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*Melissa A. Barker*

Major professor

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**STATE POLICY AND GENDER CONSTRUCTION  
IN NICARAGUA**

**By**

**Jacqueline Georgi**

**A THESIS**

**Submitted to  
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## **ABSTRACT**

### **STATE POLICY AND GENDER CONSTRUCTION IN NICARAGUA**

**By**

**Jacqueline Georgi**

On July 18, 1979, the Sandinista National Liberation Front triumphantly marched into the streets of Managua, Nicaragua, overthrowing the Somoza dictatorship, and giving birth to the beginning of a revolutionary, democratic society based on the principals of "socialist pluralism." The Sandinistas' commitment to women's emancipation, along with the political mobilization of thousands of women during and after the Revolution, brought hope to feminists and scholars all over the world who are concerned with the state's impact on gender equality.

The focus of this study has been to analyze how the Sandinista revolutionary government constructed or reproduced gender roles in Nicaragua, by analyzing government policy towards the family system and sexuality. A methodology of language, and an analysis of women's practical and strategic gender needs were used as a criteria to analyze government documents on the family and sexual relations. The conclusion of this study has been that traditional and not revolutionary gender roles may have been constructed by the Sandinistas during their ten years in power.

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## INTRODUCTION

During the last decade, social science scholars in the U.S. have experienced a rediscovery of the state as a central concept in understanding economic, political, and social reality (Charlton, Everett, Staudt, 1989: 1). Since 1980, the dominant theoretical frameworks in the social sciences have viewed the concept of the state as either an organizational instrument of the dominant class, or as a potentially autonomous organizational entity. Current scholarly work conceptualizes the state as an "actor" that can be influenced by the particular society that surrounds it, while also having the potential to shape social and political processes (Skocpol, 1985: 9). Other theorists have identified and conceptualized variations in time and space with regards to state autonomy, and have also studied the impact of state policies and structures on social conflict (Hamilton, 1982).

Political scientists who are concerned with development in Latin America have also looked at the concept of the state with renewed interest (Bourque, 1989: 121). Earlier studies of how nations in Latin America could achieve economic growth and political stability, such as the "modernization theories," have been largely criticized as being inadequate (Kohli: 1986: 12-13). Considering the increasing political instability and poverty of most Third



World nations, fundamental concepts have been formulated to gain a clearer understanding of what the meaning of development is in the Third World, and what processes help or impede development in these countries. Dependency theory (Munck, 1984: 7-15) has illuminated the ways in which development in the "dependent" periphery nations has been interrelated and unequal with the development of the metropolis countries. In other words, dependency theory has shown how historical relations between the metropolis and the periphery nations is the key to underdevelopment in the periphery countries. Yet, it does not address the variations and the internal sources of change in the "dependent" nations.

Looking at the internal processes of the state as well as reassessing the relationships among the state elites and the public have been two areas of renewed interest. These new concepts are crucial links in analyses of the state, and analyses of gender relations. This is because groups of women in countries around the world have criticized the existing development policies; yet their voices remain unheard by the state and international agencies that create and implement development policies (Sen & Brown, 1986: 40).

Around the same time that these new conceptualizations of the state were being formulated, Western feminist scholarship has produced some discoveries of its own, challenging fundamental concepts and theories in its search

for understanding the inequalities of gender relations and the economic, political and social consequences of these inequalities.

In trying to understand the processes of gender inequality, many feminist scholars now argue that our concepts of gender, instead of being biologically determined, immutable categories, are socially constructed, changing historically, with cross-cultural variation, and open to conscious manipulation (Bourque, 1989: 115). In other words, a woman's role in human social life is not in any sense a product of what she does, or what she is biologically; rather it is the meaning her activities acquire through concrete social interactions. The significance women give to these activities can be more clearly understood through analyses of the relationships women form and the social contexts they create. As Rosaldo states,

Gender in all human groups must, then, be understood in political and social terms, with reference not to biological constraints but instead to local and specific forms of social relationships and in particular, of social inequality (1980: 400).

