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WOMEN IN REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENTS:  
THE CASE OF NICARAGUA

by

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Abstract: The participation of women in Central American revolutionary movements has surpassed, in quantity and quality, all previous examples from the history of the Western hemisphere. Any attempt to understand this participation theoretically should take into account four developments: (1) the international context of women's movements and feminist discussion; (2) contradictions in the social structures of Central American societies that directly affect women (migration, male unemployment, rise in female-headed families, influx of women into higher education, etc.); (3) conditions for women within revolutionary organizations; and (4) the revolutionary strategy of people's war. The argument for the importance of these factors is developed in terms of the Nicaraguan revolution, but they are held to be valid for El Salvador and Guatemala as well. Numerous examples of women's experiences in the revolutionary process in Nicaragua are cited.

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## WOMEN IN REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENTS: THE CASE OF NICARAGUA

The revolutionary movements in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala represent a qualitatively new stage in Latin American revolutionary history. They also seem to represent a qualitatively new stage in the history of women's participation in revolutionary movements, not only in this hemisphere but perhaps in the world. Women participated massively in the Nicaraguan revolution in roles that many observers have argued were more varied and significant than in any other twentieth century revolution (see PTS, 1979). They were mobilized at practically every level of Nicaraguan society where opposition to the Somoza dictatorship emerged--in neighborhoods, on farms, and in factories, offices, and schools. They were fully incorporated into the actual fighting forces of the Sandinista Liberation Front (FSLN), not only in transportation, communication, and logistics but in combat and positions of command, something unprecedented in Latin American history. A tiny group of "exceptional" women had been part of the foquista guerilla organizations<sup>1</sup> of the 1960s--in Uruguay, Bolivia, Brazil and, before then, in Cuba (see Jaquette, 1973)--and some women fought as guerillas "just like men" in the Mexican Revolution. Never, however, had there been so many women in combat (perhaps 30 percent) in such positions of high responsibility, with men as well as women within their command. Further, reports out of El Salvador and Guatemala indicate that the pattern is being repeated there on an equally impressive scale (see Mendez, 1980).

The experience of Nicaragua, and now the other Central American countries, represents an important break with past conceptions of women's proper role in socialist and revolutionary struggles and with strategies for changing the attitudes of men and women about that role. In the Popular Unity period of Chile (1970-73), for example, women were not really thought of as a major force to mobilize directly since they were not a large percentage of the unionized, industrial labor force. Women were encouraged to support the struggles of their unionized and Socialist brothers, husbands, and fathers but were not expected to contribute directly and uniquely to the overall process of socialist transformation. Despite this neglect at the level of overall strategy, women at the base took the initiative to organize themselves in neighborhood committees to counteract food shortages, sabotage, and manipulations of the black market (Andreas, 1977).

The consequences of this fatal oversight are now well known: arch-conservative and reactionary forces moved into the vacuum and claimed the territory of "defense of the family" and the interests of women (assumed to be identical) as their own (see Crummett, 1977). Middle- and working-class women, vulnerable to the climate of fear and deliberate misinformation

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<sup>1</sup> Foco literally means "the center of action" or "detonator." As a strategy for revolutionary change, based on the Cuban model, the foco approach assumed that a small group of militarily trained, armed professional revolutionaries was capable of creating the subjective conditions for a successful insurrection, of being the spark, so to speak, that, with relative ease, lights the revolutionary fire. The emphasis in foco organizations was on military and tactical, rather than political and ideological, training and as a result, they tended to be isolated from mass movements and organizations.

because of their tenuous connection to the organization and mobilization of the strategies of socialist transformation, ended up allying with women of the bourgeoisie in helping to overthrow a socialist president in a bloody military coup that has brought in its wake untold hardship for these same middle- and working-class families (Mattelart, 1976).

Learning from the sobering lesson of Chile and building on the experiences of Cuba, Nicaragua not only broke down the division of labor in combat, but channelled significant energies and resources into the establishment of a mass women's organization in an early stage of the struggle. In contrast to Cuba, which established the Cuban Women's Federation one year after the victory (in 1960) but waited to organize formal discussions of women's role in the family until fourteen years later (with the drafting of the Family Code), Nicaragua was able to take advantage of the momentum of victory to build on the base of a strong mass women's organization with a leadership and membership tested for two years in the fire of difficult struggle.

Why are these developments occurring for the first time in Central America? How do we explain the high degree of participation of women in revolutionary movements in a region that is predominantly capitalist, but still economically one of the most backward in the hemisphere? Why have women been able to organize when there seems to be little precedent for doing so--no early twentieth century suffrage movement to speak of, for example--and where the conditions of capitalism long ago destroyed--in El Salvador and Nicaragua, at least--most elements of a pre-capitalist matrilineal, matri-local, relatively equalitarian culture. Finding the answers to these questions will help us not only understand better how masses of people are mobilized to participate in revolutionary movements, but how the concerns of socialists and feminists interact and intersect, in theory as well as in practice.

