

Fighting on Both Fronts: The Struggle for Women's Liberation in Conjunction with the Sandinista Rebellion

Johanna Morazan

After four decades of rule under the Somoza dynasty, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), a socialist rebel party founded in 1961, overthrew President Anastasio Somoza Debayle on July 19, 1979 effectively terminating the autocratic dictatorship that had ruled over Nicaragua. Despite the aggressive masculine reputation of the Sandinista rebels, men were not the only ones suffering under the oppressive regime nor were they the only ones who mobilized against the subjugation of Nicaraguan civilians. The Marxist-influenced struggle against the imperialist allied regime of the Somozas reached several audiences, especially within the borders of Nicaragua; the time had come for women to incite change within the patriarchal and dogmatic existence that had become unbearable under the Somozas' reign. Women who allied themselves with the rebel cause fought not only to dismantle the dictatorship responsible for crippling the country's economy and political infrastructure, but also the machista (chauvinistic) sentiments and attitudes ingrained within every aspect of Nicaraguan society. In this sense, the revolution acted as a catalyst for the Nicaraguan women's movement, allowing women of all social and economic backgrounds to adopt a radical approach to participate in their emancipation from gender discrimination.

Sandinista commander and FSLN co-founder Tomás Borge, who later served as the Interior Minister of Nicaragua for over a decade, was a major proponent of women's rights during the uprising. Borge demonstrated these ideas to the public in September of 1982, at a rally commemorating the fifth anniversary of the founding of the Luisa Amanda Espinoza Association of Nicaraguan Women (AMNLE). This speech, titled "Women and the Nicaraguan Revolution" was given in the presence of over 2,000 audience members, among them compañeras (female

comrades) who lead sister organizations in Guatemala, Venezuela, Cuba, and other nations in Latin America that were fighting for women's liberation in their respective homelands.

Borge highlighted how Nicaraguan society had become conditioned to accept this inequity between the sexes as a societal norm and not a great injustice. Women in Nicaragua were condemned to perform maternal labor, but many of these women also bore the responsibility of working outside to take care of the family's financial needs. Borge emphasized the substantial number of women who lead double lives as the pillars of family stability and primary economic providers. Borge indicated that "83% of the women who work also carry on their shoulders the weight of economically maintaining their household, raising the children, and doing the household chores."¹ The consequences of patriarchal practices perpetuated by men in Nicaraguan society were exacerbated by the poor wages and working conditions of women within the working class. The gender-based prejudices women encountered within the realm of domesticity were now embedded into the capitalist framework that allowed the Somoza regime to deplete the nation's resources, forcing the civilian population to bear the economic burden of reforming their society. Borge proclaimed that women should not have to struggle alone for their liberation "[men] must convert [themselves] into *compañeros* of the women, into teachers and students of women – sharing political education with them, sharing in whatever means possible the housework, love and care of the children, and love and defense of the revolution."² Women alone could not liberate themselves if the men of Nicaragua continued to practice misogynistic behavior; men would also have to unlearn the social and cultural values that subjected women to abuse, oppression, and manipulation.

Although the Sandinistas were successful in ousting President Debayle, the liberation of the country's entire population depended on completely reforming the political, economic, and

social infrastructure of the nation which had been ravaged by the greed of the preceding government. Among the works that focused on the feminist struggle during the Sandinista uprising *Women and Revolution in Nicaragua* by Lucinda Broadbent focused on the collaboration between the AMNLAE and the Sandinista government to “set about creating several creches for working mothers and launched a ‘minimum programme’ for women, demanding legal equality, responsible paternity, and equal pay for equal work.”³

As the premier organization dedicated to serving working class women of Nicaragua, they implemented feminist rhetoric within the larger Marxist-based principles of the Sandinista party. Established in 1977 under the former title Asociación de Mujeres ante la Problemática Nacional, the AMNLAE was part of a network of organizations associated with the FSLN. This organization was created with the intention to integrate women into the revolutionary process as well as “providing women workers with a space to develop and assert their demands, many of which have been taken on by the Sandinista government and by employers.”⁴ When confronting the issues that threatened the rights of women in the workplace, the AMNLAE had decided that improved conditions and benefits would be most effectively accomplished through legislative change.

The close ties between the FSLN and the AMNLAE meant that the leaders within these groups worked together to implement new legislation that would directly protect working women under the new government, and in 1986, the National Assembly (the post-Somoza legislative branch of the Nicaraguan government) ratified a new constitution that designated “a guarantee of no loss of pay when sick children caused women to be absent”, and made it “illegal for employers to dismiss or turn away women because they are pregnant or on maternity leave.”⁵ The following years would consist of several smaller women’s organizations following the lead of the AMNLAE in the pursuit of women’s liberation across all sectors, such as the Maria Elena Cuadra Movement

of Employed and Unemployed Women (MEC), established as an organization independent from the influence of the FSLN in 1994.

