WHAT HAPPENED TO THE WOMAN WITH THE AK-47?

THE TRANSFORMATION OF WOMEN’S RIGHTS

IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY NICARAGUA

Erin Bradley

Ignacio Martín-Baró Human Rights Essay Competition

Graduate and Professional School Division

April 8, 2012
Case Study

In December of 2009, a 27-year-old Nicaraguan woman, called “Amalia” by the press, sought treatment in a local clinic for dizziness, nausea, and breathing problems. After a battery of tests, in February she was admitted to a hospital with a life-threatening case of metastatic cancer, and doctors advised that she immediately begin radiation and chemotherapy. But they refused to treat her. Why? Because Amalia was ten weeks pregnant, and in Nicaragua doctors who perform medical procedures that cause harm to the fetus, even unintentionally, face criminal prosecution.\(^1\) This law stems from a total ban on abortions passed in 2006, which makes no exceptions for rape, incest, young age, an unviable fetus, or to save the life of a mother.

Amalia’s case was brought to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights by a coalition of organizations including the Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights, the OB-GYN Society, the New Family Association (ANFAN), and the Center for Justice and International Law (CEJIL). In what is being described as a “historic legal precedent,” the Commission ordered the Nicaraguan government to ensure Amalia had access to appropriate medical treatment. The State complied within the five day deadline, and press reports stated that she was receiving specialized cancer treatment. While Amalia’s lawyer from the Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights celebrated their victory in gaining treatment, she lamented that many Nicaraguan women face similar situations without the benefit of intervention by international governing bodies.\(^2\)

How did this total ban on abortions, which endangers the lives of Nicaraguan women and infringes on their basic human rights, become law in a country with such a rich history of feminism? Images of female guerilla warriors were common during the Sandinista revolution,

---


and when the Sandinistas gained power, the state sponsored programs to promote gender equality and female mobilization. Has the spirit of feminism of this time period disappeared, or was it simply a passing illusion in a long history of attacks on feminism and women’s rights in Nicaragua?

**Introduction: An Un-Revolutionary Transformation**

October 6, 2006 marked in many ways a culmination of years of growing dissent against women’s rights in Nicaragua. On this day, over 200,000 people, many of them women, marched in Managua in a show of anti-abortion solidarity. An alliance of Catholic and Evangelical abortion opponents had organized the march in an attempt to persuade the legislature to ban therapeutic abortions, those performed to save the life of the mother. Their efforts were successful, as a few days later a law was passed to ban abortion in any circumstance, including rape, incest, young age, and life threatening pregnancy.

The unanimous votes of the congressmen of the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional, otherwise known as the FSLN or simply the Sandinistas, were critical in passing the anti-abortion measure. These were the same Sandinistas who not 30 years before had been active participants in the beginnings of the women’s movement in Nicaragua, and who had been longtime supporters of feminist and women’s rights causes. The timing of their startling about-face was not accidental, as a few short weeks after they helped pass the anti-abortion law, Daniel Ortega was elected as the Sandinista president of Nicaragua, returning the Sandinistas to power for the first time since 1990. From this decidedly un-revolutionary beginning, the Sandinistas’ and particularly Daniel Ortega’s new tenure in power has been marked by continued anti-

---

4 “FSLN” and “Sandinistas” are used interchangeably by the author
5 Kampwirth, “Antifeminism,” 123.
feminist policies that infringe on the basic rights of women in Nicaragua. Although the this turn from feminism may seem surprising given their leftist revolutionary history, Daniel Ortega and the Sandinistas are continuing a long history of attacks on women’s movements from political, cultural, and religious sources.

