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The post-conflict transformation of gender norms in Nicaragua

Following a half-century of political repression and violence in Nicaragua culminating in a decade-long civil war (1979-1990) with massive physical, social, political, and economic costs, the country began a long and at times halting process of political and economic reconstruction. Popular identification with the Sandinista program of social and economic justice along broadly socialist lines during the Sandinista National Liberation Front's (FSLN, or Frente Sandinista de la Liberación Nacional) tenure in government did not end, however, following their electoral defeat in 1990. Women's organizations in particular, including those explicitly tied to the FSLN as well as autonomous feminist organizations that also emerged during the 1980s and 1990s, continued to seek greater gender justice and equality in the post-conflict period. They drew on gains made during the Sandinista era, but also sought to end harmful or regressive practices related to gender during the more stable post-Contra war era.

The possibility of transformation of all aspects of public and private life lies at the heart of post-conflict reconstruction efforts, and gender relations are no exception. In Nicaragua, the wartime use of gendered images of mothers and fighters, despite reimagining the capacities and roles of women, nonetheless had the effect of constructing women with a narrow range of attributes and political views; this limited their efficacy. Moreover, women's issues were frequently downplayed or sidelined as the Contra war dragged on, causing the Sandinista government to instead prioritize the war effort and war economy. The post-conflict period thus seemed to offer a renewed possibility for women's political organizing free of the FSLN's structures, but autonomous feminist organizations increasingly found their social and economic

demands overlooked or actively ignored by the neoliberal policies of the new government. There was a certain consistency between the conflict and post-conflict periods then, in that although feminist activists enjoyed many successes, they more often found their demands sidelined in deference to the larger political exigencies of the day. Women's daily lives and health have been especially negatively impacted by this failure to deeply transform essential understandings of gender norms and relations.

War and gender norms

War and conflict are fundamentally gendered phenomena¹ that severely disrupt not only daily life for those affected by them, but also norms related to social performance, including gender norms and gender roles. This disruption of gender norms and performance throughout the many gendered phases of war has been widely recognized in the feminist IR literature in particular as opening a space for the renegotiation and transformation of social understandings of gender in the post-conflict period.² It has been suggested that a new post-conflict “political settlement, constitution, and political regime may provide opportunities to enshrine the principles and promote the practices of gender equality and women's rights and empowerment” in political, social, and economic arenas, “and also to strengthen women's citizenship.”³ Other commentators further argue that in order to truly achieve gender justice in the wake of war and conflict, “the gender biases underpinning ideas of nationalism, war/peace/security, human rights, liberalism,

¹ C.f. Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making feminist sense of international politics*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990; Cynthia Cockburn and Dubravka Žarkov (eds.), *The Postwar Moment: Militaries, masculinities, and international peacekeeping*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2002; Joshua Goldstein, *War and Gender: How gender shapes the war system and vice versa*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

² C.f. Cynthia Enloe, *Nimo's War, Emma's War: Making feminist sense of the Iraq War*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010, 5; Cynthia Cockburn and Dubravka Žarkov (eds.), *The Postwar Moment: Militaries, masculinities, and international peacekeeping*.

³ Helen O'Connell, “What are the opportunities to promote gender equity and equality in conflict-affected and fragile states? Insights from a review of evidence,” *Gender and Development* 19/3 (November 2011): 456.

and so on must also be problematized in the process.”⁴

However, this potential reconfiguration of gender roles and expectations post-war is not always realized; rather, developments during and after the war may result in the retrenchment of deeply conservative and oppressive gender norms.⁵ Indeed, while women have enjoyed “some success in relation to women’s participation in elections and formal politics and engagement in small-scale economic enterprise,” the larger workings of gender regimes, including “inequitable gender power relations within the household and wider society,” have not been well-considered or understood.⁶ This may happen both when “the experiences and needs of women are markedly absent or silenced by the general discourse of accounting for the past” in addressing and redressing legacies of violence and conflict, and when actors seeking social transformation fail to assess “the structures and modalities of change that create and enforce exclusion for women in post-conflict” contexts, and so “fail to effect meaningful political and legal transformation for women in situations where profound social and political change is negotiated.”⁷

The question of how to study this retrenchment of oppressive norms, much less explain it, however, has been heavily under-theorized and under-explored in the literature: does gender justice and empowerment mean the establishment of quotas for women in government? Lifting war-affected women from poverty? Lowering rates of sexual and domestic violence? Empowering local women’s organizations to be agents of social progress in their communities? Observable and quantifiable measures of women’s entrance into and agency in public life can serve as useful proxies for the protection and advancement of women’s (human) rights in post-

⁴ Niamh Reilly, *Women’s Human Rights: Seeking gender justice in a globalizing age*, Cambridge: Polity, 2009, 97.