Author Jennifer Bickham Mendez, a professor of sociology at the College of William and Mary recounts the political circumstances that lead to the formation of the MEC and its role in the post-socialist women's movement in her book, *From the Revolution to the Maquiladoras: Gender, Labor, and Globalization in Nicaragua*; the MEC was born from the deeply wrought conflict within the Sandinista Workers' Central (CST), which was Nicaragua's largest trade union at the time. The CST's leadership was an exclusively male collective, which created resentment among the CST's national women's secretariat office that had escalated into a plan to form an autonomous working women's administration. This new organization, known as the MEC, in the post-Sandinista era raised important questions about "the struggles of women and workers under global capitalist conditions and the intersections of feminism and labor organizing."⁶ One of the major challenges in confronting capitalist conditions afflicting women workers was implementing effective accountability politics through the government to protect the rights of workers in the workplace. Campaigns to enforce national and international human rights laws within factories operating under Free Trade Zones (FTZ) had been met with criticism from government agencies, the Ministry of Labor, who claimed "since the requirements of the code of ethics were already contained in the Constitution and the labor code, the code of ethics was unnecessary."⁷ To goad state officials into acting to ensure worker's rights were protected, organizers of the MEC would speak on these matters in media conferences and public forums as a means of shaming state officials and governors and turn public opinion against those within the government who neglected violations of workers' rights. As a result, the MEC in collaboration with the Ministry of Labor presented a resolution directly to the employers of the FTZ in January of 1998. This resolution

included six demands that “address the enforcement of current national laws from the Constitution of Nicaragua as well as the National Labor Code”⁸ Employers of the FTZ eventually signed the resolutions, reflecting the MEC’s dedication to workers’ rights and the organization’s focus on the social and economic conditions that afflicted them.

In the aftermath of the 1990 election, when Violeta Chamorro was elected as the first and only female president of the nation, the FSLN no longer possessed the power that came with proximity to the presidential branch of the Nicaraguan government; meaning they no longer had access to the national platform that came with the political control of the presidential position which FSLN leader and Nicaraguan president Daniel Ortega had to forfeit. Chamorro’s rise to presidency signified a cultural transition in the late 20th century that would diverge from the social and political ideology established by the previous regime. While the revolutionary sentiments of the previous decade were gradually receding, the FSLN and its associate organizations inspired an entire generation of Nicaraguan women to resist their roles as a marginalized demographic through reactionary ideology. The appointment of Violeta Chamorro marked a change within the political systems of Nicaragua, demonstrating that women were capable of roles that were exclusively occupied by men. Women were becoming actively involved in the political framework on a national level. The influence of the Sandinista party and the AMNLAE paved the way for contemporary organizations to give women the platform and resources necessary to uplift themselves beyond the patriarchal paradigm that works to impede their social, political, and economic equality. Like the grassroots work that was carried out within the organizations associated with the FSLN, the MEC as a women-only organization was dedicated to addressing issues that emerged in the mid-1990s that threatened workers' rights and instigating political action

from the government to enforce state legislation as Chamorro's anti-labor administration were negligent in the imposition of the laws and prosecution of those who violated them.

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¹ Tomás Borge. "Women and the Nicaraguan Revolution" in *Nicaragua: the Sandinista People's Revolution: Speeches by Sandinista Leaders*. (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1985), 53.

² Tomás Borge. "Women and the Nicaraguan Revolution" in *Nicaragua: the Sandinista People's Revolution: Speeches by Sandinista Leaders*, 55.

³ Lucinda Broadbent, et al. *Women and Revolution in Nicaragua*. (London: Zed Books, 1990), 141.

⁴ Lucinda Broadbent, et al. *Women and Revolution in Nicaragua*, 36.

⁵ Lucinda Broadbent, et al. *Women and Revolution in Nicaragua*, 29.

⁶ Jennifer Bickham Mendez. *From the Revolution to the Maquiladoras: Gender, Labor, and Globalization in Nicaragua*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 5.

⁷ Jennifer Bickham Mendez. *From the Revolution to the Maquiladoras: Gender, Labor, and Globalization in Nicaragua*, 188.

⁸ Jennifer Bickham Mendez. *From the Revolution to the Maquiladoras: Gender, Labor, and Globalization in Nicaragua*, 189.