#### Method

If my assertion that the quality and quantity of women's participation in Central American revolutionary movements is without precedent in the history of the hemisphere, then the reasons must lie in other social, ideological, and organizational conditions that are also new or, at least, new in their combination. The factors identified here are not meant to be exhaustive nor to represent the totality of those needed for a theory of women's participation in revolutionary movements in general or in Central America particularly. They are argued, however, to be the most important elements for such a theory.

The case under study here is Nicaragua. Nevertheless, the elements I propose for an explanation of women's participation there are meant to apply to Central American revolutionary movements overall. They are: (1) the international context in which the revolutions are taking place (the impact of the international women's movement and the experience of women in revolutionary movements in other Third World countries); (2) contradictions in the internal social structure of Central American societies that affect women directly (migration, male unemployment, female-headed families, influx of

women into higher education, etc.); (3) internal conditions for women within the revolutionary movement and in revolutionary organizations (leadership, relations between men and women, revolutionary ethics, etc.); and (4) the general line and strategy of the revolutionary movement, particularly, the line of "prolonged people's war."

The evidence used in arriving at this analysis comes from a variety of sources: documents and first-hand accounts of the origins, development, and political line of various organizations; census data and other social and economic studies; and interviews with female participants in the Nicaraguan revolution about their background, experiences, and ideas. In the discussion which follows, I often draw on interviews conducted by Margaret Randall, an expatriate American who lived in Cuba for ten years and now works in the Ministry of Culture in Managua, Nicaragua. Nevertheless, I have also conducted a number of interviews (some of which overlap with Randall's) with Nicaraguan women who participated in the revolution and have conducted similar interviews with Guatemalan and Salvadoran women.

### The International Context

Both the international women's movement and other national liberation and socialist movements (particularly those in Cuba, Vietnam, and Angola) have shaped the international context in which revolutionary movements such as those in Central America take place. The international women's movement came together for the first time in an organized way in preparation for the International Women's Year Conference in Mexico City in 1976. The official preparations and program had little impact on the consciousness or lives of the masses of women in developed and underdeveloped countries. Parallel to this process, however, was an unofficial one that succeeded in bringing to Mexico City women as diverse as Betty Friedan, liberal feminist from the United States, and Domitila de Chungara, socialist, wife of a Bolivian tin miner and organizer of the housewives committee of the Siglo XX mine (see de Chungara, 1978, for an account of the encounter between Domitila and Betty Friedan during the U.N. International Women's Year Conference).

For at least five years prior to this event there had been a diffusion, albeit uneven, of ideas and debates generated in women's movements in the advanced capitalist countries to underdeveloped countries. While these discussions and debates were usually concentrated among university students, professionals, and leftists, they sometimes spilled over into the mass media, as is seen by several years of articles on "women's issues" and the "women's movement" that appeared in a daily newspaper in Guatemala (El Grafico, 1970-73; see also Rivera and Carpio, 1977). Issues such as domestic violence, housework, and rape also emerged in unexpected contexts, for example, among rural women in peasant organizations in India (Omvedt, 1977).

No single international women's organization ever emerged to put together all the separate movements and grass-roots efforts, but during the 1970s it is possible to say that the women's movement took on a loose but definite international character through the exchange of travelers, distribution of literature and manifestos, and coming together in actual conferences. These

contacts reinforced the process of critiquing old ideas and thinking about alternatives. Some of the most consistent male defenders of women's liberation in Nicaragua today, for example, had contact with the women's movements of the United States and Europe as well as with the Cubans when they debated and discussed the Family Code. While Latin Americans in exile often had strong and enduring disagreements with the "narrow feminist" focus of some of the organizations they encountered, they nevertheless absorbed many of the ideas to which they were exposed and applied them to the Latin American context.

The process of thinking about alternative models of changing relationships between men and women was aided greatly by increased contacts during the 1970s between Latin American activists and other national liberation movements. In Vietnam, Angola, and Mozambique, women participated in armed resistance, developed women's organizations during the anti-colonial phase of struggle, and attempted to change relations between men and women in the family, in political organizations, and in society at large (see Eisenbergman, 1974; Urdang, 1979).

Most important of all, perhaps, were the theoretical contributions of the Cuban experience. The Cubans began the process of revolutionary transformation with the handicap of having seized state power without mobilization of the masses of people. As a result, organizations such as the Women's Federation got off to a slow start. When the Cuban leadership did initiate discussions about obstacles to women's full incorporation into production and political life, they did it in a bold and innovative way around a draft of a new Family Code.