Conway, Bourque and Scott further argue that the production of culturally appropriate forms of male and female behavior is a central function of social authority, one that is mediated by the complex interactions of the economic, social, political, and religious institutions (Conway, Bourque, Scott, 1987: xxi-xxx). Subordination or

domination are not fixed positions, but are current outcomes of dynamic and interactive processes which are open to challenge and change. Since the concepts of power and hierarchy are central to the study of gender inequality, many feminist scholars have criticized the ways in which government policies have contributed to the disadvantaging of women. Yet, until the 1980s, little attention was paid to studying the structure and ideology of state bureaucracies with regards to their impact on gender inequality (Charlton, Everett, Staudt, 1989: 9).

While feminist scholars in the last decade have recognized the importance of studying the role of the state in the construction of gender relations, there is no consensus on what the "ideal" role of the state impact should be with regards to achieving gender equality (Bourque, 1989: 115). Feminist analyses of the state run the spectrum of totally rejecting the state as a masculine, militaristic, and authoritarian entity (Charlton, 1989: 29-35), to fully embracing the ability of a socialist state to promote an egalitarian ideology (Bourque, 1989: 115). For example, Frances Fox Piven (1984) views the state as a site of the struggle in which gains can be made by women. Similarly, Zillah Eisenstein's work (1983) suggests that because of the existing conflicts between patriarchy and capitalism, the state can be seen as an arena for mediating conflicting class and gender interests in which women can

struggle to meet their needs. On the other end of the spectrum is Eileen Boris and Peter Bardaglio's work which views the state as "an instrument of male control over women." In this view any policy reform affecting gender relations merely means a trade-off between family patriarchy and state patriarchy (Bardaglio & Boris, 1983: 70-93).

Whether "pro" or "anti" state, there are certain shortcomings to the various feminist perspectives of gender-state relations. For example, as women of color and Marxist feminists have pointed out, the term "woman" should not be used as an undifferentiated category. The idea that women share a common oppression disguises and distorts the variety and complexity of women's social experience. Racism, class privilege, and sexist attitudes divide women (Hooks, 1984: 44). Therefore, in theorizing about women's struggles for social change, it is essential to recognize differences, and not assume homogeneity among women (Molyneux, 1985: 232). We also need to be careful not to assume that all states share the same values and ideologies. There is great diversity among state officials, therefore, they "are both potential sources of access as well critical actors in the creation and maintenance of hierarchies" (Bourque, 1989: 115).

To summarize the above discussion, the statist (Skocpol, 1985), development (Abraham and Abraham, 1988), and feminist literature (Bourque, 1989), despite the

creative directions of these bodies of theory and research, all have some limitations, and it is important to understand that all three would benefit greatly by making important linkages. For example, theoretical discussions on the nature of the state may focus on the degree of state autonomy or the degree to which states can act independently of social classes and specific groups in society. Examining how the issue of autonomy is relevant to the efforts in women's organizations to affect public policy is a link that can enrich both theories of the state and gender inequality.

#### FOCUS OF STUDY

In theory, during a period of social revolution, the state is supposedly transformed, thus offering the potential of serving gender interests (Molyneux, 1981: 1021). Authority becomes unstable in both the public and private spheres as old structures and ideologies crumble, giving the opportunity for gender roles to be transformed. In the words of Barbara Wolfe Jancar;

In such a situation, women have easier access to political roles, since dominant institutional patterns are weak. Moreover social change affects women directly in every aspect of their lives. Hence, there is a greater likelihood of political interest and political response...role differentiation according to sex tends to diminish as women find they have to perform tasks formally considered male, such as waging guerilla warfare or working in armaments factories...Finally, because the new order has not yet been established the real possibility of change still exists (Jancar, 1978: 113-114).

To investigate Jancar's claim, this study will address the particular role the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) revolutionary government has played with regards to constructing new gender roles (or maintaining the existing ones) by analyzing government policy towards the family system and sexuality in Nicaragua.

