.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

<sup>220</sup> Alvin Levie, *Nicaragua: The People Speak* (South Hadley, MA: Bergen & Garvey Publishers, Inc., 1985), 29.

Thirty-year-old María Carmen also admitted to not knowing much about Nicaragua's political situation. She confessed, "look, I'm not a political person," but noticed that "I worked hard [before the revolution.] Long hours. I still have long hours and I still work hard. It was very hard for me. Very hard for all of us in the market. Especially the women. Especially the girls."<sup>221</sup> María worked in Managua's main open market, the Mercado Oriental. Despite these long hours and lack of political knowledge, María sensed a change: "But I'll tell you something... Now it's different. It's more fair... I think that this government wants to do the right things. In things like the police and the schools and the health campaigns you can see the difference."<sup>222</sup> María judged the government's effectiveness in terms of her daily needs, basing her opinion on her ability to sell dresses and blouses without discrimination and harassment from the police. She depicted how some women felt the revolution initiated political changes without explicit knowledge of it. While AMNLAE leaders documented the movements' goals to educate more women on political issues, María still displayed an important, intermediary step in the process: while she was not informed about the political atmosphere that made these differences, she understood the connection between the government and her changing lifestyle.

Diana Espinoza represents a much more politically knowledgeable and participatory woman. A mother of four children at the age of twenty-five, she also became active in the labor movement during the revolution and served on the board for the Sandinista Youth organization. Like María, she supported the FSLN, but with more enthusiasm and dedication. Her husband belonged to the Council of Trade Union Unification (*Consejo de Unificación Sindical*, CUS), a political party in opposition to the Sandinistas. Diana explained that the CUS was "a workers' confederation that takes the side of the bosses, the capitalists, the guys who have all the

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<sup>221</sup> *Ibid*, 28.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid*.

money.”<sup>223</sup> Despite her disapproval, Diana told him, “Look, I don’t mess with your politics...you have no business messing with mine. If I respect your ideas, you have to respect mine too. If you don’t I’m sorry but I’m leaving.”<sup>224</sup> Diana’s political resolve reflects the confidence some women developed through their involvement in the revolution. To fully understand the nature of how the revolution affected women’s lives and how they saw this change, Diana eloquently articulated this idea:

I was fourteen when the revolution came to power. But I could see that a lot of men beat up on women; they liked mistreating women. There are still a lot of men who do that. but before it seemed like there were more. And women didn’t have anywhere to go where they could complain about it. No one listened to women. The revolution built women’s centers; for example, the Luisa Amanda Espinosa women’s organization. Now they even have a legal office, a special place for women to go and file their claims if they’re being beaten or mistreated. And they listen; they call the man in, and they can even take him to court. That’s been a change with this revolution: women aren’t shoved aside so much, as if we don’t matter. The idea that women should stay at home and only men should go out and work, that’s changed.<sup>225</sup>

Diana’s account displays the balance between women’s small victories and the reality of their continued opposition to the deeply engrained *machismo*. While laws and legal offices cannot eradicate mistreatment, they did empower some women to find help and the resources to address their abuse. The idea that women had the right to accuse men of this exploitation shifted the dynamics of power in how men and women interacted. As laws changed, their effects began to trickle down to the public. While discrimination and abuse remained, women like Diana and María show that legal changes had helped set in motion a process of social change in Nicaragua.

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<sup>223</sup> Randall, *Sandino’s Daughters Revisited*, 92.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

## WOMEN AND THE CONSTITUTION

Perhaps women's most notable political experience was in the drafting of the new Constitution, passed in January of 1987. AMNLAE, as part of the Council of State, worked in the drafting from 1985 to 1986. On October 10, 1985, the General Secretary of AMNLAE, Glenda Monterrey, presented the criteria that her organization demanded to appear in the Constitution. Besides recognizing women's rights in the Constitution's Preamble and in the description of the revolution's principles, AMNLAE'S document outlined specific women's rights under several categories: the general rights and guarantees of Nicaraguans, the right to work, rights to the individual, the right to protection of family, political rights, educational and cultural rights, the right to the land, and the right to maternity.<sup>226</sup> This short but direct document demanded such rights as "recognizing domestic work as socially valuable... prohibiting using women as sexual objects and *machismo*... equal work and equal pay," and ended by stating that the document represented a "leap of quality in our Association, expressed by the content of the document."<sup>227</sup> The document and its demands represented a written acknowledgement of the growing independence and consciousness many women formed through the revolutionary process.