Women could only participate equally in social production and politics, the Cubans argued, if there were a breakdown of the division of labor in household work, a sharing of the "second shift" that had traditionally been the responsibility of working women. Poor countries like Cuba needed the contributions of women in production but could not afford to make significant investments in reducing the labor intensivity of household work. Men would simply have to share in household tasks and political men, in particular, would have to set the example. While who does the housework is not necessarily the primary issue during periods of crisis, such as a revolutionary war where normal family life is often suspended, the question of what women can do and what men have to be willing to do to enable them to do it was given importance by the example of the debates in Cuba.

The majority of FSLN cadre could not, of course, discuss the question of women's role in national liberation and socialism directly with representatives of other movements, and circulation of books and pamphlets was extremely limited due to censorship and repression. Nevertheless, the ideas were diffused in important, if limited, ways through cadre training and limited access to a book such as Margaret Randall's Cuban Women Now (La Mujer Cuban de Hoy) which FSLN Commandante Dora Maria Tellez mentions as one of the ten books to which she and other cadre had access when they operated underground (Randall, 1980:87).

Ideological influences in conflict with traditional dominant social values also came in the form of imported commercial mass media during the 1960s and 1970s. Magazines such as the Reader's Digest, Good Housekeeping, Cosmopolitan, Vanidades, and Paula could hardly project a message of real liberation. But in attempting to be current with the times, they often reflected, as well as reinterpreted, the movements for social change in the advanced capitalist countries. They identified problems--the double standard, conflicts between work and family, sexual liberation, and loosened family ties--even though their solutions were romantic and unrealistic even for middle-class, North American women. Nevertheless, they discussed changing relationships between men and women and women's expectations for themselves and their mates, and this most certainly accelerated already existing contradictions between old ideologies and new realities, especially for the young and middle-class. The images of North American television, though equally distorted and hardly liberating in the alternatives they posed, most certainly contributed to the deterioration of feudal-like norms for social behavior.

By 1979, the women's movement, the socialist movement, the student and indigenous movements, and the mass media had placed new issues and priorities on the international agenda. The Nicaraguan revolution of 1979 took place, therefore, in a totally different international context than its predecessors in Mexico in 1918 and Cuba in 1959. It was an international context different even from that of the national liberation movements of China, Vietnam, and Angola, one which benefitted from the richest insights in each of them without necessarily being condemned to reproduce their weaknesses. It is in this light that Dora Maria Tellez' comment to an interviewer from Granma should be understood.

[T]he Nicaraguan revolution has had the largest participation of women because it is the most recent. In the next revolution, no matter where it happens, there are going to be more women.

The Latin American woman has awoken and begun to take stock of herself, and as this happens, she will be able to undertake more and more tasks within her true capabilities and limitations (PTS, 1979).

### The Structural Contradictions in Women's Lives in Nicaragua: The 1960s and 1970s

Little is known about the history of women's situation or political participation in Central America. It seems certain, however, that prior to the Spanish Conquest, women in indigenous society had much greater freedom (including sexual) and access to material resources than they did afterwards. At their height, pre-colonial societies seem to have been characteristically matrilineal and matrilocal with a high degree of equality between the sexes, although these patterns were already in various degrees of decline by the time of the Conquest (see Randall, 1980; Nash, 1978; Anton, 1973).

While there are still elements of matrilineality and matrilocality in some indigenous groups in Guatemala (see Gillian, 1951; Maynard, 1963), these formal reminders of a distant past have all but disappeared from Nicaragua and Salvadorean mestizo society. In their place is a pattern of strict patriarchal controls on women's behavior in society and in the family (LACWC, 1977). At the same time, there are forces at work that tend to break down these controls such that in the last two decades, more and more young women, particularly urban women, are attending school and working at jobs outside the family unit. More and more men are unable to support their families due to unemployment and underemployment (and the alcoholism that often ensues). As a result, the rate of abandonment of families by fathers and husbands is extremely high in Central America. When fathers or husbands are present, but unable to adequately provide, the locus of the family unit often passes to women who somehow find a way to provide for material and emotional needs.