⁵ Brigitte Sørensen, “Women and Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Issues and Sources,” *UN Research Institute for Social Development, Programme for Strategic and International Security Studies*, WSP Occasional Paper no. 3 (June 1998), iv.

⁶ *Ibid*, 455.

⁷ Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, “Women, Security, and the Patriarchy of Internationalised Transitional Justice,” *Human Rights Quarterly*, 31 (2009), 1057.

conflict societies; however, it is unclear whether changes in gathered statistics truly reflect the transformation of gender relations and concepts of gender.

This paper assesses the changes in gender norms, roles, and expectations that took place in Nicaragua between the conflict and post-conflict periods, focusing primarily on changes in the status of women and femininities (excluding, due to space concerns, assessments of masculinities and non-normative gender and sexual identities, preferences, and expressions, though these, too, are critical to a holistic assessment of transformations of gender regimes in post-conflict societies) by examining the work of women activists during this time in their larger political and social context. There is ample literature available on both the successes and failures of women's organizations in advocating for women's rights and gender justice on the national political scene; however, these successes do not necessarily demonstrate or track larger changes in conceptions of and attitudes toward gender in Nicaragua. By contrasting these with national indicators related to women's health, economic empowerment, rates of domestic abuse, and participation (and efficacy) in national organizations, then, I hope to place a lens more broadly on women's daily lived experiences of marginalization and efficacy, oppression and empowerment during this period.

Women's liberation in the context of national liberation

In conflicts characterized as struggles by armed groups for national liberation, especially those that are explicitly Marxist in orientation, women's liberation is often posed as an important (though subordinate) element of the armed group's political platform.⁸ These movements often use mixed-gender fighting units, and women have played a crucial role in wars in Vietnam, South

⁸ Bridget Byrne, "Towards a Gendered Understanding of Conflict," *IDS Bulletin*, 27:3, 1996: 35.

Africa, Argentina, Cyprus, Iran, Northern Ireland, Lebanon, Israel, and Nicaragua, among others.⁹ However, evidence suggests that these groups are no more likely to honor their stated interest in securing women's equality and empowerment in the post-conflict period than other, more conservative groups in other, similar conflicts. Indeed, "to date, no liberation or revolutionary war, no matter how progressive its ideology regarding the emancipation of women," has successfully "empowered women and men to maintain an emancipating atmosphere for women after the military struggle and brief honeymoon are over."¹⁰

One possible way to study this problem of women's continued subordination in revolutionary states might be to examine the content of these groups' rhetoric and actions during the conflict period and conclude that, despite the presence of female fighters and visibly changed women's roles in conflict and resistance, the larger constructions of women as mothers (of fighters), peacemakers, and victims that persist during these eras reveal that women were still seen as largely separate from the process of warring, and their concerns were subordinate to the "high politics" of war and peace. Aaronette White, for instance, argues that the very idea of "revolutionary war" is something of a contradiction in terms, as the militarized logics of warfare that rely on hierarchical commands contradict the revolutionary ideals of egalitarianism and democratic decision-making.¹¹ Lorraine Bayard de Volo adds that, because the binaries of war and of gender are mutually reinforcing, war necessarily "sustains gender inequality by drawing from and reinforcing the privileged masculine and devalued feminine."¹²

In the case of Nicaragua, this analysis is largely valid; Bayard de Volo finds that because

⁹ Joshua Goldstein, *War and Gender: How gender shapes the war system and vice versa*, 78.

¹⁰ Sondra Hale, "Liberated, but Not Free: Women in post-war Eritrea," in S. Meintjes, A. Pillay, and M. Turshen (eds.), *The Aftermath: Women in post-conflict transformation*, London: Zed Books, 2001, 123.

¹¹ Aaronette M. White, "All the Men Are Fighting for Freedom, All the Women Are Mourning Their Men, but Some of Us Carried Guns: A Raced-Gendered Analysis of Fanon's Psychological Perspectives on War." *Signs* 32/4 (2007):875.