During May and June of 1986, the FSLN held *cabildos*, public meetings to deliberate over important issues to farmers, youth, rural families and women.<sup>228</sup> Lucinda Broadbent commented on a meeting she attended in Managua:

Men were attacked for rape and domestic violence, for leaving housework to women, for abandoning women with children, for being responsible for prostitution and for failing to understand that the Nicaraguan Revolution includes women... Every woman was given space to speak. As one said: 'I feel a deep

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<sup>226</sup> Fernández, et al., 45-9.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid*, 49.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid*, 50.

emotion at participating in this open meeting, adding my voice to the Constitution. This really is *our* revolution.<sup>229</sup>

The meeting lasted over five hours, with more than 50 speeches given by women.<sup>230</sup> While not every meeting ended as stirringly as this specific night in Managua, the emotion suggests how strongly some women felt about their involvement in the constitutional process. Milú Vargas wrote that the *cabilidos* demonstrated that AMNLAE's constitutional demands aligned with the demands of Nicaraguan women.<sup>231</sup>

Their involvement at both the grassroots and organizational levels yielded a new Constitution with more than ten articles specifically addressing women's rights; the old Constitution of 1974 had not contained a single reference to women. María Lourdes Bolaños served as a Supreme Court magistrate and director of IXCHEN (a women's support organization) and stated that with the Constitution, "I believe we have taken a quality step, we stopped just being 'mother' and identified ourselves as women."<sup>232</sup> Then she also admitted, "laws educate but they do not transform, they are instruments...it's not that we are going to throw all the men in jail, I think it's more important that the law educates well..."<sup>233</sup> She viewed in their capacity to gradually reform gender ideology in Nicaragua. She hoped these laws would teach men that women deserved better treatment and teach women to demand this proper treatment. She addressed how women had learned from the law-making process, "Women demonstrated that we are capable of making laws...we have demonstrated that they are our laws, created by us with errors and flaws, but they are our own error and flaws."<sup>234</sup> The Constitution

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<sup>229</sup> Lucinda Broadbent, in Managua on 10 June 1986, quoted in *Nicaragua Today*, Autumn 1986, found in Collinson, 113-4.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>231</sup> Fernández, et al., 50.

<sup>232</sup> Brenes, Ada Julia, et al. *La mujer nicaragüense en los años 80* (Ediciones Nicarao: Managua, 1991), 37.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

crafted women's rights in ink, but the meetings and discussion beforehand empowered more women through active participation.

The legislation passed by the FSLN during the 1980s was a political breakthrough for women, illustrating how the revolution facilitated the women's movement initially. As Daisy Zamora said, "Yes...It's absolutely true that the revolution opened up a new space for women here," but she also outlined the limits of this legislation: "I think the problem was that this new space wasn't accompanied by a new mentality on the part of most of the male-dominated leadership...there was a gap between what the revolution offered its women and what we women found in our day to day relationship with 'Comandante X,' a man still very much formed in the old ideas."<sup>235</sup> As Daisy discussed, the women's movement had many layers to be addressed and new, protective laws had to be first established, implemented, and then efforts made to transform gender relations. While many of the women complained about the lasting *machismo*, this articulation of discontent was an important, while subtle, step in itself. This articulation shows an acknowledgement of women's right to certain types of treatment and legal rights.

Daisy Zamora also described the women who worked on the Constitution and how their demands worked within the limits of *machismo* and tradition. She added "...the women who helped write the Constitution were undoubtedly convinced that they were looking out for women when they conceived of this new basic law of the land, but in practice they could go only so far. And I know they are honest, that they are honestly convinced of their feminist positions...I'm not criticizing them. I'm simply saying that the situation was such that none of them had the courage to publicly argue for positions I know they defended in private."<sup>236</sup> Her assessment outlines the women's movement as a *process*. By the end of the 1980s, women had struck

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<sup>235</sup> Randall, *Sandinó's Daughters Revisited*, 111.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid*, 113.

somewhat of a balance between areas of progress and areas of resistance. At the end of the decade, the women's movement boasted a mixed bag: important legislation had been passed, important discussions created and put in place, but the government had ultimately failed to continue working for women. Ironically, national government changes at the end of the decade strengthened many areas of the women's movement by increasing their resistance to women's interests.

As the revolutionary government faced more foreign and national opposition, the leaders backed down on several issues they had prioritized previously, such as women's rights. While the FSLN created the first successful women's organizations in the 1970s, they fell short in supporting this empowerment, especially in the late 1980s. The bulk of legislation that addressed women's needs passed in the first half the 1980s, mainly from 1979-1982.<sup>237</sup> Many of these laws supported women's "feminine" needs, such as laws against prostitution, promoting breastfeeding and pertaining to family-rearing. As women became more revolutionary, they received less support from the FSLN. They did not pass proposed laws making men legally accountable to support their children and legalizing abortion, for example.<sup>238</sup> Their failure to elect a woman to the National Directorate also frustrated women.<sup>239</sup> Women were forced to create more separate and independent initiatives and reshaped their movement to function without the FSLN's backing.