While changes in the rate of abandonment are difficult to measure due to the lack of information on female-headed families in the past, it seems clear that the incidence has increased dramatically and is linked to the seasonal demand for male labor, decreased access to land, and low male wages (see Wheelock, 1975). The Common Market import-substitution industrialization program of the 1960s, the encroachment of agro-export enterprises on small- and medium-size peasant lands, and the increased seasonal demand for agricultural labor contributed to high female migration to urban areas and a high concentration of women workers in service sector employment. Urban working-class women often found it easier than men to engage in subsistence activities--selling food on the streets, selling fruits, vegetables or clothing in the market, selling lottery tickets, or selling services such as cooking, cleaning, or waitressing. Young, educated urban women were an ideal reserve of labor for multinational corporations and the corresponding clerical, office and commercial needs they generated. As a result, the proportion of women officially classified as part of the economically active population increased from fourteen percent in 1950 to twenty-two percent in 1970 and twenty-nine percent in 1977 (Ybarra Rojas, 1978). The proportion of students of higher education who were women increased from ten percent in 1962 to thirty-three percent in 1978. An estimated one-third of all families in Nicaragua in 1978 were headed by women. When the FSLN moved to organize women into mass organizations in 1978, the dominant ideology still defined the role of women as materially and emotionally dependent on men, restricted after marriage to the social world of the home. The reality for many Nicaraguan women, however, was clearly another.

The political situation brought into clear relief the contradiction between women's actual roles and the dominant ideology: women were expected to protect their children, but their children were increasingly the targets of repression for real or imagined opposition to the dictatorship. Women increasingly had to be "in the street," outside the controlling confines of the household. But by venturing "into the street," they were increasingly subjected to sexual harassment and political repression. Sexual assaults on women known or imagined to be FSLN collaborators became commonplace on the streets and in the jails. The routine transfer of National Guard soldiers from town to town every three months did little to help an already established pattern of "casual paternity."

In urban areas, young people proved to be the easiest recruits for the early FSLN due to their concentration in schools, relatively greater "leisure" time (if unemployed), and ability to pass through the streets without attracting attention. As a result, it was often sons and daughters who first exposed their parents, usually their mothers, to the ideas of the anti-Somoza movement. When sons and daughters were captured, it was mostly mothers who went to jails, penitentiaries, and public offices to demand their release, partly because mothers tended to be more sympathetic to the activities of their children and partly because adult men were vulnerable to being arrested themselves. Mothers who got involved in the struggle against the dictatorship because of their children did so for the most traditional of reasons--protection or defense of an immediate family member. But once they became involved, the traditional aspect of their motivation often transformed into its opposite. Margaret Randall describes the process:

In Nicaragua in recent years daughters often assume the role of shaping the ideas of their mothers. In innumerable cases, a mother enters the struggle motivated by the ideas of her children. The child is integrated into the revolutionary struggle. The mother begins working in support tasks, forming part of a necessary network of the rear guard, sewing, cooking, carrying messages, etc.; little by little she begins to think about things that go beyond the domestic unit. She begins to confront social and political problems and she does it collectively. She takes on more important, more complex tasks. Finally she becomes a militant. And she, herself, as an independent social being; in an active part of a struggle to change the life of everyone (1980:253). (This and all other translations are mine.)

In this process of growing consciousness and commitment, the cycle of mothers raising daughters to be resigned and self-sacrificing mothers and wives, and sons to be successful men for whom the work of women is invisible, began to break down. Sometimes it happened only after the death of a child. Like many other mothers, Dona Santos Buitrago, the single parent of FSLN militant Julio Buitrago, was afraid of his being killed and frequently urged him not to get so deeply involved. Julio was her only son and she was a poor woman who had worked extremely hard to put him all the way through school to the university. Friends of Julio's commented that he could not stand to see women mistreated because he always thought of his mother. Doris Tijerino recalled:

Julio always told me that one of the things that worried him most was that his mother Dona Santos probably wouldn't be able to bear the sorrow of his death, that the day that happened, she'd die too (1978:116). [Nevertheless,] when Julio died, Dona Santos survived. And not only did she survive and bear her sorrow at the death of her son but she changed radically. Dona Santos was a mother worthy of a Sandinista martyr. She went to the meetings, took part in the struggle to free the prisoners, went to many assemblies with the mothers of other imprisoned comrades and helped plan popular campaigns (1978:117).



Sometimes it was the other way around: mothers convinced children. In other cases, mothers and daughters became involved simultaneously without each other's knowledge. Such was the case of Ruth Marcenaro and her older daughter Rina Campos, each of whom discovered the other was involved when they ended up in the same cell with hoods over their heads. Rina commented:

My mother and I have really always gotten along well but because I began to work in Jinotepe she saw that I was going out and not telling her much and there was a certain conflict between us during this time. She did not understand nor did I think I could tell her. But once we were prisoners together and both passed through the terrible experience that torture is--well, we overcame the conflict. Now we treat each other as militants and comrades and we are really good friends (Randall, 1980:254).