¹² Lorraine Bayard de Volo, "A Revolution in the Binary? Gender and the Oxymoron of Revolutionary War in Cuba and Nicaragua," *Signs* 37/2 (Winter 2012): 434.

gendered methods of mobilization for war tend to rely heavily on and reify existing notions of gender, they more often “reproduced many traditional roles for women on a daily basis.” Because of this, “war is not necessarily an opportunity for women to take on roles and identities that contradict traditional notions of femininity. In that sense, war is not necessarily a feminist political opportunity.”¹³

However, this is still a somewhat unsatisfying analysis in that, whether or not deeper cultural conceptions of women and gender roles were shifted during this time, the conflicts undeniably opened both rhetorical and performative space for women to assume other roles and expressions of agency. The context for this phenomenon was an armed conflict in which the revolutionary government officially viewed them as equals. In Nicaragua, this meant practically that women composed about 30% of FSLN military forces, with many in commanding positions, as well as filling various support roles as messengers, supply managers, and keepers of safe houses.¹⁴ Similarly, it should not be assumed that the mobilization of women as mothers is a disempowering experience for women; even “the daily process of constructing and participating in a community” may improve women’s sense of self-worth and political efficacy.¹⁵ The retrenchment of gender roles and norms post-conflict, in other words, must not be assumed to be a necessary consequence of the conduct of the war, as the destabilization of earlier prevailing norms during the conflict and immediate post-conflict period is undeniable.

This tension between the reification of gender inequality through rhetorical and symbolic practice even as women created real political and legislative changes through successful

¹³ Lorraine Bayard de Volo, *Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs: Gender identity politics in Nicaragua, 1979-1999*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001, 234.

¹⁴ C.f. Helen Collinson (ed.), *Women and Revolution in Nicaragua*, New Jersey: Zed Books, 1990, 154; Patricia Flynn, “Women Challenge the Myth,” in Stanford Central American Network (ed.), *Revolution in Central America*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1983, 416; Linda L. Reif, “Women in Latin American Guerrilla Movements: A comparative perspective,” *Comparative Politics* 18/2 (January 1986): 158; Olivia Bennett, Jo Bexley, and Kitty Warnock [eds.] *Arms to Fight, Arms to Protect: Women speak out about conflict*, London: Panos, 1995, 205.

¹⁵ Lorraine Bayard de Volo, *Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs: Gender identity politics in Nicaragua, 1979-1999*, 235.

organizing in Nicaragua is clear both in the conflict and post-conflict periods. Overall, however, the failure to transform broader norms related to gender and the family along with the achievement of legislative quotas and techniques of electoral mobilization since the Sandinista era have left women's health and economic status – major elements of their daily lived experience – vulnerable to both public and private threats.

The revolutionary history of Nicaragua

Since independence in 1821, Nicaragua's has been “a history of US intervention, of political and economic dependency cultivated by Washington, and of sporadic, usually defeated rebellions against imperialism and exploitation.”¹⁶ Following a bizarre series of ultimately defeated attempts by US businessman William Walker to install himself as dictator of Nicaragua and reinstate slavery there from 1855-60, the country's next brush with American imperial pretensions was in 1909, when the US encouraged and funded a rebellion against President José Santos Zelaya, who was seeking funding for a Nicaraguan canal to rival the US-held Panama Canal. The US invaded the country three times in the next two decades, acting as an occupying force from 1912-25 and 1926-33. From 1927-33, a peasant army led by general Augusto Sandino waged a guerrilla war against the American occupiers, eventually forcing the exit of the US Marines. However, before leaving the US installed the Guardia Nacional, a national police force, led by Anastasio Somoza García; Somoza installed himself officially as dictator in 1936, and the Somoza family ruled Nicaragua brutally for 45 years with explicit US support.