### **VIOLETA CHAMORRO AND CONSERVATIVE GENDER POLITICS**

Though the FSLN had drawn back in their support of women's movements by the 1990 election, Violeta Chamorro introduced an even more conservative gender policies when she took

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<sup>237</sup> Collinson, 111.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid*, 118.

<sup>239</sup> Randall, *Sandinó's Daughters Revisited*, 135. s



office. Violeta's image, in and of itself, was contradictory. She was the first female Nicaraguan president, third female president in Latin America, and first Latin American woman elected to the office by the public. The front page of *La Prensa* praised Violeta in 1991 as "neither a guerrilla nor aggressive, [she's] a woman of the house."<sup>240</sup> These two images—a "woman of the house" serving as president—contradict themselves and illustrate how traditional ideas did not fit with the changing feminine identity in Nicaragua. Yet President Chamorro and her administration worked to push gender relations returning to the old, traditional, hierarchical structure. To accomplish this goal, the government reverted to conservative policies already discussed in areas such as healthcare, education and labor reform. As for Violeta's role, her image represented the traditional, caring mother and has even been equated to the Virgin Mary. Often dressing in all white during her campaign, she emphasized the murder of her husband, Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, and the suffering she had endured as a result of his death. Since Nicaraguans considered Pedro Joaquín a martyr for the revolution, presumably murdered for his opposition to Somoza, Violeta assumed this sacred image. Also, her campaign focused on strengthening the "Nicaraguan family," and she stated in New Year's speech: "[In 1990] the Nicaraguan family will return to reunite with joy. In 1990 the people are going to choose our moral option..."<sup>241</sup> Her words and policies equated the traditional family values to the country's national values. This familial imagery emphasized the conservatism that she ironically reintroduced, challenging the advances that women's movements had made. Perhaps the most contradictory aspect of her traditional administration was the fact she, a woman, was its leader.

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<sup>240</sup> Karen Kampwirth, *Feminism and the Legacy of Revolution* (Athens: Ohio University Research in International Studies), 47.

<sup>241</sup> Karen Kampwirth, "The Mother of the Nicaraguans: Doña Violeta and the UNO's Gender Agenda," *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 23, No. 1, Women in Latin America, Part 2 (Winter, 1996), 69.

In reaction to the new government's new traditionalism, the feminists responded by restructuring their own movement. The opposition that characterized the last years of the FSLN's government and intensified when Violeta took office created a strong drive for autonomy among women active in women's issues. María, a woman involved in political struggles in Chile, Honduras and Nicaragua, explained, "with the new election, a big emptiness opened up...It was a political emptiness...For [Sandinistas] it was very serious, it was a cause for grieving. Your life's work, your political work, your employment, all that fell apart. So for me, this emptiness was filled by the feminist movement."<sup>242</sup> For women like María, the FSLN's loss resulted in a closer alignment with the feminist movement, thereby strengthening the coalition. Women who had previously supported the FSLN now diverted these efforts to women's issues.

Daisy Zamora viewed these transformations as part of the movement's strengthening. She stated, "I believe these are logical moments in a movement that is beginning to develop within an atmosphere of a more internalized freedom. Then too, I think that as the networks develop they're going to create the conditions we need for an organized movement to emerge."<sup>243</sup> Daisy explained how the political atmosphere and conditions bolstered the growth of women's movements. When Violeta Chamorro was elected, her platform gave generally older and more conservative women a space to contest the radical, nontraditional progress of women in the previous decade. This active opposition ironically contested the traditional, passive roles these very women supported. Moreover, this resistance strengthened staunch feminists who banded together in opposition to President Chamorro and her administration. This struggle should not be viewed as backtracking from 1980s progress, but rather as a development in how women's role in society evolved. In Nicaragua, where traditional gender roles had been engrained in society for

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<sup>242</sup> Kampwirth, *Feminism and the Legacy of the Revolution*, 58.

<sup>243</sup> Randall, *Sandinista's Daughters Revisited*, 119.

centuries, these traditions could not be overturned in a decade. The fact that the struggle was taking place, a discussion ensuing and traditional women assuming positions of power in order to contest feminists show that the movement had outgrown and survived the revolution. This accomplishment, in and of itself, was radical for Nicaraguan women.