**Women During the Sandinista Revolution**

Women were an integral component of the leftist Sandinista revolution against the conservative Somoza regime. According to some estimates, women comprised over 30% of Sandinista military forces. When the Sandinistas won power in 1979, they began expansive social programs in agriculture, working conditions, education, and healthcare, and also actively worked to address the gender inequality pervasive in media, law, and other institutions. These social programs led to mass mobilization among Nicaraguan young adults, particularly women. Young women were active in literacy programs, health clinics, coffee harvests, and community safety. Their mobilization not only helped develop the infrastructure of the Sandinista government, but also represented the challenge to traditional authority that marked the revolution. Political leaders also created a state-affiliated women’s agency, the Asociación de Mujeres Nicaragüenses Luisa Amanda Espinosa (AMNLAE). Although “women’s interests were often secondary to greater political goals of national unity and development,” the organization did provide an important venue for addressing gender inequalities. An important member of the Sandinista coalition that defeated Somoza, the organization continued its support of the FSLN after in transformed from a guerrilla movement to a political party. The AMNLAE

---


9 Fernandes, “The Pink Tide.”
advocated for changes in Nicaragua’s legal system to better address gender inequality, and provided healthcare, counseling services, and legal aid in “women’s houses” scattered throughout the country. Despite the support the Sandinistas gave to the women’s movement during these important years of nationwide reforms, the alliance was not without tension. The FSLN was dominated by men, which caused tension with AMNLAE’s agenda of promoting gender equality.

This relationship was further strained as conflict with the American-backed Contra forces began in 1982. President Daniel Ortega responded to the war-torn economy by making drastic cuts in public expenditures, which especially adversely affected low-income women. Although the Sandinistas had been supporters of increasing economic and political participation among women, the “adjustment measures” imposed by the government were devastating to those in unstable jobs and those responsible for childcare and household maintenance; primarily women. As the struggle against the contras continued, the FSLN’s shift away from proactive advocacy for gender role equality to a decidedly more traditional framing of gender transitioned from policies of economic necessity to policies of deliberate gender-role framing.

Use of Imagery

Images of female combatants had been popular during the revolution and the beginning of the Sandinista government, but as a male-only draft was implemented the FSLN changed its discourse. Increased resistance from mothers of draftees led to a “hearts and minds” approach to generate popular support for draft. This new campaign changed popular images from those of female guerrillas to those of “patriotic wombs” and “Spartan mothers,” who somberly but

---

10 Kampwirth, “Resisting the Feminist Threat,” 76.
11 Ibid.
14 One of the most recognized of these images is of a young Sandinista combatant with an AK-47 over one shoulder, nursing a baby in her arms. Another shows a laughing Sandinista woman in uniform. See Appendix A.
proudly raised warrior-sons.\textsuperscript{15} The specific cultural context of Nicaragua allowed this kind of campaign to take root among the populace. Mothers are viewed as caretakers of the family, even of adult sons, which gives them a unique moral authority that can greatly impact overall public opinion. As much as the Sandinistas feared the opposition of this moral authority, they also wished to utilize it for their cause.

They mobilized mothers of draftees into maternal organizations in an attempt to redirect or control their anger, and also used them to promote political propaganda from an “apolitical” perspective. The Sandinistas used the fact that “[w]omen can be framed as mothers speaking from the heart out of love for their children rather than from a political standpoint”\textsuperscript{16} to disseminate propaganda to the public and garner popular support. This carried the added benefit of evoking emotional resonance with both national and international supporters of the Sandinistas.\textsuperscript{17} While utilizing the imagery of grieving yet proud mothers may have benefited the Sandinista’s military campaign, it did not help the economic problems caused by extended military conflict. The public sector cuts made by Daniel Ortega that negatively affected low-income women may have caused them to retract their FSLN support, as a significant gender gap in the 1990 presidential election contributed to their loss to the conservative Unidad Nicaragüense Opositora (UNO).\textsuperscript{18} Additionally, a study of these election results indicate not only a gap between men and women, but also a division between the older generation and young people, particularly young women, perhaps showing a rift between those who held traditional values and those who benefitted from the social reforms of the revolution.\textsuperscript{19}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Bayard16} Bayard to Volo, “Mobilizing Mothers,” 719.
\bibitem{Bayard17} Ibid.
\bibitem{Babb18} Babb, “After the Revolution,” 32.
\end{thebibliography}
The Rise of the Conservatives

Ironically, the maternal imagery used by the FSLN to garner support was the same imagery used by UNO candidate Violeta Barrios de Chamorro in her successful campaign for the presidency. Chamorro was the widow of outspoken Somoza critic Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, who had been assassinated in 1978. She vocalized her identity as a widow throughout her campaign, and also, although she was “a presidential candidate and a public figure, she was presented as symbolic of the private women, the traditional mother.”