Sandino was assassinated on Somoza's orders in 1933, but his legacy persisted. Following the post-WWII economic boom, as popular demand for democratic reform grew, Somoza

¹⁶ Roger Lancaster, *Life is Hard: Machismo, danger, and the intimacy of power in Nicaragua*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992, 1.

responded with brutal repression, and thousands of Nicaraguans were tortured and killed by the Guardia Nacional in the 1970s.¹⁷ The FSLN (Sandinista National Liberation Front) was established in 1961, its name explicitly invoking Nicaragua's revolutionary past, and it continued to fight and gain popular support throughout the next two decades. The Sandinistas sought national liberation with a program that was informed simultaneously by nationalism, socialism (itself informed by Leninism, Guevarism, and the anti-authoritarian New Left), and liberation theology.¹⁸

In 1979, the FSLN overthrew Somoza and took power; Daniel Ortega, a member of the FSLN, was democratically elected President in 1980, taking 67% of the vote in a six-person race.¹⁹ However, the United States almost immediately began arming "remnants of the defeated Guardia Nacional," now known as the Contras, and funded their paramilitary insurrection for the next decade.²⁰ Nicaragua was consumed by civil war until, exhausted and recognizing that the war would not end until a change of government was realized, Nicaraguans voted out Ortega in 1990 with 55% of the vote against the FSLN. The UNO (Unión Nacional Opositora, or National Opposition Union) coalition, created explicitly to challenge the FSLN and led by Violeta Chamorro, was voted into office in 1990. George H.W. Bush promptly cut off funds to the Contras, and for the next sixteen years, neoliberal presidents tried to reverse the revolutionary legacy, with varying degrees of success.²¹

At the close of the decade, the Nicaraguan economy was a shambles, prostrated by years of

¹⁷ Olivia Bennett et. al., *Arms to Fight, Arms to Protect: Women speak out about conflict*, 205.

¹⁸ Roger Lancaster, *Life is Hard: Machismo, danger, and the intimacy of power in Nicaragua*, 4.

¹⁹ Karen Kampwirth, *Latin America's New Left and the Politics of Gender: Lessons from Nicaragua*, New York: SpringerBriefs in Political Science, 2011, 10.

²⁰ Roger Lancaster, *Life is Hard: Machismo, danger, and the intimacy of power in Nicaragua*, 3.

²¹ Karen Kampwirth, *Latin America's New Left and the Politics of Gender: Lessons from Nicaragua*, 10.

civil war and a US embargo, with over 35,000% annual inflation.²² Direct material costs of the war were estimated at between \$1.5 billion and \$4b and the costs of the US embargo at \$3b; the Sandinista government estimated total direct and indirect losses from the war at \$17b.²³ By 1988, real wages had fallen to less than 10 percent of their level in 1980.²⁴ In this volatile environment, the years from 1990-2006 were ones in which the government cut state services more frequently than they created them, and “in which life for Nicaraguans became more unequal and generally more precarious.”²⁵ Daniel Ortega was reelected in 2006 and the FSLN returned to power, though the political landscape of the Left had changed in the intervening years.

Gender regimes and gendered mobilization in revolutionary Nicaragua

Women played a very significant role during the FSLN’s early guerrilla years in the 1960s and ‘70s, both in the military struggle and in rhetorical mobilization. Maxine Molyneux suggests that many women became politicized following the 1972 earthquake in Managua, as neighborhoods organized themselves to care for victims while the Somoza regime misappropriated relief funds; subsequently, “many of these women experienced their transition from relief workers to participants in the struggle as a natural extension, albeit in combative form, of their protective role in the family as providers and crucially as mothers,”²⁶ effecting a shift from practical to strategic organizing. Indeed, one of the most iconic images from this period, widely reproduced in many forms during the war, is that of a young woman with a rifle slung across her back, smiling as she nurses an infant; it often carried with it the slogan “Tender in love,

²² Roger Lancaster, *Life is Hard: Machismo, danger, and the intimacy of power in Nicaragua*, 6.

²³ Michael Conroy, “The Political Economy of the 1990 Nicaraguan Elections,” *International Journal of Political Economy*, Fall 1990: 16.

²⁴ Roger Lancaster, *Life is Hard: Machismo, danger, and the intimacy of power in Nicaragua*, 7.

²⁵ Karen Kampwirth, *Latin America’s New Left and the Politics of Gender: Lessons from Nicaragua*, 10.