Not all children, however, were able to win over their parents. Some had no choice but to abandon their families or to be abandoned by their families. Marisol, a woman from such a family, noted:

Look, there comes a time in the life of people in which your political ideas make you separate from certain things. This is how it has to be. Really, it wasn't difficult for me. Little by little, I was achieving a goal which was the triumph of the Revolution and my family passed then to second place. The Revolution is before the family, before everything (Randall, 1980:286-7).

Martha Cranshaw, whose parents disinherited her after she had been held incommunicado in prison and badly tortured, observed:

I know that it is me who has to understand my parents and not them me. They can't understand me. They can't understand that I would leave my house, my comforts, to look for a world in which I didn't know where I would sleep or where I would eat. These type of questions were impossible for them to understand . . . because as we say, it is a question of class (Randall, 1980:270).

Many married women activists, likewise, had to choose between militancy and marriage when their husbands objected to their involvement or to that of their children.

Capitalist development itself in Nicaragua made impossible the realization of bourgeois ideals of the nuclear family and economically dependent women. The expansion of capitalist relations of production during the 1960s and 1970s only made the potential conflict between dominant ideas and the reality of most Nicaraguan women more acute. But open conflict between women's views of themselves as self-sacrificing mothers with primary loyalties only to the small circle of the family only broke down, however, in the context of a revolutionary movement. Under the conditions created by this movement, what had been a traditional barrier to the participation of women--their commitments to their families--actually turned into its opposite.

### Life for Women Inside the FSLN

The first female militants of the Sandinista Liberation Front describe themselves as determined to demonstrate their worth as fighters in the struggle against all odds. What made it possible not only for them, an exceptional few, but for many women to achieve important positions in cadre and mass organizations was the organizational line of the Front itself. Women were frequently recruited as collaborators and militants and were able to move up in the organization to positions of responsibility. Some women worked with Sandino's army in the 1930s (some say that they actually did part of the fighting, see Randall, 1980), but never had so many women been incorporated into so many important roles.

Both in Sandino's time and in the contemporary period, the roles offered to women in the movement were ahead of those available to them in society at large, but acceptance of their position was much more difficult in the earlier period. Nazaria, a 61-year-old woman who travelled with Sandino's army, commented:

There was criticism, yes, from the majority of people. They didn't understand that women could participate, be equal to men. That just like men, women can be combatants as well. Sometimes we ourselves marginalized ourselves. They said that what we were doing was incorrect, that it was crazy to go around with an army. How could a woman be able to fight, the people said and even now you see some who think like that. But not the youth. The young ones congratulate me for participating like they do (Randall, 1980:21).

When the Front was established in 1962 to carry on the banner of Sandino, its founding members were apparently men. But soon afterward, perhaps because women were already participating in other guerilla organizations on the continent, the first women were recruited into the FSLN. Dora Maria Tellez, one of the women who eventually rose to be a commandante, commented:

At a certain time in the history of our organization there was a tendency to underestimate women. I'm speaking of the years prior to 1963, more or less. It was even the norm in that time that women did not enter the organization. Then that view began to break down little by little and the first women to enter the organization were Gladys Baez, Doris Tijerino, and Luisa Amanda Espinosa. They were the first women to enter the organization and after that, little by little, more were incorporated (Randall, 1980:88-9).

But the organization into which the first women were recruited was still in a "foquista" stage, isolated from the masses and frequently subject to heavy losses. This isolation and clandestine life must have been doubly hard for the women. A friend of the first female martyr of the organization, a young working-class woman named Luisa Amanda Espinosa, said of this period of work:

In order to speak about the sacrifices that Luisa Amanda Espinosa made when she was a militant in the early 1970s, you have to take into account that there were still relatively few women in the Frente Sandinista. At the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, the organization was passing through a stage of reorganization. Those were new times and very tough ones, and women in this stage had to confront sharp problems, serious problems that perhaps made membership difficult for men as well as women. Organizational work--recruiting, politicizing--dominated over military activities in this period. In urban areas, it was normally women students who had some degree of politicization (Randall, 1980: 61-62).

As a consequence of the emphasis on recruitment of students, a young working-class woman like Luisa was not really at the center of the organization's work during this period and lacked the support of other women from backgrounds like her own. Later, however, as peasant and urban women began to be incorporated through their participation in mass organizations, women of all sectors and social classes eventually became part of the organization. Dora Maria Tellez commented:

In our revolution, peasant women struggled in tremendously heroic ways, in spite of the repression. But in the city participation was also difficult. It was looked upon badly that a woman would be part of the political struggle (they said we were prostitutes). . . . More or less in 1972 or 1973 is when we begin to incorporate women from the city in large numbers; this is when we created organizations such as the Association of Women Confronting the National Problem (AMPRONAC) which curiously took root at both the popular level and in the high bourgeoisie; it took root in all sectors because it was an antisomocista response directed by the revolutionary movement against the dictatorship (Randall, 1980:24).