Susan Bourque (1989) argues that a systematic approach to the study of gender and the state is most successful when attention is paid to four areas of analysis. According to her work, scholars first need to identify the roles of state policies in structuring access to control of society's resources by gender. This includes focusing on the legal and property systems, as well as employment, education and health provisions, and the creation and use of new knowledge and tools. The second dimension is understanding the prevailing attitudes towards sexuality and its control by studying state policies towards the family, birth control, and abortion. Looking at how the state treats sexual preference and how it controls sexual violence and rape is also included in this area of analysis. Understanding the state's use of intersecting and competing hierarchies of class, gender, and race to establish social control is the third dimension. Here it is important to analyze how gender is used in conjunction with, or in opposition to, class, race, and ethnic divisions to serve state purposes. The last area of analysis is identifying the use and

manipulation of gendered symbols of state authority by focusing on how authority and legitimacy are conveyed through gender imagery (Bourque, 1989: 116). Even though this study will focus on only one of the four dimensions, it is crucial to understand that all four areas of analysis are interrelated, and a change in one affects a change in the other three.

This paper will focus on Bourque's second dimension of gender-state relations by studying the FSLN's policy towards family relations and sexuality. This area was selected because it is important to understand "private-public" relationships and how these are not "separate spheres" but are part of one continuous spectrum of social relations.

Susan Tiano (1988) has illustrated this in her critique of women's work in the public and private spheres. She argues that conceptualizing social reality in terms of the public-private dichotomy distorts our understanding of women's roles in the economy. A distinction implies that the family and women's reproduction activities are not political and that the household is socially and economically autonomous (Tiano, 1988: 35). Viewing the public-private spheres as separate makes it possible to assume that women's reproductive activities and the family lie outside of the political realm when the opposite may be true; these activities form an essential part of the social structure. In addition, these implications neglect the

ongoing interdependence between the family and government as well as other institutions (Thorne, 1982: 17). As Chuchryk suggests, "Not only do women perform important reproductive activities for the state but also that the state has historically played an active role in defining and delimiting those activities" (1989: 137). In 1986, Sonya Alvarez proposed that "the Latin American State has confined women to their ostensibly natural functions within the family or the 'private sphere' by politically and institutionally reinforcing the boundaries which have limited women's lives socially and historically" (Chuchryk, 1989: 137). By analyzing the FSLN's policy towards the family system and sexuality in Nicaragua, I intend to explore whether the revolutionary FSLN government reinforced these socially defined boundaries by defining and reproducing traditional rather than revolutionary gender roles.

This paper will be organized in the following way: The next section will provide a historical overview of the Nicaraguan family system, paying particular attention to the gender division of labor and how it was strongly affected by the growth of agro-export economies. This section will also describe the role of women in overthrowing the Somoza regime, and it will discuss the early gains made by the Revolution which specifically benefited the majority of women. The third section will analyze FSLN government



documents toward women by using a "methodology of language" described by Passaro (Passaro, 1987: 52). The fourth section will discuss the FSLN policy on family relations and sexuality, and focus on the intended and unintended consequences of these policies for women's practical and strategic gender needs. Finally, the conclusions of this study will be presented.

### HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The small country of Nicaragua, nestled between Costa Rica and Honduras, has had a long history of colonial domination beginning in the 16th century when the conquistadors of Spain colonized these lands in 1523 (Barry and Preuch, 1986: 271). Similar to other areas in Latin America, the Spanish occupation was characterized by ruthless exploitation of the native peoples. For example, Bartolome de las Casas, a Spanish bishop who wrote about the treatment of Central American Indians, said that they "suffered as much as possible the tyranny and bondage which the Christians imposed upon them...[and] subjected to so much evil, butchery, cruelty, bondage, and injustice that no human tongue would be able to describe it" (Barry and Preuch, 1986: 271). On the Pacific coast, large areas of land were turned into plantations which the local people were forced to maintain under a system of slavery imposed by the Spanish (Walker, 1985: 13). This colonial

infrastructure was limited to the Pacific Coast, however, since due to the intense resistance of the Carib Indians, the Spaniards failed to incorporate the Atlantic Coast. This area, known as the Miskito Coast, was dominated by the British and remained separate until 1894 (Barry and Preusch, 1986: 271).

