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Report On Nicaraguan Women's Movement

by Deborah Tyroler

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Robinson * More than 1,000 women met in Managua in late January to discuss the plight of women in Nicaragua and to launch what they described as a reinvigorated "diverse yet united" feminist movement. Participants in the "National Forum on Women" included women from all walks of life and political persuasions, including Sandinistas and non-Sandinistas, workers, campesinas and homemakers. They discussed unemployment, the cutback in public assistance for maternity, health and child care programs, the resurgence of traditional machista values, regressive changes in divorce and other legislation affecting women, and the general problems women face regarding their participation in Nicaraguan society. At the end of the forum, the participants called for a renewed women's movement based on autonomous, democratic structures and the development of a new political culture, within the feminist movement and in society at large. The women's movement in Nicaragua

The current women's movement in Nicaragua dates back to the formation of the Association of Nicaraguan Women Confronting the Nation's Problems (AMPRONAC) in the late 1970s as part of the struggle against the Somoza dictatorship. AMPRONAC, associated with the Sandinista movement, took its inspiration from the 1969 political program of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), which for the first time in the country's history called for the emancipation of women. After the 1979 revolutionary victory, AMPRONAC changed its name to the Luisa Amanda Espinoza Nicaraguan Women's Association (AMNLAE), in honor of the first woman member of the FSLN to die fighting Somoza's National Guard. During the 1980s, AMNLAE worked closely with the FSLN in the revolutionary process. Gains made by women in the first years of the Sandinista administration were many and far-reaching. These included passage of legislation favoring equality before the law, new legislation regulating divorce, expanded educational opportunities, training programs for working women, and childcare programs to help women enter the work force. These achievements paralleled greatly increased participation by women in a whole range of political activities, including the assumption of important leadership positions in local and national organizations. A less tangible, yet crucial change was that, for the first time, women felt they had access to government and to the political system. While these steps were important, even critical for Nicaraguan women, the revolution failed women in some key areas. As one activist in women's issues who is also a Sandinista party member said, "The revolution offered us everything it gave us the basic conditions to move forward. We can't deny or underestimate the importance that the revolution had and, indeed, continues to have for us, for Nicaraguan women. But the revolution also let us down, and we need to be very open about that and demand an accounting of what happened." The decade-long contra war financed by the United States took a heavy toll on women. For many women, the war conditions and the needs of defense led to the ossification of the women's movement and to its increasing inability to respond to the real needs of women. AMNLAE became an organization almost exclusively dedicated to organizing the mothers of combatants, arranging family visits to the war fronts, and drumming up support for the military draft. While the need to support the war effort was widely-shared, some members of AMNLAE argued that such support should not mean abandoning the fight for women's rights, particularly in a country with a high rate of violence against women and a high death rate due to illegal abortions. In response to a growing chorus of protest among AMNLAE
dissidents and revolutionary women in general that their issues had been suppressed, the FSLN released a "Proclamation on Women" on March 8, 1987, International Women’s Day. The statement acknowledged that Nicaraguan women faced a unique situation in the nation's social reality, and called on all Nicaraguans to address the issue of women's status and needs and machismo in society. But the document did not provide any practical or political guidelines on how Sandinistas, the government, or AMNLAE would actually reorient their work in this regard. Well before the FSLN lost the 1990 elections, many Sandinista women had begun to denounce paternalism and authoritarian attitudes within the party towards the women’s movement. By the late 1980s, these women were debating the need to create an autonomous women's movement and to reorient feminist strategies. In 1989 a group of AMNLAE leaders resigned in protest over the top-down leadership methods used in the organization, claiming that the Association had become a mere vehicle for implementing party decisions rather than a forum for Nicaraguan women to address their situation. This rupture took place, in fact, at a time when other social sectors and mass and popular organizations linked to the FSLN were also discussing the need to have their own voice, their own identity and their autonomy. The AMNLAE dissidents succeeded in generating a debate in the media on key issues during the 1990 election campaign. But most reached a silent "truce" in support the FSLN against the right-wing National Opposition Union (UNO). Women’s rights under UNO In less than two years in power, the UNO government has launched a major offensive against women’s rights. In a context where religious ideologues are setting the new "moral" tone, everything from sex education programs to support for child care, occupational training and higher education opportunities, are under attack. "Morals" have been introduced in primary and secondary schools as part of the official curriculum, drafted by the US Agency for International Development (AID). The orientation is to restore women to their traditional status within the family and society. Ironically, the machismo which permeates Nicaraguan culture is primarily learned and reinforced at home, as women are the ideological torchbearers in the society. Many women have their first child at a very young age. Generally, Nicaraguan women manage the household economy, a task demanding considerable agility, given the country's profound economic crisis. The most destructive and dramatic impact the UNO government has had on women has been in the implementation of the notorious structural adjustment plan. According to the independent Managua-based research center FIDEG, the economic measures have had a particularly acute effect on poor women. IMF plans imposed on other countries have spelled disaster for women, leading to what many analysts call the "feminization of poverty" as women struggle to maintain their households and keep their children healthy on drastically reduced budgets. When massive layoffs begin, women tend to be represented disproportionately among the ranks of the newly unemployed. One example in Nicaragua is among women agricultural workers. The Rural Workers Association (ATC) reports that only 8,000 women are now represented among its ranks, down from some 15,000 just a few years ago, and that 5,000 of those women still affiliated with the ATC only have temporary employment. As the informal sector long a safety valve for the unemployed in Nicaragua constricts with the growing recession, many women who were trying to make do with extremely small-scale business or service ventures are no longer able to keep afloat. In general, women in Nicaragua face a daunting challenge to simply hold their ground. However, women are facing up to this challenge. There are currently at least 100 different women’s groups, including women’s collectives, cooperatives, study groups and research centers. Meanwhile, AMNLAE continues to organize, and has agreed on a strategy to establish networks with these diverse new groups to resolve common problems, forsaking its early position that an umbrella organization should be created to address women’s issues. Participants in the "National Forum on Women" discussed everything from immediate

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activities to long-term strategies for revitalizing and expanding the feminist movement. On March 8, International Women's Day, thousands of people are expected to take to the streets to demonstrate the strength of the Nicaraguan women's movement. The demand will be "liberty to decide about our own bodies, our own organizations and our own destiny," a "new political culture" and new definitions of power which provide for equality "in whatever sphere" of society. * Espinoza Robinson, a free-lance journalist, is a former employee of the Agencia Nueva Nicaragua and the National Network in Solidarity with the Nicaraguan People (Washington, DC).

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