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“Ni un Paso Atras:” Women’s Political Participation in Revolutionary Nicaragua

On July 19, 1979, cheering crowds welcomed the Sandinistas into the city of Managua, Nicaragua, only two days after Anastasio Somoza Debayle, head of the 43 year-old Somoza dictatorship, fled the country. The Sandinista Rebellion greatly impacted the trajectory of the country and sent shockwaves through Washington D.C. as the U.S. government tried to tighten its hold on the region. While its consequences were numerous, the effect of the Sandinista Rebellion on the women of Nicaragua was particularly powerful. Prior to the Sandinista Rebellion, women’s political participation was limited to electoral politics and discouraged any challenge to the patriarchal status quo. The Sandinista Rebellion fundamentally changed the role of women in politics by allowing them to expand their participation in social movements or guerilla warfare and by encouraging them to develop an agenda specifically addressing women’s issues.

Before examining the effects of the Sandinista Rebellion on contemporary women’s politics, it is necessary to understand the nature of women’s political participation in pre-revolutionary Nicaragua. The women’s movement in Nicaragua began long before the Sandinista Rebellion; however, this movement was primarily restricted to electoral politics. The focus of the early women’s movement was gaining the right to vote; calls for women’s suffrage began as early as 1880. By the 1920s, women expanded their struggle to include the fight for equal access to education; however, the primary goal was to obtain entry into political society. Throughout the

1920s, 30s, and 40s, sporadic bursts of momentum kept the fight for women's suffrage alive (González 41).

The Somoza family consolidated power in 1936 and curtailed women's participation so sharply that many achievements of the early feminists became virtually obsolete. In 1955, women were finally granted the right to vote, although they would have to wait until 1957 to actually exercise this right. While women's suffrage was an important historical milestone, it did little to change the political landscape. Completely ignoring the contributions of earlier activists, the Somoza family took full credit for women's suffrage in hopes of gaining the support of Nicaragua's newly enfranchised female population. The Somoza family, particularly Luis and Anastasio Somoza Debayle, repeatedly invoked their connection with women's rights in order to bolster the legitimacy of the dictatorship (Kampwirth *Women in Guerilla Movements* 23). In praise of women's efforts on behalf of his 1957 campaign, Luis Somoza called women the "breast" of the party, comparing them with the most savory part of the chicken (González 53).

The Somoza dictatorship used women's enfranchisement to subdue challenges to the patriarchal status quo. The women's branch of the Liberal party, known as Ala Femenina del Partido Liberal, was created in 1955 and charged with the task of grooming women to be supporters of the regime. It was the Ala Femenina's duty not only to turn women voters out to the polls for Somoza but also to monitor and control women's participation. The Ala Femenina encouraged women to support the Somoza dictatorship through "proper" and "acceptable" manifestations of political expression (González 54-59). Members of the Ala Femenina focused their energy on electoral campaigning and

were discouraged from participating in more radical social movements. The *Ala Femenina* did positively impact women in pre-revolutionary Nicaragua by providing an open (yet severely limited) space to address political concerns and by offering support to women who sought public office. However, these gains were largely negated by the *Ala Femenina*'s refusal to facilitate independent feminist thinking. At the end of the day, this organization that was supposedly working for the advancement of women still took its orders from two men: the President of the Republic and the Nationalist Liberal Party Chair.

Women's participation during the Somoza dictatorship was largely void of any attempt to address concerns specifically facing women. After gaining the right to vote, women became active in the struggle for better schools, more jobs, and public safety; however, they supported these causes in a non-gender specific way. They did not demand any change to the prevailing patriarchal gender ideology in Nicaragua. Instead, women used their newfound electoral power to perpetuate a regime that subjected women to marginalization in the workforce, government, and family setting (González 43). The Somoza dictatorship effectively incorporated the women's movement, significantly reducing its threat to male dominance. The victories of true feminism represented by earlier movements were erased from Nicaragua's national memory.

This political climate began to change in the late 1950s as economic depression changed the social landscape. The Somoza regime instituted neoliberal reforms, which encouraged the development of agro-exports. As large agro-industries flooded the country, peasants were pushed off their land. Increase landlessness created a downward pressure on wages as more of the country became unemployed or underemployed.

Increasing agro-exports also led to a rise in food prices, making the situation for peasants even more difficult (Kampwirth *Women in Guerilla Movements* 24-25). Men from rural Nicaragua migrated to the cities in large numbers to look for work, a development that adversely affected the traditional family structure. Women were left not only to maintain their responsibilities as caretakers, but also to assume greater responsibility in providing household income. In response to these new burdens, women began to migrate to cities as well. Traveling to urban areas gave women greater independence and exposed them to the growing economic inequalities of the country. The experience of comparing their lives with lives of others often had a radicalizing effect on women. The disruption of the traditional nuclear family and migration to the city encouraged women to become involved in community organizing as a way of establishing a support network and as a way of taking control of their situation (Kampwirth *Women in Guerilla Movements* 24-28).

Women responded to economic hardship not only by migrating to cities but by entering the workforce as well. In 1950, women made up 14 percent of the economically active population; by 1977, that number increased to 29 percent (Kampwirth *Women in Guerilla Movements* 27). Joining the workforce exposed women to a range of political ideologies absent from the environment of traditional family life.