Known for their militancy, the Nicaraguan Indian population would not submit to colonial rule, and throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, local revolts were common. There is some evidence which suggests that women may have also taken part in the struggle to resist colonial rule. For example, legend has it that a group of Indian women who were raped by the Spaniards killed themselves rather than bear children into slavery (Collinson, 1990: 3). Yet, in spite of pervasive resistance, the result was mass genocide of the native population. Today, only 4% of the population are full-blooded Indians, the rest are of mixed Spanish and Indian descent.

Nicaragua achieved independence from Spain in 1821, but the legacy of colonialism still continued in the form of a new imperialist power; the United States. As early as 1856, U.S. military presence became visible in the region when Thomas Walker not only invaded Nicaragua, reinstating slavery, but also declared himself President, and was recognized as such by the U.S. government (Burns, 1987: 13). Soon after, U.S. based commercial companies moved in, taking

advantage of Nicaragua's natural resources, particularly for timber, metal ore, and fruit. To secure their interests and political dominance, the U.S. in 1909 brought in the Marines who remained in Nicaragua until 1934 (Chomsky, 1985: 127).

Following the legacy of resistance of his ancestors, Augusto Sandino was one political figure who refused to comply with the new colonizers, and he organized a peasant army to fight the Marines. Despite six years of fighting, the U.S. was unable to defeat Sandino's army. The U.S. finally left Nicaragua in January 1933, but not before establishing the National Guard and installing the regime of Anastasio Somoza (Burns, 1987: 15). After he assassinated Sandino, and declared himself President, Somoza set up an oligarchic, corrupt system that would rule the country in the interests of his own family and their United States allies for almost half a century (Collinson, 1990: 3-4).

#### Somoza Period: 1937-1979

During the Somoza dictatorship, Nicaragua joined the ranks of those countries lowest in per capita income and life expectancies in the world. It became one of the countries with the highest infant mortality and population growth rates and levels of illiteracy (Williams, 1985: 3). The following statistics compiled in 1971 by USAID further illustrate the oppressive conditions of the majority of Nicaraguans: approximately 5% of the population owned 58% of

arable land, of which 23% was owned by the Somoza family. It was estimated that 80% of the people were illiterate in the countryside. Nearly 50% of the population survived on an income of 90 dollars a year, 80% had no running water, 59% had no electricity, 47% had no sanitation facilities, and 69% lived in houses with dirt floors. These kinds of living conditions were further deteriorated by epidemics of malaria, tuberculosis, polio, typhoid, and gastroenteritis. Out of every 1000 infants born, 100 of them died, and 6 out of 10 deaths were from curable infectious diseases (The Amanecida Collective, 1990: 6).

The expansion of agro-export production in the 1950's had a tremendous impact on the Nicaraguan social structure. It created an unequal distribution of the land, seasonal migration, and an irregular labor force (Burns, 1985: 3). For example, between 1950 and 1965, a cotton boom took place in which many campesino families were driven off their lands, usually by the National Guard, and were forced to migrate into the cities. In 1950, 65% of the population lived in the rural areas; and by 1963, the figure had dropped to 49% (Barricada, April 30, 1984: 9).

This migration was accompanied by the loss or displacement of many cottage industries, causing many to be unemployed. Those who could find jobs in the cities tended to work in the service sector for very low wages. Due to strong competition in the labor market, many families were

forced to work in the streets, including the children. They would shine shoes, sell newspapers and flowers, as well as beg. The girls and women worked as vendors while the men searched for the seasonal jobs of harvesting coffee, cotton, or sugar cane (Barricada, April 30, 1984: 9).