²⁶ Maxine Molyneux, “Mobilization without Emancipation? Women’s interests, the state, and revolution in Nicaragua,” *Feminist Studies*, 11/2 (1985): 228.

fierce in battle” (see Appendix I).²⁷

The image also demonstrated the tensions implicit in women’s war participation: although it is an image of “empowered maternity,” it is also one of war, and this war would offer thousands of women the opportunity to “break the constraints of their traditional roles,” and gain the skills and consciousness to work later as feminist activists.²⁸ “Without the revolutionary moment,” Norma Chincilla avers, “feminism would undoubtedly still be the province of a privileged few.”²⁹

Particularly during this early period of the war, however, Lorraine Bayard de Volo argues that women and images of motherhood were nonetheless mobilized in ways that often constrained their agency, “restrict[ing] women to political action that appeared deferential and self-abnegating,” two hallmarks of conventional images of motherhood.³⁰ Organized as mothers, Nicaraguan women collectively utilized “a maternal discourse based on compassion, especially in terms of children” to demand an end to the persecution of Nicaraguan youth, the high cost of living, and the US-funded Contra War.³¹ Although there were other women’s groups during this period not organized around a collective maternal identity, most notably AMNLAE (the Asociación de Mujeres Nicaragüenses “Amanda Luisa Espinosa,” the women’s arm of the Sandinista political front), even AMNLAE’s lack of political independence from the FSLN and primary work organizing with mothers’ groups “forced more explicit and controversial feminist issues to the back burner.”³²

Once the Sandinistas took power in 1979, “there was a qualitative leap in women’s public roles” as women were mobilized in massive numbers in the service of the revolution. This was

²⁷ Lorraine Vayard de Volo, “A Revolution in the Binary? Gender and the Oxymoron of Revolutionary War in Cuba and Nicaragua,” 422.

²⁸ Karen Kampwirth, *Latin America’s New Left and the Politics of Gender: Lessons from Nicaragua*, 4.

²⁹ Norma Chincilla, “Nationalism, Feminism, and Revolution in Central America,” in Lois West (ed.), *Feminist Nationalism*, New York: Routledge, 1997, 209.

³⁰ Lorraine Bayard de Volo, *Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs: Gender identity politics in Nicaragua, 1979-1999*, 4.

³¹ *Ibid.* 22.

³² *Ibid.*

thanks, in no small part, to Sandinista adherence to “Marxist notions that the road to gender equality was through the integration of women into the public sphere,”³³ and women were mobilized for a variety of purposes, including teaching literacy, immunizing children, harvesting coffee, and guarding their neighborhoods at night.³⁴

The differences among members of the Sandinistas’ broad anti-Somoza coalition, however, quickly began to show following his deposition; among the points of contention were disagreements about how the revolution was to emancipate women, and in fact what it meant to emancipate women. Kampwirth characterizes these positions broadly as “feminine” and “feminist.”³⁵ The former argued that the revolution offered opportunities for women to better fulfill their traditional roles; the latter asserted that women’s emancipation required challenging those traditional roles.³⁶ Although the two camps’ positions on matters of policy (e.g. women’s health initiatives) nonetheless often aligned,³⁷ their reasons for those positions and desired ends were often at odds with each other.

Women’s rights came under increasing fire during the 1980s, however, as political tensions caused Sandinista party leaders to sideline women’s issues, arguing that “if the Sandinista government were to fall to the Contras then all the gains of the revolution for women, as well as other sectors, would be lost.”³⁸ AMNLAE actively supported this stance, with the understanding

³³ Karen Kampwirth, *Latin America’s New Left and the Politics of Gender: Lessons from Nicaragua*, 5.

³⁴ Karen Kampwirth, *Feminism and the Legacy of Revolution: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas*, Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004, 26.

³⁵ In her study of the gender dimensions of Daniel Ortega’s long political career, Kampwirth presents Ortega as a quintessential proponent of “feminine” emancipation. See Karen Kampwirth, *Gender and Populism in Latin America: Passionate Politics*, University Park: Penn State University Press, 2010, 164.

³⁶ Karen Kampwirth, *Feminism and the Legacy of Revolution: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas*, 44.

³⁷ “Feminine thinkers would support better access to health care because taking care of the family’s health is a woman’s job. In contrast, feminist thinkers would support better access to health care (especially reproductive health care) because it would free women to live better lives, and to challenge the confines of traditional gender relations.” (Kampwirth 2011, 5).

³⁸ Karen Kampwirth, *Latin America’s New Left and the Politics of Gender: Lessons from Nicaragua*, 7.

that “emancipation was to come about as a by-product of making and defending the revolution.”³⁹ Molyneux, acting as an apologist for the Sandinista cause, argues that much of the sidelining of women’s concerns that occurred can be explained largely by the exigencies of politics: because “the FSLN attempted to maintain, as far as the situation permitted, a broad multiclass base of support” and maintained an official commitment to pluralism during the 1980s, it had to make some concessions to oppositional groups, in particular the capitalist class. The Catholic Church, too, maintained a strong hold on social and political life, and strongly opposed policies aimed to improve women’s rights, including labor laws, education and family reforms, and reproductive rights.⁴⁰ This willingness to compromise on these issues is, of course, not entirely comforting.