An important side of this political movement played out on the grass-roots level, where rural women got involved in political issues as well. Their main resources were workshops and meetings held by organizations such as AMNLAE. For example, women collaborated together against violence in a workshop held in 1992. They established five goals: make rape a public crime, make the penal code more protective for women, educate the population on violence through media, incorporate sex education in the school curriculum and create a women's network that continued to work against violence.<sup>244</sup> They succeeded in all these goals except sex education, but still met criticism from conservative voices who opposed such a public assault on violence. Yet as Karen Kampwirth assessed, "the public nature of the controversies was a good indicator of how open and free political exchange was at the gathering; gone were the days of the unanimous acclamations that disguised underlying disagreements."<sup>245</sup> This discussion—the support and opposition expressed by women on these newly discussed issues—created a new political atmosphere in which women's voices were introduced on multiple levels, including rural and poor women.

Certain larger political issues drew traditionally less involved women into political issues. For example, Dora María Téllez, who served as the Minister of Health, was nominated for election to the FSLN's National Directorate in 1991. Sparking controversy between men and women alike, Dora María did not get elected. Milú Vargas, a woman who worked as the legal

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<sup>244</sup> Kampwirth, *Feminism and the Legacy of the Revolution*, 63.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

counsel for the Council of State in 1982<sup>246</sup> described, “outside the Olaf Palme Convention Center there were demonstrations, groups of women from Managua in support of Dora María’s candidacy...But, of course, we were in the minority. On the other hand, the fact that the discussion took place at all, out in the open like it did, was a step forward in my opinion. The discussion was very important.”<sup>247</sup> Milú recognized the revolutionary attention on women’s issues at the time. While the FSLN’s National Directorate still only elected men, Dora María’s nomination publicized the idea that a woman could be included. When asked if she thought the FSLN would elect a woman to the National Directorate in the future, Milú responded, “well, we’ll have to see if women are even interested by that time... But I’m not at all sure that’s what we women want, at least those of us who have done some reflecting on the matter.”<sup>248</sup> She then began to ask questions, “what would it cost us to have a woman on the directorate? What benefits would accrue? What degree of representation would we find satisfactory?”<sup>249</sup> Milú’s questioning of what action would best support women and analyzing the degree of association women should have with the FSLN government illustrates the independence that led to the more autonomous transition in the 1990s. While women encountered an increasingly “sexist” FSLN and the traditional efforts of new President Violeta Chamorro, the women reacted by organizing into autonomous movements instead of closely linking themselves with any other political organization. This maturation illustrates that the 1980s had armed women with skills and motivation to keep fighting after the revolution. As Milú added, “You know, I consider this a real gift. The FSLN enabled us to grow to the extent that we were able to claim autonomy, think for ourselves, create new alternatives and new possibilities for struggle. I believe we women are

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<sup>246</sup> Fernández, et al, 22.

<sup>247</sup> Randall, *Sandino’s Daughter Revisited*, 135.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid*, 136.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid*.

an important part of the Front's rich history... our experience in the FLSN is what gave us this strength, this possibility for change."<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> *Ibid*, 140.

### GENDER RELATIONS: DAVID, GOLIATH AND RESPONSIBILITY

*“I believe the Revolution has come to help women determine their own destiny, establish the same rights for men and women, and also the same responsibilities.”*

--Xiomara Gutiérrez<sup>251</sup>

In their 1980s and 1990s testimonies and interviews, women constantly referred to a changing “consciousness” and awareness of changing gender relations. Some of these women were more aware of this change than others, but regardless, new forms of gender identity had begun to emerge. Margaret Randall, an author who conducted numerous interviews during and after the Revolution, wrote, “In each of the more than 80 interviews conducted for this book...almost every conversation revealed signs of transformation and growth as women developed new ways of relating to other women, to lifelong comrades, to their children and to themselves.”<sup>252</sup> While many of these testimonies indicated positive changes, others focused on the awareness of struggles and injustices against women. The latter may characterize the most significant shift in women’s gender ideology, as this dissatisfaction showed neither ignorance nor idealism, but a knowledge of realistic conditions. Overall, women discussed gender relations more often and more defiantly than before the revolution. While laws, healthcare and education were pivotal to the movement, the way in which women perceived gender relations determined the future and continuation of women’s movements past the 1980s.

Where new opportunities existed, optimism among women burgeoned. Many of their testimonies spoke of idealistic progress, fulfillment and purpose through new work or volunteerism. “I love my work,” Lisbeth Mena described her job at the Reeducation Center Campesinas del Cua, a center for troubled, young girls, “I feel that I’m building for myself, for my people, for the Revolution. I feel myself growing, learning all the time. That’s a good

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<sup>251</sup> Xiomara Gutiérrez, “Cómo es la nueva mujer...?” *Barricada*, 28 September 1985.