### General Situation of Women Under Somoza

The situation of Nicaraguan women prior to the overthrow of Somoza was very similar to the general situation of women in Latin America. Due to Nicaragua's dependent capitalist economy and its extremely low level of economic development over the last 100 years, most of the women of Nicaragua were forced to bear the double burden of maintaining the household responsibilities while also working outside the home. Unemployment, poverty, and insecurity led many men to abandon their families, leaving women as the sole supporters of their families (Randall, 1981: V). For example, in the urban workforce, women made up 34% of the labor force, and in the rural areas 9.2%. Women's wages on the average, however, were lower than men's and their rates of unemployment higher with a longer duration of unemployment (Williams, 1985: 3). It should be pointed out however that women's economic participation has been underestimated in official statistics. For example, before 1979, about 85% of single mothers who worked did so in areas that were extensions of their domestic duties such

as selling homemade food, doing laundry, and working as domestic maids (Collinson 1990: 28). Their participation in the salaried workforce nevertheless was very high for Latin America. For example, in 1950, the proportion of women wage earners was 14 percent. In 1970, it was 21.9%, and in 1977 the figure rose to 28.7% (Randall, 1981: V).

While there were laws that proclaimed equal rights for women, in practice they were paid significantly less than men. This was especially true in the rural areas where women were not only paid less than men, but where their wages were handed over to their husbands (Williams, 1986: 3). In fact, as late as 1938, the National Assembly was still debating whether women should be given citizenship. One legislator concluded "that the state will grant citizenship to women, but not the right to vote, as they are incapable of exercising such a right" (Barricada, August 1984: 4). This derogatory view of women was also reflected in the fact that they were not given the right to vote until 1955 (Collinson, 1990: 109).

In education, both men and women had an illiteracy rate of over 50%. Drop out rates were also very high. For example, of those who enrolled in first grade, only 25% finished the sixth grade. With these high drop out rates, only 1% of the population entered the university; of those who did, men were overrepresented in the business and science fields, and women in the humanities and social sciences

(Williams, 1985: 3).

Perhaps the area in which women were the most severely affected was in health. Located primarily in the urban areas, health facilities in Nicaragua were notorious for being understaffed, and poorly supplied. This contributed to high birth rates due to a lack of access to contraception methods and a high mortality rate. For example, by the time the average rural woman reached the age of 34, she would have given birth to 8 children of which 4 or 5 would have died (Williams, 1985: 3-4).

In addition to the existence of strong social class differences, where a few lavished in tremendous wealth while the vast majority lived in extreme poverty, explicit gender discrimination was also evident (Williams, 1986: 1). As Bustos suggests:

...the division of the sexes evolved into the division of labor, which relegated women to work at home and men to work outside, thus creating a complex ideological and legal superstructure that legitimized this division and discrimination it implies. The superstructure is perpetuated by presenting as natural many characteristics pertaining to both sexes, which are real but basically result from the division of labor and its derivatives. These characteristics are not a principal cause of the division of labor, as both men and women believe. As a result of this division, man granted himself more rights than duties and to woman, who in general consents, he gave more duties than rights. (1980: 34).

This tradition of male dominance, and the gender division of labor was prevalent everywhere, especially in the country side.

In summary, Nicaraguan women were severely discriminated against during the Somoza years. They were generally kept from political power and denied access to the public sphere by illiteracy, isolation in the home, working the long hours of the 'double shift', and by traditional attitudes of "male superiority" (Chinchilla, 1986: 19).

### The Triumph: The Overthrow of the Somoza Government

By the early 1970s, the Somoza dynasty began to disintegrate as Nicaraguans of all social classes increasingly began to question Anastasio Somoza's endless greed and brutality. This popular discontent was accelerated by two major events. First, after the earthquake of 1972, which literally destroyed the capital city of Managua, Somoza and his allies funneled international relief funds into their own pockets. The second event was a successful hostage-ransom operation by the Sandinista Front of National Liberation, the guerrilla army. Somoza reacted by declaring a state of siege, ordering full censorship of the press and commanding the National Guard to wage a campaign of terror in the rural areas, in hope of capturing the guerrillas (Walker, 1985: 20). In one year, from 1975 to 1976, 3000 peasants were murdered by the National Guard and thousands were imprisoned or exiled (Ruchwarger, 1987: 18).