Early in her campaign her views on feminism became clear, as she told a reporter “I am not a feminist nor do I wish to be one. I am a woman dedicated to my home, as Pedro taught me.” Chamorro also emphasized that she was not a politician, but simply wished to reunify the Nicaraguan people as she had reunified her politically divided family, utilizing the same “apolitical mother” imagery evoked by the Sandinistas. She appealed to the same group of constituents that the Sandinistas had sought; older women who were not widely mobilized in the Sandinista reforms and who had not greatly benefitted from them. These women felt threatened by the rapid social changes induced by the revolution, and felt a maternal duty to stop any continued armed conflict.

Chamorro’s Use of Imagery

The older generation, particularly women, wanted a return to traditional family life, and Chamorro utilized her position as a suffering widow and mother to make clear that she shared these values. She also drew upon the same image of the “suffering mother” that the Sandinistas had used to garner support for their cause. A campaign advertisement stated that a vote for the FSLN meant a “continuation of obligatory military service and the suffering of mothers.”

21 Qtd. in Kampwirth, “The Mother of the Nicaraguans,” 69.
22 Two of Chamorro’s children were staunch Sandinistas; two were fervently opposed to the revolution.
23 Kampwirth, “The Mother of the Nicaraguans,” 70.
24 Qtd. in Kampwirth, “The Mother of the Nicaraguans,” 70.
even used this imagery after an injury caused her to wear a leg cast for most of the campaign, telling her fellow mothers that the “cast is nothing compared with the cross that we have carried during the last ten years.”²⁵

She also utilized a third powerful image during the campaign, that of the Virgin Mary. Dressed in white throughout her campaign, Chamorro emphasized her reliance on male advisors, particularly her deceased husband, and on the assumption she had been celibate since her husband’s death. This image stood in stark contrast to the Sandinista image of the woman guerrilla, which also contributed to her apolitical image. She continued to be presented in this way throughout her presidency, as a Nicaraguan newspaper proclaimed on the anniversary of her first year in office that she was “neither a guerrilla, nor aggressive, [but] a woman of the house.”²⁶

**Antifeminist Policies**

Chamorro’s antifeminism permeated not only her public image but also the policies she enacted while in office. She and the UNO elaborated their beliefs about traditional values in their “Program of Unity,” which “promised to take families not forward to some egalitarian family but backward.”²⁷ Chamorro drew upon the traditional Nicaraguan dyad of “la mujer de la casa” versus “la mujer de la calle,” which emphasized that women who stayed at home were moral, whereas those who left the home for other activities, even to work, were not as morally pure.²⁸ The UNO also began economic policies that adversely affected women. In receiving aid from the International Monetary Fund and the U.S. Agency for International Development, they complied

---

²⁵ Qtd. in Kampwirth, “The Mother of the Nicaraguans,” 71.
²⁶ Qtd. in Kampwirth, “The Mother of the Nicaraguans,” 72.
²⁷ Kampwirth, “The Mother of the Nicaraguans,” 70.
with mandates that produced privatization and a decrease of state-sponsored social services.\textsuperscript{29} These policies disproportionately affected the poor, children, and women.\textsuperscript{30} Although these economic policies may have unintentionally caused more women to stay home as a result of unemployment, other policies under Chamorro appear to have been directly targeted at reversing women’s liberation.