The important part of the FSLN organizational line was its emphasis on "correct" relationships among cadre and between cadre and leaders. It took great care in cultivating its recruits, in basing advancement on objective skill and merit, and in motivating through political understanding. In the case of women, this support and emphasis on respect paid off. Over and over again when questioned about problems of sexism, women in the organization brought up examples of relations with men on the outside and contrasted them with relations with men in the organization. Monica Baltadano, at one point a commander of the Northern region before her imprisonment, offered the following observation:

I think I was lucky in this respect. For example, here in Managua, I worked with Walter Mendoza and with Ramon Cabrales, with companeros who have the mentality of "new men," excellent companeros, different from many men. I think it never entered their mind that I was a woman and, besides, I had experiences and prestige and there were no problems. There might have been difficulties among people who didn't know me. But this would be at the

level of collaborators, above all in the North because the Northerners have big problems of machismo--but at the level of militants, no, I never had problems of this type (Randall, 1980:114).

Problems arose, for example, when women with leadership responsibility were staying in "safe houses." The collaborators in the house found it difficult to accept that female guests did not automatically offer to cook, clean and mop.

It was difficult for them to understand that one had leadership responsibilities. It was difficult, too, for them to understand that a companero headed for the countryside would come and that since that companero was all day without doing anything he could wash dishes. The companero would understand it but sometimes the woman of the house wouldn't. It's not right for a man to work, she would say. Or, how is it possible that you don't wash Bayardo's her companero's clothes if you are a woman? Things that the companeros understood perfectly but the collaborators didn't (Randall, 1980:114-115).

The kind of support and respect women were able to gain inside the organization contrasted greatly with the contradictory virgin/whore roles available to them on the outside. There, once women transcended the boundaries of traditional roles, they were thought to deserve whatever abuse ensued. Sexism and machismo were integral parts of the Somoza dictatorship's control of society through the National Guard. Monica Baltadano could command a whole region of male and female troops for the FSLN; but when it came time for one of Somoza's officials to surrender, he initially refused to negotiate with her, because she was a woman.

The opportunities for respect in the movement on the basis of merit were an important reason why young women, even from high bourgeois families, rejected their class privileges (in apparently greater proportions than their male counterparts) and joined the revolutionary organization. They also played a role in the recruitment of strong, independent-minded peasant women like Gladys Baez. Recalling her break with the Nicaraguan Communist Party, Gladys commented:

After I got out of jail, something happened that facilitated my transition to the Sandinista Front. I left the jail and went to the office of the Party. I ran into Eli Altamirano and he comes out saying, 'Look companera, we knew that you would respond well, we knew that you had conviction, we knew all that you were capable of doing; we were plenty sure of your response. But you know, that conversation you had in the House of the Worker with Armando Nurinda gave rise to unfavorable comments about your character.' The night before we had fallen prisoner we had been talking to this companero in the House of the Worker and since I was a married woman . . . well. . . . In sum, a question of prejudices (Randall, 1980:22).

Gladys' response to such prejudices was unequivocal anger.

So, while I was suffering hunger you were talking shit! . . . I can converse with whoever, the maximal leader or whatever but when it has to do with my principles and form of being, I don't care who says what to me. Even more, I think it is my obligation to speak out (Randall, 1980:228).

Being treated differently within the ranks of the organization was extremely important to the morale of the women of the FSLN. Relatively more equal treatment by companeros (comrades) does not, in itself, guarantee long-term changes, say, in men's participation in housework or in women's equal access to employment, but it does provide an important standard and ideal which has an impact far beyond its own ranks. As Dora Maria Tellez commented:

With the revolutionary political process ideas and concepts change too. The same is true in the case of women. Women here participated in the revolution not at the level of the kitchen but at the level of combatant and at the level of political leadership. This gives another framework to women. In fact, women played another role in war and acquired a tremendous moral authority for any man to be able to respect her. It would be difficult for any woman combatant to allow some man to raise his hand to hit her, to mistreat her. Because there is an authority to her, a moral authority to the general female population that is now reflected even in intimate relations. The conception of the relationship has changed (Randall, 1980:92).