While economic devastation, disruption of the family, and urban migration provided the desire for action, liberation theology provided women with a justification for action. A new generation of clergy promulgated the philosophy of justice for the poor, thus inspiring women to take action against the current regime (Kampwirth *Women in Guerilla Movements* 32). The voices of Catholic priests preaching against the regime

and its economic policies added legitimacy to the revolutionary movement and assured women of their right to security from poverty.

It was against this backdrop of social unrest that the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) emerged. Women had absorbed new political ideologies in the urban workforce and had been galvanized by liberation theology; the FSLN offered them the opportunity to act. The guerilla's style of mass mobilization was non-discriminatory. The guerilla forces welcomed anyone willing to pick up arms—men and women alike. Sexism did not cease to exist; rather, members of the FSLN found it to be in their best interest to suppress sexist tendencies for the good of the resistance. The life of a guerilla demanded a high level of toleration and cooperation. Living in the mountains, surviving on scarce resources, and relying on comrades for survival resulted in the rapid disintegration of traditional division of labor (Kampwirth *Women in Guerilla Movements* 33). Furthermore, the connection of the FSLN with liberation theology bolstered the legitimacy of the Sandinistas and helped maintain women's commitment to the movement. When the Sandinistas marched triumphantly into Managua, it was in large part due to the participation of thousands of women in guerilla forces and revolutionary social groups (Kampwirth *Women in Guerilla Movements* 21).

Much attention is given to the revolutionary women of the left, yet the FSLN also galvanized women on the right. Numerous women joined the U.S.-backed contras because of a concern that the Sandinistas would become too heavily involved in the economy if given the opportunity to govern. Militant right-wing women were actually motivated by their desire to *avoid* collective action and to defend the idea of individualism from the Marxist Sandinistas. For example, women of the contra

movement considered the literacy campaign of the Sandinistas a clandestine attempt to indoctrinate the next generation of Marxist rebels (Kampwirth *Radical Women in Latin America* 92-97). The Sandinista Rebellion was such a potent, controversial movement that it propelled women to radical action on both fronts.

During the revolutionary years of 1961 to 1979, the Sandinistas significantly impacted women; however, it is questionable whether or not the Sandinistas had a lasting effect on women's rights. The FSLN government of the 1980s enacted important legislation on behalf of women including paid maternity leave, equal access to education, equal divorce rights, economic independence, and the inclusion of sex education in schools (Vanden and Prevost 384). Despite these reforms, the FSLN left noticeable loopholes that largely inhibited the development of women's rights. No attempts were made to rectify the lack of an equal pay provision, to address violence against women, to democratize the family, or to comprehensively protect the rights of gays and lesbians. Furthermore, the Sandinista leadership vehemently opposed the decriminalization of abortion, refusing to defy the Catholic Church. This position strengthened the Catholic Church's battle to protect traditional family values and structures (Prevost 8-9).

In 1990, David Ortega of the FSLN lost the presidential election to Violeta Chamorro of the UNO who encouraged a return to traditional, pre-revolutionary roles for women. During the Chamorro administration, Nicaragua moved towards an even more venomous anti-abortion platform (Prevost 8). Soon after her election, President Chamorro and the Minister of Education, Sofonias Cisneros, declared that sex education would not be taught in schools, insisting that it was the responsibility of the parents. Several government positions were cut, including the coordinator of the national sex

education committee. Under the Sandinistas, billboards were constructed that read: “Prevent AIDS, use a condom.” The Chamorro government replaced these signs with ones that read: “Prevent using condoms, be faithful to your partner” (Wessels 10-11).

Despite these discouraging developments, the Sandinista Rebellion has still had generally positive impacts on women’s participation because it encouraged women to expand their avenues for social change and to promote gender-specific issues. As Jennifer Leigh Disney argues, “women have gone from being mobilized *by* the Sandinistas for the purpose of achieving the nationalist and socialist goals of the revolutionary party in power, to *organizing themselves* for feminist political change” (543). Despite the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas by the UNO in 1990 and by the Liberal Alliance in 1996 and 2001, the national women’s organization of the revolutionary period, the Association of Nicaraguan Women “Luisa Amanda Espinosa” (AMNLAE), remains a strong, autonomous organization. AMNLAE works throughout the country providing services to women that were not available prior to 1979, including programs devoted to health, economic development, gender equality, political participation, and legal rights (Prevost 8). Alongside AMNLAE, numerous other women’s NGOs and feminist movements have flourished. Disney argues that the women’s movement is now the strongest sector of Nicaragua’s civil society (543). It is an important testament to the legacy of the Sandinistas that former female members of the FSLN are now pursuing their own autonomous, feminist organizing.

Before the Sandinista Rebellion, women’s political participation was largely limited to electoral politics and did not propagate feminist ideologies. Generally, pre-Sandinista participation by women supported the status quo. The Sandinista Rebellion

changed this environment by encouraging women to engage in more radical forms of political expression and to fight for social change specifically directed toward women. The political atmosphere following the Sandinista Rebellion was not conducive to the expansion of women's rights, yet this development does not negate the achievements of female organizers and guerillas in the 1960s and 70s. Despite subsequent administrations that have lacked a commitment to women's rights, women today are a more powerful voice in Nicaraguan politics than they ever have been before.

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