<sup>252</sup> Margaret Randall, *Sandino's Daughters Revisited* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 204.

feeling.”<sup>253</sup> Maura Rayo, a middle-aged woman from Sebaco, Matagalpa, confessed similar feelings, “The important thing is that I’m a full member [of the Leonel Valdivia Cooperative], the same as anyone else. [...] I’m contented, especially since now I’m a full member of the cooperative.”<sup>254</sup> Women like Maura and Lisbeth suggested that expanding opportunities in the job market, revolutionary activities and women’s organizations led to an increased confidence and optimism. The mass mobilization initiated by the FSLN, therefore, also sparked the wave of women’s idealism that led more and more women to become involved.

As more women participated in the revolution, they became more aware of unjust gender relations in Nicaragua. Many women explained that their understanding of women’s rights and repression changed. When asked if she felt discriminated against while working within FSLN politics, Dora María Téllez, one of the most active female leaders, answered, “Not that I can remember. Of course, there may be things I wouldn’t have noticed at the time that I might feel differently about today. As [women] gain in consciousness we see things with new eyes.”<sup>255</sup> While upper and middle-class women like Dora María were better informed of these ideas, rural and peasant women realized them as well. Saida Rugama, a secondary school teacher from Managua, for example, said, “Our CDS (*Comité de Defensa Sandinista*, Neighborhood Defense Committee) is growing, growing, growing. The political consciousness of we Nicaraguans is growing, growing, growing...”<sup>256</sup> Remarkably, lower-class women also referenced ideological transformations despite the fact that upper and middle-class women had more exposure to these changes (through education and women’s conferences, for example). Based on over two hundred interviews, Karen Kampwirth assessed that upper and middle prestige women were “[socialized]

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<sup>253</sup> Alvin Levie, *Nicaragua: The People Speak* (South Hadley, MA: Bergen & Garvey Publishers, Inc., 1985), 36.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, 60-1.

<sup>255</sup> Randall, *Sandinista's Daughters Revisited*, 244.

<sup>256</sup> Levie, 15.

into revolutionary culture,” which “involved studying the history of their own countries, reading major works of the international left, and participating in discussion groups in which they interpreted their studies,” unlike lower-class women.<sup>257</sup> Many of these lower-class women *did* discuss a new consciousness and new confidence, though, and alluded to it if not outright addressing it. María Inéz González from Ciudad Chinandega stated simply, “we are living a revolutionary process. Everyone has the right to have respect.”<sup>258</sup> Nicaraguan women’s movements were unique in that they emerged through the Sandinista Revolution, the most widespread, grassroots upheaval in Nicaraguan history. In this way, women’s movements used this remarkable window of opportunity to reach a substantial portion of the female population.

This consciousness initiated the growth of feminism in Nicaragua, mainly becoming popular with upper and middle class women in the early 1990s. Feminist movements often grow out of revolutionary movements, because the organization of women in male-dominated regimes build off this foundation to pursue a feminist platform.<sup>259</sup> A woman named Sonia supported and participated in the FSLN until the mid 1980s when she left the party to become a feminist organizer. As she stated in a 1997 interview, “I realized that I didn’t want to leave the party but [at the same time] I didn’t want to stay in the party. I did not reject Sandinismo but I did reject the FSLN ... For me feminism was a refuge.”<sup>260</sup> Politically experienced women like Sonia took the initiative to create women’s programs, establish women’s hospitals, organize women’s conferences and reach out to Nicaraguans. Many of these women proclaimed to be feminists and took up leadership positions, devoting much time and energy into the movement. As Margaret Randall sums up,

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<sup>257</sup> Karen Kampwirth, *Feminism and the Legacy of Revolution: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas* (Athens: The Center for International Studies, Ohio University, Ohio University Press, 2004), 11.

<sup>258</sup> Levie, 123.

<sup>259</sup> Kampwirth *Feminism and the Legacy of the Revolution*, 6.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid*, 1.



Nicaraguan feminists, tired of trying to get AMNLAE to understand and respect their positions, have created an independent, broad-based, cross-class, and internationally connected movement that currently boasts a number of research and education foundations, several excellent publications, and a guerrilla-like networking system. Most of the women involved consider themselves Sandinistas; they either continue to be members of the FSLN or are sympathizers. Many speak emotionally about their development within the Party and say they would not be where they are today without it. But they also feel it is time to discard the male leadership that has so overwhelmingly refused to address their concerns.<sup>261</sup>

Basically, the FSLN had set a precedent through its own established values of equality and human rights. Since many feminists were at one time Sandinistas, these very goals transformed into the pursuit of women's rights. The FSLN inadvertently provoked and taught many women how to be feminists.