**Direct attacks on gender-equality.** One of Chamorro’s actions was a “conscious effort to reinstate traditional gender relations” by producing new textbooks for Nicaragua’s school system.\textsuperscript{31} These texts, in a series named “Morals and Civics,” presented images and text of “correct” gender relations for all grade levels of Nicaraguan children.\textsuperscript{32} In addition, the books emphasized the importance of legal marriage over common law marriage, although both are recognized in the 1987 constitution, as well as denouncing abortion.\textsuperscript{33} Secondly, she greatly reduced the social services available to women that had been introduced under the Sandinistas. Day care centers were closed, state-funded programs for marriage counseling and services for domestic violence victims were shut down, and contraception was no longer available at public hospitals.\textsuperscript{34} Eliminating childcare options was one way to force women from the workplace and back into the home, and is also a violation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, which Nicaragua ratified in 1981.\textsuperscript{35}

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{30} Babb, “After the Revolution,” 27.
\textsuperscript{31} Kampwirth, “The Mother of the Nicaraguans,” 73.
\textsuperscript{32} And, interestingly, were funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).
\textsuperscript{33} Kampwirth, “The Mother of the Nicaraguans,” 73.
\textsuperscript{34} Kampwirth, “Resisting the Feminist Threat,” 79.
\textsuperscript{35} Article 11, Section C “States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the field of employment in order to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women, the same rights, in particular: … (c) To encourage the provision of the necessary supporting social services to enable parents to combine family obligations with work responsibilities and participation in public life, in particular through promoting the establishment and development of a network of child-care facilities.”
\end{footnotesize}
More direct policies to remove women from the workplace were also implemented. The UNO developed a “plan for economic conversion,” which offered US$2,000 in exchange for members of the state bureaucracy to quit their jobs. This not only reduced the number of Sandinistas in the government, but also caused women to return to traditional roles in the home, as women disproportionately took advantage of the deal. As one UNO administrator said, “Of course [the plan] is going to impact quite a bit family life. Before, women had to leave their children to work.” Now they were free to “return to their homes and take care of their children.” The reforms of the UNO were not entirely unexpected, as the party continued its conservative tradition; however, even when the leftist Sandinistas returned to power the attacks on women’s rights continued in Nicaragua.

The New Sandinistas

Their involvement in the anti-abortion effort days before the 2006 elections marked the beginning of a change for the previously revolutionary Sandinistas. They “seemed to reimagine the legacy of the revolution, and the new vision of what it meant to be a revolutionary was traditional Catholic rather than liberation-theology Catholic, antifeminist rather than feminist.” Since the passage of this law, the Sandinistas have appeared to accept the broader goals of many anti-abortion and anti-feminist activists; to restore or impose a more traditional model of gender relations in Nicaragua. As one politician said “We must unite against the liberated woman, who thinks she can control all parts of her body.” Perhaps due to their defeat by the conservative UNO in 1990, the FSLN strove to appeal to a broader conservative base, and were willing to abandon their former ties with the Nicaraguan women’s movement. This led to not only policy

---

36 Kampwirth, “The Mother of the Nicaraguans,” 75.
38 Qtd. in Kampwirth, “Antifeminism,” 132.
attacks on women’s rights, but also individual attacks on feminism by new President Daniel Ortega and particularly his wife, Rosario Murillo.

Ortega and Murillo had lived for 27 years in an unmarried partnership, but less than a year before the 2006 election were married in a Catholic ceremony presided over by a Catholic archbishop. Murillo soon became an outspoken opponent of the women’s movement, which she articulated in an antifeminist manifesto of sorts called “La conexión ‘feminista’ y las guerras de baja intensidad.” In this proclamation, she speaks out against the women’s movement and labels it “false feminism.” She accuses “false feminists” of cultural domination and invasion, claiming that they intend to change cultural values and impose strange and unfamiliar social norms. She also compared their efforts to capitalism and neo-colonization, saying that their values were fundamentally opposed to the revolutionary spirit of the Sandinistas. This trend is consistent in Murillo and President Ortega’s rhetoric, as they consistently accuse “advocates for women’s rights with being privileged imperialist pawns and undermining national culture.”