#### The General Line of the FSLN: Prolonged People's War

In the early 1970s, the FSLN, like several other Central American revolutionary organizations such as the Popular Liberation Forces (FPL) in El Salvador and the Guerilla Army of the Poor (EGP) and Revolutionary Organization of the People in Arms (ORPA) in Guatemala, broke with the "foquista" conception of guerilla warfare in favor of the Vietnamese-inspired conception of Prolonged People's War. In contrast to the over-reliance on military actions at the expense of political organization and a small band of full-time revolutionaries (the guerilla focoe) at the expense of grass-root mass organizations, "people's war" emphasized the long slow (i.e., prolonged) process of accumulating forces and the organization of the masses (i.e., "people") in all sectors and at all levels under a multiplicity of tactics and organization forms that could speak to a multiplicity of contradictions (see Debray, 1977; Chaliand, 1977; Chinchilla, 1980; and Hodges, 1974 for further discussion of "foquismo"). In contrast to the bureaucratism, conciliationism, and dogmatism of the traditional Communist Party, it emphasized the armed struggle, the predominantly capitalist character of Nicaraguan society, and the necessity of working-class and peasant hegemony in any alliance with a sector of the bourgeoisie.

People's war adherents in Nicaragua and Guatemala followed the Vietnamese emphasis on beginning the process of accumulation of forces in the more protective environment of rural areas, but the concept itself is not inextricably linked to a choice of rural over urban or peasant over proletariat as its application by revolutionary groups in more urbanized, proletarianized El Salvador demonstrates. In fact, what is important about the conception of prolonged people's war is that it generally avoids the forced dichotomous choices that characterized debates over revolutionary strategy for the previous decade. During the 1960s, it was either rural or urban guerilla, vanguard party or mass organization, the political or military aspect as primary, legal, or clandestine forms of work. By the late 1970s, the advocates of people's war had begun to demonstrate, in practice, not only the possibility but the necessity of multiple tactics for multiple fronts simultaneously coordinated in a single strategy. As Orlando Nunez wrote:

In our countries, all forms of struggle are necessary; all the sectors involved can be brought together in practice; all the experiences can be built upon. We are faced in our countries with great historic and structural limitations . . . revolutionary 'purism' must cede to the concrete possibilities for a coherent struggle led by that revolutionary organization which dedicates itself to the destruction by force of the apparatus of power of the established order. The politics of unity of the Sandinista revolution meant the utilization of all forms of struggle--legal, clandestine, unionist, subversive. It signified politics based on alliances with hegemony guaranteed by the FSLN. That is to say, the FSLN guaranteed the hegemony of an armed organization, ensuring the development of the struggle in favor of the working classes independent of the support of those who participated in the movement that opposed the established order (1981:15).

This view breaks with a particular brand of Marxist thought that is mechanical, deterministic, and undialectical and replaces it with an ability to analyze and respond to the complexity of concrete social formations. As Costello, in a critique of economism, wrote:

The capitalist social formation develops, not as the expression of one single contradiction but as the combined result of a multiplicity of contradictions. The basic or fundamental contradictions always develop and are affected by their existence alongside a host of lesser contradictions. [These include:] contradictions between production and consumption, and between the conditions under which surplus value is produced and the conditions under which it is realized. In the present stage of capitalism, imperialism, these contradictions are not only internal to each country dominated by capitalism but international, embracing the entire capitalist world. . . . [Then] there is the contradiction between capitalism and various vestiges of pre-capitalist systems such as simple commodity production, slavery, etc. (1980:4).

The totality of the social structure can only be understood by understanding all its contradictions and their relationships to each other.

Sometimes contradictions neutralize or cancel each other out; at other times they reinforce or intensify each other. Just as social development cannot be reduced to only one instance (the economy), so it cannot be reduced to a single contradiction. Rather, we should see development as a process determined by the particular structure of the totality of contradictions; the multiplicity of contradictions structured by relations of domination and subordination (Costello, 1980:3).

The only way to capture this multiplicity of contradictions is to study the concrete reality of a concrete social formation and the only way to really understand that reality is to sink deep roots into it like the FSLN did early in its formation by interviewing those who had fought with Sandino and by popularizing his views.

The art of revolution, then, becomes the art of coordinating or "articulating" multiple struggles against multiple contradictions in such a way that none is liquidated and the totality is strengthened.

[W]hen the secondary elements are forgotten--the struggle in the countryside, the fighting core, the activities of militants and so on--the principal element asphyxiates and dies. The dialectic is the oxygen of history and those who ignore it can only shrivel and die--unless they are provided with the iron lung of outside aid (Debray, 1977:109).

The overall class perspective for the coordination of contradictions is proletarian; but housewives, students, Christians, peasants, professionals, petty vendors, indigenous peoples can no longer not be seen as simply auxiliary to a revolution fought by the proletariat; each group can be organized directly around its concrete immediate demands in such a way that the overall revolutionary process is advanced. "Secondary" contradictions are still "secondary" but they are hardly unimportant as the spectacular success of the Guatemala guerillas in incorporating indigenous peoples in their ranks and their leadership after four hundred years of separation dramatically demonstrates.