Formed in 1961, and named after Augusto Sandino, the



Sandinista Front of National Liberation led the final offensive into Managua in July 19, 1979, culminating in the fall of Somoza. Besides the revolutionary army, mass scale grass-roots organizations were crucial in overthrowing the Somoza dictatorship. The Sandinista Defence Committees, the Sandinista Workers Federation, the Rural Workers Association, the National Union of Farmers and Ranchers, the Association of Women Confronting the National Problem, and the Sandinista Youth were among the six major organizations (Serra, 1985: 65). In the words of Orlando Nunez;

The politics of unity of the Sandinista revolution meant the utilization of all forms of struggle--legal, clandestine, unionist, subversive. It signified politics based on alliances with hegemony of an armed organization, ensuring the development of the struggle in favor of the working classes independent of the support of those who participated in the movement that opposed the established order (Chinchilla, 1983: 13).

Thus, without this massive participation of the population, the successful overthrow of Somoza could not have been possible.

#### Women's Participation in the Nicaraguan Revolution

With the exception of Vietnam, women's participation in the Revolution had been unprecedented in recent times (Molyneux, 1985: 227). Much of this participation was part of the general population's uprising against the repression of Somoza, yet during the last two years of the dictatorship, women's grass-roots involvement was stimulated

and coordinated by the women's organization called the Association of Women Confronting the National Problem (AMPRONAC) (Chinchilla, 1990: 371).

In its embryonic stage, AMPRONAC was composed of 70 professional women who created study groups to discuss social problems and solutions. The overwhelming conclusion from these discussions was that in order to solve their specific problems as women, they needed to overthrow the dictatorship (Barricada, Oct. 11, 1984: 6). Nora Astorga, a founding member of AMPRONAC, and Deputy Foreign Minister during the Revolution, phrased the position of the organization in this way:

In Nicaragua we cannot conduct a struggle of a Western feminist kind. This is alien to our reality. It doesn't make sense to separate the women's struggle from that of overcoming poverty, exploitation and reaction. We want to promote women's interests within the context of that wider struggle (Molyneux, 1985b: 147).

AMPRONAC massively mobilized Nicaraguan women in all aspects of the struggle in the final insurrection known as the "War of Liberation" (Walker, 1985: 20). They organized food stores, prepared safe houses for the guerrillas, controlled the supplies of drugs and the network of clandestine medical clinics, organized the network of drop boxes for supplies and materials, and participated in civil defense (AMNLAE Bulletin, 1979: 1). By the time of the Sandinista victory, AMPRONAC had up to 8,000 members (Molyneux, 1985b: 146).

The participation of women against Somoza strengthened their resolve, brought on a sense of self-respect, and precipitated many changes in their views of traditional gender roles. For example, in the words of a domestic worker with nine children: "Women weren't aware of anything; they only washed, ironed, cooked, had children and that was it. But now, I tell you, we're awakened" (Ruchwarger, 1989: 76). This was no guarantee however, that women's participation in a revolutionary movement would lead to emancipation of their gender oppression. There were many previous examples in which women participated in social movements but were forced back into their traditional roles once the revolution was achieved (Ruchwarger, 1989: 76). Although socialist parties and governments all over the world claim to be fully committed to the principal of gender equality, many feminist scholars have been quick to point out that not only does gender inequality persist, but that women's workload has been increased without substantial redefinition of gender relations (Molyneux, 1985: 229).

#### Period of Reconstruction: Sandinista Nicaragua

Before analyzing the Sandinista government policy towards women, it is important to describe briefly the context in which the revolutionary process began to unfold and the new state's political and philosophical position.