Yet changes in gender ideology were not reflected solely through radical sectors like feminism; another division of the women's movement revolutionized feminine, as opposed to feminist, interests. Many of the initiatives that have been addressed—the Literacy Crusade, healthcare reforms, childcare centers—targeted lower-class Nicaraguan women. These women, due to a combination of poverty, children, and unstable families, wanted the right to “feminine” interests like education and healthcare. The discussion among these women, although not part of the feminist, leftist movement, was still revolutionary. When explaining why many of these women did not support the FSLN in the 1990 elections, Dora María Téllez stated, “the housewives’ vote is a conservative vote. Women who have to deal with putting food on the table every day are the first to suffer from an economic crisis...So, no. I don't think it was that damned song about the cock that did [the FSLN] in, but rather the everyday situation. what people here had to endure.”<sup>262</sup> As Dora María candidly expressed, the conservative, feminine interests of financially struggling Nicaraguan women affected the 1990 elections and thus

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<sup>261</sup> Randall, *Sandinino's Daughters Revisited*, 35.

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.* 249.

exercised a political power that women had not used before. Their votes demonstrated how lower-class women asserted themselves in new ways and became larger, more involved presence in society. Ironically, the women's movements that the FSLN initiated and influenced exercised this new voice against its creator in the 1990 election.

The core struggle of women's movements played out through public issues such as healthcare and politics, but also privately in homes and daily relationships. Changes in the nature of marriage relationships especially displayed the complexities of evolving gender relations. Many women spoke of the trouble they had in their marriage once they became involved in women's movements. As Milú Vargas explained, "I began to notice that my husband had certain expectations of me...he thought I should stay home, be a mother, take care of the house. He'd ask me where his tennis shoes were, and I wouldn't have the faintest idea; and, you know, I just never thought I had an obligation to keep track of his tennis shoes."<sup>263</sup> During the movement, women became more assertive and ended their marriages on their own accord, and peacefully. As Vidaluz Meneses said, "and that's what happened in our marriage: we just moved further apart. I was more and more in love with the revolution. And of course my area of activity was very exciting with great projects and extraordinary change..."<sup>264</sup> In other cases, men became less repressive and did not always follow the typical *machismo* attitude. Maribel Duriez spoke of her husband, "He is one of the few men who has put machismo aside a little...He is an excellent man. He is understanding. He doesn't complain because I am studying, like so many men do... We both clean, cook, and share the responsibilities at home."<sup>265</sup> Many Nicaraguan marriages, especially in poor, rural areas, did not reflect any change in gender ideology, and

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<sup>263</sup> *Ibid*, 130.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid*, 158-9.

<sup>265</sup> Denis Lynn Daly Heyck, *Life Stories of the Nicaraguan Revolution* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1990), 162.

women submitted to men's superiority. However, as Milú showed, some women who were unhappy in these types of marriages chose to end them; as Maribel also showed, more women than before were not subjected to the same repression. In other words, the stark lines that defined men as home leaders and women as their subordinates were not erased, but many examples showed that they had blurred.

Women's sexuality became a significant element of women's movements because sexual exploitation was a deeply ingrained foundation of *machismo*. Despite the efforts to redefine women's sexual identity and rights, sexism was still very much a problem in Nicaragua. However, as gender relations changed, women's perception of their own role shifted to include *women's* sexism. Gioconda Belli discussed women's role, "for us, we're guilty of buying into this macho concept of power, of going along with it, of singing hymns to the greatness of our David and Goliath struggle."<sup>266</sup> This idea also appeared in *Barricada*, in an article by Clara Martínez who wrote on "*ideas machistas*," or women's version of *machismo*. She wrote, "When we are convinced that realistically there are activities or jobs exclusively for men and others that are only adequate for women, we are thinking in women's version of sexism."<sup>267</sup> Belli and Martínez pointed out that sexism was based on the relationship between men and women. While men mistreated women, they added that women were guilty of tolerating this mistreatment. Both women made females more responsible for their own protection, a statement that showed an ideological shift in the ability and *responsibility* of women to be a more powerful part of Nicaraguan society. This shift embodied the course of gender relations: as the revolution emphasis on equality allowed women to better understand their own repression, women grew to become more responsible and active in shaping the perceptions of their own gender.

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<sup>266</sup> Randall, *Sandino's Daughters Revisited*, 189.

<sup>267</sup> Clara M. Martínez, "La lucha contra las ideas machistas," *Barricada*, 28 September 1985.