However, much of the debate over women’s rights and participation in public life during this time was framed in terms of “women’s proper place in the home (*en la casa*) and not in the street (*en la calle*).”⁴¹ When the FSLN refused to include women in the draft instituted in 1984, and then eliminated the only women’s volunteer battalion in 1985, for instance, it justified the move saying that women needed to stay at home and care for their children due to the lack of social services.⁴² President Daniel Ortega, who had been consistently more conservative on issues of women’s rights, even attempted to control access to contraception, suggesting that, in the face of a US-funded Contra war that constituted “a policy of genocide,” “women who were interested in controlling their fertility were guilty of disloyalty, and of undermining the revolution.”⁴³ By the late 1980s, increasingly frustrated by these developments, AMNLAE, though subordinate to the

³⁹ Maxine Molyneux, “Mobilization without Emancipation? Women’s interests, the state, and revolution in Nicaragua,” 238.

⁴⁰ Ibid 241-243.

⁴¹ Florence Babb, *After Revolution: Mapping gender and cultural politics in neoliberal Nicaragua*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001, 117.

⁴² Margaret Randall, *Gathering Rage: The failure of twentieth century revolutions to develop a feminist agenda*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1992, 46.

⁴³ Ibid. Notably, this does not seem to have been solely an exigency of wartime: in a bid for reelection in 2006, Ortega and the FSLN voted to ban “therapeutic” abortion (to save the life of the mother), and succeeded in passing a total abortion ban in 2008 (see Kampwirth 2011, 11).

FSLN, had begun to exercise a more independent voice, arguing that the revolution was failing to address other basic gender issues including workplace discrimination, women's unpaid labor, and domestic violence.⁴⁴

It was in this environment, as gender justice was being sidelined in the interest of social justice and AMNLAE was coming under fire for acting as the "submissive wife" of the FSLN, that an autonomous feminist organization called the Party of the Erotic Left (PIE) was established to lobby (successfully) for gender equality in the 1987 Constitution.⁴⁵ Following the FSLN's electoral defeat in 1990, the PIE and many other women activists, disenchanted with the FSLN's persistent deferral of women's issues and attempts to co-opt AMNLAE's leadership, went on to start a number of independent women's organizations in the post-conflict state.⁴⁶

Women's rights in post-conflict Nicaragua

The Sandinista defeat in 1990 in many ways empowered the feminist movement, freeing them from Sandinista political control and allowing them to use their new experience in activism to focus "on the struggle against violence, for sexual rights, and for an expansion of citizenship rights, especially... but not exclusively for women."⁴⁷ The movement still involves hundreds of groups working to reach millions of women through Women's House networks, medical, psychological, and legal advocacy services, lobbying efforts, and outreach in the mass media.⁴⁸

One of the women's movement's especially impressive successes was in forcing the FSLN

⁴⁴ Jennifer B. Mendez, *From the Revolution to the Maquiladoras: Gender, labor, and globalization in Nicaragua*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2005, 48.

⁴⁵ c.f. Maxine Molyneux, "Mobilization without Emancipation? Women's interests, the state, and revolution in Nicaragua"; Karen Kampwirth, *Latin America's New Left and the Politics of Gender: Lessons from Nicaragua*, 8-9.

⁴⁶ Ana Criquillón, "The Nicaraguan Women's Movement: Feminist reflections from within," in M. Sinclair (ed.), *The New Politics of Survival: Grassroots movements in Central America*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1995, 224.

⁴⁷ Karen Kampwirth, *Latin America's New Left and the Politics of Gender: Lessons from Nicaragua*, 10.