After the overthrow of Somoza, the Nicaraguans were

left with the enormous task of reconstruction. The country was in shambles and many lives were lost. A conservative estimate suggests that about 35,000 people died during the eight months before the overthrow. This was about 1.5 percent of the entire population. Of these deaths, eighty percent were from government bombardment of civilians (Booth, 1985: 47).

The economy also felt the destructive impact of war. For example, before leaving the country, Somoza and other government and military leaders looted the national treasury, taking several hundred million dollars, leaving only about 3.5 million dollars which was not sufficient for paying even two days worth of vital imports (Ruchwarger, 1989: 9). Altogether, about 500 million dollars worth of property damage was done, including the destruction of dozens of factories, schools, and hospitals in Nicaragua's major towns (Booth, 1985: 47).

Due to these conditions, the new revolutionary government established three major goals. These consisted of rebuilding the devastated economy, redistributing income towards workers and peasants, and dismantling the social bases of the old regime (Ruchwarger, 1989: 10).

### Philosophical Foundations of the FSLN

The Sandinistas distinguished themselves by their commitment to political pluralism, nonalignment, and a socialism based on the principles of a mixed economy (Molyneux, 1985: 236). There were many accusations from the Reagan Administration and the deposed Somoza government that the new system was the "first domino" of the Soviet system that would abolish private enterprise, civil liberties, and religion (Walker, 1985: 24). While most of the leaders in the FSLN claimed to be Marxists, their goals did not encompass the elimination of private property. In the words of Jaime Wheelock, one of the founding members of the FSLN:

It is important to understand that the socialist model is a solution for contradictions that only exist in developed capitalist countries. Now, for a series of reasons, many of them political, and having to do with hunger and desperation, certain peoples have made a revolution in the worst conditions of social development...This is our case. Even though we have socialist principles, we cannot effect the transformation of our society by socializing the means of production. This would not lead to socialism, rather, on the contrary, it could lead to the destruction and disarticulation of our society (Ruchwarger, 1989: 10).

In contrast to the Somoza dictatorship which based its power on a corrupt, U.S. military trained structure and a small elite, the new revolutionary forces based their strength on grass roots organizations (Walker, 1985: 22). The FSLN did not want to betray the humanistic goals for which so many people had organized and for which many had died. Therefore, despite their overriding concern for

reconstructing the economy, the primary objective of the FSLN was to improve the conditions of the country's poor, mainly the workers and peasants (Ruchwarger, 1989: 11).

With regards to abolishing religion, many of the Sandinistas were influenced by Catholic social doctrine and seriously wanted to improve the conditions of the poor. After being inspired by the 1968 Conference of Latin American Bishops at Medellin, Colombia, which denounced the oppressive social, economic, and political conditions of Latin America, many members of the FSLN wanted significant changes. Regardless of their faith, most of the FSLN leaders felt that religion should be respected, and if possible, church involvement should be sought in the revolutionary process (Walker, 1985: 24).

#### FSLN's Position on Women's Emancipation

The Sandinistas' commitment to "socialist pluralism" became a symbol of hope not only to socialists, but also to those concerned with gender inequality, and women's liberation. As early as 1969, the FSLN's commitment to women's emancipation was made public in the Programa Historico del Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional ("Historic Program of the FSLN"). The program stated that "women will be given a more dignified place in society," adding that "all their rights in society will be enforced so that they are not subject to discrimination" (Angel,

Macintosh, 1987: 16).

While other socialist states have had similar phrases about women in their constitutions, the FSLN's distinction was their recognition of the specificity of women's oppression. Unlike other Marxist vanguard parties, the Sandinistas did not denounce feminism as divisive or counterrevolutionary. In addition, only weeks after they were in power, a law was passed that banned the media's exploitation of women as sex objects; furthermore, the Sandinistas filled high positions in the government as ministers, vice-ministers, and regional coordinators of the new FLSN state with women (Molyneux, 1985: 237).

Despite these positive acts and proclamations, little substantive progress was made to improve the subordinate position of women. In the first major speech on women's status in 1982, Minister of Defense Tomas Borge admitted that "women remain fundamentally in the same condition as in the past" (Passaro, 1987: 52).