CONCLUSION: A SURPRISING COUNTRY

*"The past will not return*

*Now everything is otherwise  
Everything another way  
Not even what was is now as it was  
Now nothing of what is will be what it was  
Now everything is something else  
It is another era*

*It is the beginning of a new era  
It is the beginning of a new history  
The old history is over, now it cannot return  
This is now another history."*

--José Coronel Urtecho, "The past will not return"<sup>268</sup>

Women's movements in Nicaragua have developed behind a façade of misconceptions. The immense poverty of the country, the guise of an anti-feminist female president, and the continuing *machismo* all misconstrue an honest understanding of the dynamics of Nicaragua's gender relations. The revolutionary nature of women's movements appear more subtle because they grew in the midst of the realities of a third-world country: poverty, sexism and corruption. As Dora María Téllez stated, "You can't say now, and maybe you will never be able to say, that the problems of women have been solved. There are enormous problems which have been solved, but there are other great problems which we have not yet begun to address."<sup>269</sup> Dora María correctly stressed that Nicaraguan women still struggle with several fundamental issues, such as abortion rights or equal pay, which have not improved or have even backtracked. However, ideological shifts have occurred in how the population perceives women and their role in Nicaraguan society. These previously unforeseeable changes cannot be reversed, and have become the foundation of women's movements. For women in Nicaragua, the last three decades

<sup>268</sup> José Coronel Urtecho, "The past will not return," in *Poets of the Nicaraguan Revolution* edited and translated by Dinah Livingstone (London: Katabasis, 1993), 135.

<sup>269</sup> Margaret Randall, *Sandino's Daughters Revisited* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 262.

have been all but typical—as Dora María expressed, “It’s not a cut-and-dried matter, of course.”<sup>270</sup> Yet women emerged into the twenty-first century as the most successful result of the largest grassroots rebellion in Latin America.

The initiatives many women took—to create new women’s organizations, to vote, to build women’s healthcare and daycare centers, to volunteer to teach during the Literacy Crusade—signified a major shift in the future of women’s rights. These many movements took root in Nicaragua in the late 1970s and 1980s, largely with direct support from the Sandinista government. After the defeat of the Sandinistas at the polls in the 1990s, women then began to shape their own movements during in 1990, women then began to shape their own movements as they grew more autonomous, often in opposition to the more socially and culturally traditional Violeta Chamorro administration. As Saida Rugama described, “the process—I’m convinced that it’s irreversible...It teaches us to leave our social sickness behind.”<sup>271</sup> These women’s movements represent a successful, lasting result of the Sandinista Revolution. The survival and growth of these movements show that women in Nicaragua have embarked in the last three decades on a long process of transforming traditional gender relations.

The FSLN played a pivotal and simultaneously complex role in the women’s movements. The Sandinista Revolution first accelerated the growth of women’s movements in the 1980s. At the end of the 1970s, the Sandinistas recruited women to become members of the FSLN and active in the insurrection. By uniting women against Somoza and opening opportunities for women’s involvement, the FLSN triggered an increase in female participation and increased their visibility in Nicaraguan society. This mobilization sparked personal transformations for many women who then began to push the traditional limits on their gender. These

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<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

<sup>271</sup> Alvin Levie, *Nicaragua: The People Speak* (South Hadley, MA: Bergen & Garvey Publishers, Inc., 1985). 15.

transformations materialized in different ways: some women pursued feminist, radical change while others pursued more conservative political agendas. That they *pursued* change at all marked a fundamental step in women's activism during the 1980s. Since their main organization, AMNLAE, worked within the government, the FLSN incorporated female interests in their own goals—for example, the National Directorate (the Sandinista's main governing body) supported several laws to support women in the labor market and appointed women to various political positions. Though many scholars debate the extent to which the Sandinistas supported the women's movement, what support they did give during the early 1980s stirred women, many of them young, to become much more active in civic organizations, formal labor markets and women's rights. The FSLN played a pivotal role in the acceleration of the women's movement in Nicaragua. Without the revolution and its support of women, the movement would have grown more slowly and taken hold in Nicaragua much later.

Ironically, the FSLN's failures at the end of the 1980s facilitated the continued growth in women's movements. By the mid-1980s, the FSLN often suffocated women's movements. Its inability or unwillingness to address women's needs became evident. The FSLN could not focus on these movements due to the economic and wartime turmoil in the country. The party also stopped short of fully empowering women in a number of ways: by not electing them to the highest echelons of FSLN leadership, not passing more sweeping laws for women's rights and continuing to treat women as inferior. As Gioconda Belli described in the early 1990s, the National Directorate's decision not to elect a woman representative "was sexism, pure and simple. I don't have another explanation. And when I say 'sexism' I'm talking about a series of prejudices—terrible prejudices. And I'm telling you: that was the beginning of the end of the

national directorate as far as I'm concerned."<sup>272</sup> Consequently, women who had been loyal to the FSLN left the party in the late 1980s and turned their attention to more directly feminist activities outside the party. With the organizational experience gained during the revolution, women applied this knowledge to women's rights initiatives such as healthcare clinics, daycare centers and community organizations. Overall, the more Violeta Chamorro and her administration returned to the promotion of traditional roles, the stronger the women's movements mobilized in opposition. These conditions encouraged the emergence of autonomous women's organizations by the early 1990s, which in turn raised the consciousness of even more women.