⁴⁸ Elvira Cuadra and Juana Jiménez, *El Movimiento de Mujeres y la lucha por sus derechos en Nicaragua: movimientos sociales y ciudadanía en Centroamérica*, Managua: CINCO, 2010, 32-51.

leadership in 1994 to revise party statutes to allocate at least 30 percent of party positions to women; this same quota was also applied to the selection for candidates in the 1996 elections.⁴⁹

Ironically, however, this new latitude for feminist action was in many ways thwarted by larger political and economic changes then taking place in the country; the package of structural adjustment policies and IMF loans in 1990, the “maxi-devaluation” of the Nicaraguan córdoba in 1991, and the subsequent dearth of hoped-for foreign aid and investment, which increased economic insecurity and hardship for wide sectors of the population, were particularly negative for women.⁵⁰ State-supported health care and education systems were rolled back and privatized, often placing these services beyond the reach of Nicaragua’s poorest citizens.⁵¹ Policies reducing state support for social services, employment opportunities, and wage levels, combined with continuing gender inequality and rising social conservatism, dramatically increased the burden of household duties on women, even as economic necessity pushed many to enter the workforce;⁵² the reduction in state-sector jobs, as well, pushed many women into informal sector employment.⁵³ Indeed, increasing evidence from the last two decades “indicates that women’s ability to cushion the blow of economic adjustment is not without limits, and many households are suffering serious consequences from the crises produced by [these] policies.”⁵⁴

Moreover, the election of antifeminist candidate Violeta Chamorro vividly highlighted the failure of the revolution to do what some commentators and feminist activists had hoped it would during the 1980s: while women’s political participation in the Sandinista government and military gave women greater access to the public sphere, it failed to transform “gender relations in the

⁴⁹ Ilja A. Luciak, *After the Revolution: Gender and democracy in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001, 198.

⁵⁰ Florence Babb, *After Revolution: Mapping gender and cultural politics in neoliberal Nicaragua*, 9.

⁵¹ *Ibid* 33.

⁵² *Ibid* 2.

⁵³ Jennifer B. Mendez, *From the Revolution to the Maquiladoras: Gender, labor, and globalization in Nicaragua*, 37.

⁵⁴ Florence Babb, *After Revolution: Mapping gender and cultural politics in neoliberal Nicaragua*, 110.

family and society.”⁵⁵ Roger Lancaster suggests that this can be understood as a failure by the Sandinista government to deconstruct the underlying, gendered oppositions of the political system, leaving privileged masculinity undisturbed in the aftermath.⁵⁶ In the run-up to the 1990 elections, the UNO campaign represented Chamorro as “a woman firmly committed to the family as a wife [and widow of the martyr Pedro Joaquín Chamorro], as mother, and... maternal figure;” Chamorro’s was a highly successful campaign, especially among women voters,⁵⁷ despite the fact that it presented an image of traditional womanhood (in which “women workers and activists [are] ‘unnatural’”) firmly at odds with the economic and political exigencies of the day.⁵⁸

One illustration of Lancaster’s proposed failure to deconstruct gender norms, “le[aving] machismo’s driving engine largely untouched,” and discourses surrounding women’s place in the home (even as economic circumstances demanded that they continue to work outside the home) is the continuing prevalence of domestic violence in the country. A series of surveys during the 1990s suggested some of the highest levels of domestic violence anywhere in the world. Two studies from the 1990s indicated that over a fifth of the women experienced severe physical abuse;⁵⁹ one 12-month study in 1995 found that 27 percent of married women reported being abused, and 70 percent of those reported cases were physically violent.⁶⁰ “A quarter of rural men in one survey said it was all right to beat a woman if she neglects the children or the house, and 10% thought it acceptable for refusal of sex. Only 17% of victims in one study told the police

⁵⁵ Ibid 59.

⁵⁶ Roger Lancaster, *Life is Hard: Machismo, danger, and the intimacy of power in Nicaragua*, 274.

⁵⁷ Florence Babb, *After Revolution: Mapping gender and cultural politics in neoliberal Nicaragua*, 9.

⁵⁸ Ibid 59, 45.

⁵⁹ María Eugenia Meza Basaure, “Violence Against Women: A centuries-old plague,” *Envío* 215 (June 1999); María López Vigil, “The Silence About Incest Needs to Be Broken,” *Envío* 230 (September 2000); Claudia García Moreno et. al. “Prevalence of intimate partner violence: findings from the WHO multi-country study on women’s health and domestic violence,” *The Lancet* 368/9543 (October 2006), 1260-1269.

⁶⁰ M.C. Ellsberg et. al, “Wife Abuse Among Women of Childbearing Age in Nicaragua,” *American Journal of Public Health*, 89/2 (1999), 242.

about the offence.”⁶¹ According to statistics reported by the NGO Women’s Network Against Violence, reported rapes also increased dramatically from 1998-2008.⁶² Women’s health and reproductive care in particular has also been negatively impacted by government policy in particular during the last twenty years, including by the most recent Ortega government.