The importance of responding, organizationally and politically, to secondary contradictions and interrelationships among contradictions is perhaps one of the most important contributions of the Central American experience. The points at which the multi-sidedness was lost (temporarily) were precisely those in which setbacks occurred. The separation of the "proletarian" tendency from that which came to be called "prolonged people's war," for example, was a result of the latter's overemphasis on the rural and peasant aspect of the struggle and underestimation of the emergent importance of the rural and urban proletariat. Likewise the emergence of the tercerista (insurrectionist) group was a response to the slowness with which the other two tendencies perceived the actual vulnerability of the existing regime and

the willingness of the population to move against it. Although some international forces attributed these separations to deep ideological differences, their subsequent reunification and successful fusion illustrate the extent to which they really represented component parts of a single whole. This unified totality, rather than any single one of the tendencies, represents, I would argue, the spirit of prolonged people's war as a general revolutionary framework.

The ability of the FSLN to organize one of the first mass women's organizations in the history of Latin America is directly related to its break with economistic, dogmatic, and mechanical conceptions of Marxism and revolutionary strategy. When FSLN cadre founded AMPRONAC (Association of Women Concerned about the National Problem), they broke with the sectarianism that demands that women's organizations be composed of only party members or only working-class women or that they be totally subordinate to the party organization. It was able to break with a "liquidationist" approach to the problems of working-class women which sees them only in their class aspect and not in the combination of class and gender exploitation. AMPRONAC succeeded where other organizations had failed because it was truly an organization in which the masses of women could participate, obtain political education, and learn leadership skills. The existence of such a mass organization, and the close relationship of the vanguard organization to it, reinforced and supported the work of women who were part of the cadre core, reminding them constantly that they should not see themselves as "exceptional women" but as representatives of the masses of women.

The successor to AMPRONAC, AMLAE (Luisa Amanda Espinosa Women's Association) is one of the three most important mass organizations in Nicaragua today. It was created by the FSLN organization and its leaders have been mainly FSLN cadre, but it is organically autonomous and its leadership gains its legitimacy from being able to lead and win the confidence of others, not through top-down directives or automatic attachment to a trademark. There are debates in AMLAE, just as there are internally in the multi-tendenced FSLN, and there are, from time to time undoubtedly, debates between AMLAE and the FSLN leadership although none have emerged in the public arena as of yet.

AMLAE is not explicitly female as some international feminists think it should be, but there is no question that it speaks to the most immediate needs of the majority of women and is a constant force for the creation of conditions whereby women's demands will themselves expand. Despite a certain expected relaxing of intense commitment after the victory by some groups of women and the tendency on the part of some men to expect women to retreat quietly back into the household sphere, leaders of AMLAE continue to raise the question of full incorporation of women into all spheres of Nicaraguan life (including combat against an expected invasion) in discussions of the future of women in Nicaragua (see Randall, 1981b for a discussion of the debate about whether women should continue to train for active combat).



## Conclusion

It is important not to underestimate the importance of the mass mobilization of women in a multiplicity of significant roles in the Nicaraguan revolution. There is little precedent for it in the history of Latin America and little equal to it in the rest of the world. Men's conception of women and women's conceptions of themselves were dramatically transformed in actions that challenged and exposed the often invisible and seemingly eternal conceptions of class society.

At the same time, it is important not to substitute the mass mobilization of women in time of war with the long-term transformation of society in which women, as well as the majority of people, are liberated. As the concept implies, the war is prolonged, not only in preparing to take power but in building something new to replace the old. Women may be given the opportunity to do what men do in the new Nicaragua but their ability to take those opportunities often depends on men doing what women do. For young women and cadre the hard choices are often mitigated by being single in the case of young women and by the availability of parents, grandparents, or neighbors for those who have children. But the majority of women, including those who are taking care of the children of others, still face the material and attitudinal obstacles to equality in their daily lives. Marriage is not really freely entered into until women have equal access to the means of subsistence. The alleviation of the burden of housework, especially in poor countries, cannot await the socialization of goods and services associated with reproduction; there is no other solution but to divide up the work at home so that women may work and participate politically outside the home. The position of women in the party will not be secure until their access to experience, leadership skills, and top positions is fully institutionalized and until criticisms of practice in "personal" as well as "public" life are fully legitimized.

The solution to all of these problems are linked, not only to an understanding of the sources of women's oppression and the measures by which they might be overcome, but to a basic understanding of Marxism as a method and strategy of revolutionary transformation. The Central American revolutions represent some of the most hopeful advances yet in forging this method and strategy.

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