**Liberals and Conservatives**

The FSLN is also drawing support from a new connection with conservative Catholicism. In Nicaragua, the Catholic Church is divided between conservative Catholics, who strictly adhere to Vatican mandates, and liberation theologists, who are more concerned with social justice. The difference between these two branches is particularly evident in concerns regarding homosexuality and reproductive rights. Conservative Catholics are generally opposed to rights for homosexuals and ardently anti-abortion, whereas liberation theologists typically are more

---

39 Ibid.  
40 All translations by author.  
concerned with leftist justice issues than individual sexual behavior or reproduction choices. During the revolutionary period, Ortega and the FSLN were “strong antagonists” of the conservative Catholic Church, but in the 1990s they began to repair this relationship in the spirit of “reconciliation.” This reconciliation was likely due in large part to the successful campaigns of the UNO in the 1990s, which drew heavily on conservative Catholic connections and rhetoric.

The women’s movement now faces attacks from both the left and right in Nicaragua. Conservatives draw upon the traditional family values they claim were more stable in Nicaragua before the Sandinistas came to power. For them, the values of the past were “characterized by complementarity and respect,” and the new feminism brought about “antivalues” such as premarital sex and paternal abandonment. For this group, antifeminism is connected to anti-Sandinismo. The left frames antifeminism as a form of anti-imperialism. Many, though not all, women’s organizations in Nicaragua gain support from international NGOs, which are often seen as unnecessary northern influences that negatively affect national character. These leftists do not categorize the women’s movement as the same kind of political and cultural effort as the revolution, claiming that “although women’s mobilization behind a revolutionary project is appropriately Nicaraguan, women’s mobilization behind a feminist project is not appropriately Nicaraguan.”

**Government Attacks on Women’s Organizations**

The assault on feminism in Nicaragua has not been purely ideological under Ortega. The banning of therapeutic abortions caused the deaths of over 80 women within the first year, and with criminal sanctions added to the law, pro-choice activists are constantly in danger of persecution and imprisonment. In 2008, the offices of two women’s organizations were raided by

---

44 Fernandes, “The Pink Tide.”
46 Ibid, 83.
Nicaraguan authorities under accusations that they had promoted abortions. The same month, staff members from the Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights were physically and verbally attacked by pro-Sandinistas as they arrived for an investigative hearing about the criminalization of abortion. Although Ortega’s government is turning a blind eye or in some cases instigating these obvious attacks, feminists in other parts of the world are taking notice and taking action, particularly given Ortega’s personal history with violence against women.

**Sexual Abuse Scandal**

In 1998 allegations first surfaced about Ortega’s sexual abuse of his young stepdaughter in the 1980s. The case was dismissed by a Sandinista judge without an investigation, although the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights determined that the case had merit. Ortega enjoys the protection of legal immunity and many Nicaraguan judges are Sandinista supporters, so the case has effectively died within the country. Internationally, however, Ortega faces the scrutiny and outcry of many feminist organizations. In Paraguay, El Salvador, Honduras, and other Latin American countries, female leaders have denounced Ortega and protested his invitation to state functions. Although he has managed to quell both the feminist movement and investigation of accusations of sexual abuse in Nicaragua, in the rest of Latin America “the feminist movement has become Ortega’s nemesis, challenging his efforts to restore his image as a progressive and revolutionary leader.”