Despite many nontrivial successes by feminist groups in the 1980s and 1990s, then, the failure to change larger discourses surrounding women and gender equality ensured that political strategies and government policies would continue to discount their needs and, in so doing, preclude important advances and protections for women.

How have ideas and practices surrounding gender been transformed since the revolution?

The Sandinista revolution and the entrance of women into the public sphere (despite conflicting larger discourses about the appropriateness of this), and particularly into government politics, which persisted even after the election of Chamorro and the introduction of a more “traditional” social discourse and neoliberal economic policies, represent an undeniable gain for women. However, the apparent failure to achieve gender equality in a number of meaningful ways that directly impact the everyday lives of Nicaraguan women, including domestic violence, reproductive rights, and healthcare access, for instance, are indicative of a larger failure to transform the overriding discourses surrounding masculinity and femininity.

These difficulties have persisted in, and in many ways are exemplified by, the recent resurgence of the New Left: following Ortega’s 2006 reelection, the FSLN-dominated government passed a total abortion ban in 2008, “provid[ing] for lengthy prison sentences for women and girls who seek an abortion and for health professionals who provide abortion services

⁶¹ UN Office on Drugs and Crime. *Crime and Development in Central America: Caught in the Crossfire*. (May 2007), 65-66. Available at: <http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Centralamerica-study-en.pdf>

⁶² Karen Kampwirth, *Latin America’s New Left and the Politics of Gender: Lessons from Nicaragua*, 22.

and life-saving and health-preserving obstetric care,”⁶³ and activists say that sexual violence in the country is endemic, while women and girls are left without legal recourse.⁶⁴

In her analysis of contemporary Nicaraguan politics, Karen Kampwirth argues that “like the old left, the new left has made significant efforts to improve the lot of women when those efforts coincide with the traditional leftist concerns for class equality.”⁶⁵ For the FSLN both in the 1980s and today, gender issues that can be fit into a class framework have been easiest to address, and so it has succeeded in passing many measures that are more beneficial to lower-class women, like educational and health reforms (though these were later rolled back). Additionally, appointing women to political positions has been generally uncontroversial and neither politically nor economically costly. Nonetheless, issues like domestic violence and reproductive rights have been more delicate, because “nobody... wants to attack the family.”⁶⁶ This would seem to indicate that women’s interests and demands have neither been substantively integrated into the Sandinista platform, nor have discourses surrounding gender norms that fit less easily into a class framework been included or addressed.

The subordination of women’s interests to the wider interests of the revolution during the Sandinista period, which persisted more openly in the 1990s as a socially and economically conservative discourse reasserted itself (and then again in the resurgence of the FSLN in recent years), reveals a certain continuity between the conflict and post-conflict period in Nicaragua. Indeed, despite the successes of women in organizing themselves for political action and entering the legislative arena since the revolutionary era, critical parts of women’s lives, including their

⁶³ Amnesty International, *The Total Abortion Ban in Nicaragua: Women’s lives and health endangered, medical professionals criminalized*, London: Amnesty International Publications, 2009, 7.

⁶⁴ Eva Carroll, “Daniel Ortega set for Nicaragua election victory but heroic sheen wearing off,” *The Guardian*, 3 November 2011 (accessed 30 March 2012), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/nov/03/daniel-ortega-nicaragua-election>.

⁶⁵ Karen Kampwirth, *Latin America’s New Left and the Politics of Gender: Lessons from Nicaragua*, 3.

⁶⁶ *Ibid* 12, 34.

economic opportunities, health care and reproductive access, and exposure to sexual violence, have gone unaddressed or are being actively undermined on the national stage. The case of Nicaragua thus presents important evidence that both scholars and practitioners interested in the potential feminist opportunities of post-conflict periods or in post-conflict transformations of social and political life must consider carefully; it highlights the importance of not only the legal guarantee of gender equality, but also of changing dominant discourses surrounding gender norms and relations to help secure a truly transformative peace.

Appendix I:



“A Sandinista woman carrying a rifle and feeding her baby painted in La Galería de Héroes y Mártires in Estelí Nicaragua”

(Photo credit: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/realworldphotosnet/5659221037/>)