The FSLN and the revolution accelerated the women's movements, but in contradictory ways. The FSLN first facilitated the growth of the movement by creating opportunities for women and supporting female involvement. They also helped women move from insurrectional mobilization to revolutionary participation by providing outlets such as the Literacy Crusade to continue women's organizing. However, the demise of the FSLN also strengthened the women's movements—an interesting twist on how the FSLN affected women in the 1980s. Whether due to outside forces or the FSLN's own gender prejudices (debated in many scholar's works), their withdrawal of support led women to withdraw their own support from the party and transfer it to women's organizations. When Violeta came to power in 1990, many women pursued female initiatives and created a network of women fighting for female rights. A visible, autonomous movement surfaced in the early 1990s—built on the irreversible cultural changes initiated during the early 1980s. So the FSLN quickened and assisted the onset of a women's movement through its early support and, ironically, its absence of support later.

These women experienced a variety of triumphs and setbacks in those twenty years, but mainly they began transformative discussions about women's rights. The irreversibility of these

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<sup>272</sup> Margaret Randall. *Sandino's Daughters Revisited* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 187.

discussions is the most significant result of the movement's inception and the FSLN's contributions because it allowed movements to grow despite changes in government and society. Furthermore, the permanence of this new female visibility was especially significant amid setbacks in Nicaragua over the past decades. From the early 1990s to the late 1990s, the number of Nicaraguans below the poverty line rose from roughly 28% to nearly half of the population. Almost three-fourths of Nicaraguan individuals lived on less than \$2 US dollars per day in the late 1990s.<sup>273</sup> After the FSLN left power in 1990, the country has become comparatively more impoverished and arguably the second poorest country in Latin America after Haiti. After Violeta Chamorro's government left power in 1997, Arnoldo Alemán served as president until 2002. Although pursued from a neoliberal model, Alemán's policies shared in common Violeta's antifeminism. Alemán attacked feminism by capitalizing on his opposition to NGOs. He tried to reduce the independence of many NGOs (including some specifically women's organizations), by accusing them of dishonest practices and subjecting them to more government control. He also accused many female NGO leaders (many who were connected to feminist activities) of an array of offenses in order to remove them from their positions.<sup>274</sup> In many respects, this opposition continued a retreat to traditional Catholic values—traditional-minded Nicaraguan intellectuals increasingly viewed feminism as the single largest opponent group to the Catholic Church. Despite these anti-feminist forces, many women still found ways to organize, testifying to the strength of their movement.

At the end of the twentieth century, Nicaraguan women's movements were perhaps the largest in Latin America. 1980s and 1990s, though, generated a *multitude* of women's

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<sup>273</sup> John A. Booth, Christine J. Wade and Thomas W. Walker, *Understanding Central America: Global Forces, Rebellion, and Change*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed. (Westview Press: Boulder, 2006), 17.

<sup>274</sup> Karen Kampwirth, "Arnoldo Alemán Takes on the NGOs: Antifeminism and the New Populism in Nicaragua," *Latin American Politics and Society*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (Blackwell Publishing: Miami, 2003), 137-144.



movements—for effective education, better healthcare, equitable labor conditions and interactive politics to name a few—and a radically changing gender ideology emerged through each of these different initiatives. This lasting movement was the most formidable result of the FSLN's revolution. The dynamics of Nicaragua in the 1980s created a window of opportunity where women mobilized for a national effort and jump-started a spreading movement. However, the government's inability to sufficiently advocate for women's rights created an opportunity for women to oppose them later in the decade. Even more ironically, women refocused their strengths to address strictly women's issues when they met increased opposition from Violeta Chamorro, Nicaragua's first female president. Therefore, through these political complexities and idiosyncrasies, women's movements emerged as the most revolutionary, long-standing, and perhaps improbable result of the FSLN's victory and the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship. As Dora María Téllez has said, "I'd like to say that I think Nicaragua is a surprising country. This is the way I see it, and I've lived here all my life. It's surprising because things aren't always what they seem."<sup>275</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> Randall, *Sandino's Daughters Revisited*, 261.

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