**Current Situation of Women’s Rights in Nicaragua**

Given Nicaragua’s history of continued attacks on feminism and women’s rights, it comes as no surprise that the situation of women in Nicaragua is drawing international attention. On March 25, 2011, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights held a hearing to discuss

the human rights situation of Nicaraguan women. Petitioners included human rights experts and representatives from women’s organizations throughout Nicaragua. The two broad areas of concern they emphasized were domestic violence and the criminalization of therapeutic abortion. According to the petitioners, over 940 cases of domestic violence and 400 cases of sexual violence occur each month in Nicaragua. Eighty-five percent of victims are minors, and a quarter of victims are younger than ten years old. Few of these cases are reported to authorities, and of those that are reported only 25% are brought to court. The petitioners claimed that the government fails to provide effective legal remedies, and that the process is “loaded with stigma” against victims. This discriminatory and ineffective judicial process directly violates human rights outlined in both the International Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women. The petitioners cited a specific case to illustrate the failure of the judicial system for victims of gender-based violence:

“The petitioners mentioned the alarming example of a 13-year-old girl who was raped by her own stepfather, and became pregnant as a result of the crime. After serving only six months of a 13-year sentence for aggravated rape, the abusive stepfather returned to the house and stabbed her to death. Neither the victim nor her family was notified that he had been released from prison.”

In defense, the state representatives pointed to public policy initiatives to promote family health, living conditions of children, and building awareness through health education. Petitioners from the women’s organizations emphasized that these programs advocate “family unity and reconciliation at the cost of finding justice for victims of gender-based violence,” and that the

---

49 Article 8 “Everyone has the right to an effective remedy by the competent national tribunals for acts violating the fundamental rights granted him by the constitution or by law.”

50 Article 2, Section C “States Parties condemn discrimination against women in all its forms agree to pursue by all appropriate means and without delay a policy of eliminating discrimination against women and, to this end take…(c) To establish legal protection of the rights of women on an equal basis with men and to ensure through competent national tribunals and other public institutions the effective protection of women against any act of discrimination.”

state had recently refused international aid to adopt best practices in addressing gender-based violence for fear of “outside interference.”

The petitioners also cited the 2006 criminalization of abortion as a concern for women’s human rights. Since the law does not allow abortions even in the case of rape or to save the mother’s life, access to adequate healthcare becomes a major concern for victims of gender-based violence. When one of the Commissioners asked the state representatives to explain the logic and constitutionality of the law, they responded that although Nicaragua is a secular country, motives for the law stemmed from Catholic religious beliefs, and that the law had gone through the appropriate legislative process. The Commission granted the petitioner’s request for continued hearings about the human rights situation of women in Nicaragua.

**Conclusion: Hope for the Future**

Although the women’s rights movement and feminist activism face significant obstacles in Nicaragua, the revolutionary spirit of the past gives hope for the future. Despite the fact that the Sandinistas have since launched efforts to keep women “from organizing in autonomous and feminist ways,” the feminist movement “emerged thanks to the mobilization of women during the revolution.” Today, the movement remains and important and continuing legacy of the revolution, and its organization allows for an “important check on the executive branch.” Even as Daniel Ortega and the FSLN continue antifeminist rhetoric and policies, their opposition grows increasingly more organized and diverse.

Recent successes and increased international attention illustrate this continued pressure by feminists. Successfully gaining an order to supersede Nicaraguan anti-abortion law and gain

---

52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
54 Kampwirth, “Resisting the Feminist Threat,” 92.
55 Kampwirth, “Mother of the Nicaraguans,” 75.
cancer treatment in the case of “Amalia” gives tentative hope to those fighting the total ban on abortions; as such a precedent might be used to save the lives of other women in the future. Continued outrage by international feminist groups against Daniel Ortega ensures that accusations against him in the sexual abuse case of his stepdaughter are not forgotten, and that his antifeminist policies will not go unnoticed or unchallenged. International organizations are also increasing pressure on the Nicaraguan government to be accountable for their actions and policies. The hearing held in March of 2011 by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights concluded with a demand for further review and future hearings about the status of women’s rights issues in Nicaragua. While women’s rights activists continue to face attacks and slander from the right and left of the political spectrum in Nicaragua, they also continue to diversify and broaden their audience and the scope of their campaign, meaning they will not be forgotten or silenced in the international human rights discourse.
References:


Appendix A.\textsuperscript{56}