The growing concern with defending the Revolution may have been a reason for the FSLN's failure to confront women's specific problems. Another reason, found usually in official doctrines, may have been that gender inequality has been a form of social relations which has survived from the past. While these two reasons may have some validity with regards to the case of Nicaragua, the following sections of this paper will argue that the existence of gender

inequality may have been reproduced in the FSLN state policy towards women through the use of language and by meeting women's specific, not strategic gender needs.

#### FSLN POLICY TOWARDS WOMEN: LANGUAGE AND GENDER CONSTRUCTION

In Joan Passaro's 1987 article on conceptualizing gender, she defines "gender" as a "conceptual and classificatory feature of particular processes of oppression" (Passaro, 1987: 50). She argues that gender is "socially constructed." That is, women are "made" and not born, and the processes through which the concepts of "masculine" and "feminine" get defined vary historically. Passaro also explores the ways that gender identities get formed in their interaction with diverse types of public affirmation. In the words of Virginia Dominguez:

Social identities do not exist without public affirmation. Social identities are simply not who we are genetically nor how we as individuals think of ourselves. They are conceptions of the self, constructed in time and place both epistemologically and socially in opposition to other such selves (in Passaro, 1987; 52).

In studying the historicity of gender through an analysis of public documents, Passaro proposes a methodology based on a theory of language (Passaro, 1987: 52). While noting the limitations of Raymond Williams' argument that everything is considered equally part of material social process, (Williams, 1977: 165), Passaro agrees that "language is not



a medium; it is a constitutive element of material social practice" (Passaro, 1987: 53). In other words, Passaro argues that gender is socially constructed through language.

In this section, I will use Passaro's methodology of language as my method of analysis. I will discuss the ways in which language was used in public documents and policies to define and reproduce gender roles in Nicaragua during the first four years of the Revolution.

### Analysis of Documents

The first document to consider is the "Historic Program of the FSLN", which was mentioned earlier. The following excerpt is the section that deals with the category "women".

#### Emancipation of Women

The Sandinista people's revolution will abolish the odious discrimination that women have been subjected to compared to men: it will establish economic, political, and cultural equality between mother and child.

- A. It will pay special attention to the mother and child.
- B. It will eliminate prostitution and other social vices, through which the dignity of women will be raised.
- C. It will put an end to the system of servitude that women suffer, which is reflected in the tragedy of the abandoned working mother.
- D. It will establish for children born out of wedlock the right to equal protection by the revolutionary institutions.
- E. It will establish day-care centers for the care and attention of the children of working women.
- F. It will establish a two-month maternity leave before and after birth for women who work.
- G. It will raise women's political, cultural, and vocational levels through their participation in the revolutionary process (Borge, 1982: 20).

While the document clearly states the intention to abolish discrimination and establish economic, political, and cultural gender equality, upon closer inspection, there are some contradictory definitions of the category "women" in the specific propositions that follow. For example, 5 of the 7 propositions consider "women" to be mothers, and their interests are aligned with children's interests. The two remaining points view women as being recipients of "dignity", and "raised" levels of political, cultural, and vocational levels. As Passaro has pointed out, women are seen as "victims [of odious discrimination] and mothers, are certainly not agents of their own liberation" (Passaro, 1987: 54). The category "woman" has two implied definitions that negate each other: On the one hand "woman" is defined as being a mother, a victim, and a political object; on the other, "woman" should be equal to men. This implies that women are subjects. Yet, how can they be both?

The Programa Del Gobierno de Reconstruccion Nacional ("Government Program of National Reconstruction") which was made public in a communique by the FSLN Exterior Commission in 1979, also has a section on women. Article 3.8 is titled "Attention to the woman, the child, and the elderly." The document makes it clear that the FSLN will give dignity to women, making effective all their rights in society, so that they will not be subject to discrimination. In the same paragraph, it further adds "a pregnant mother,

or one who is breast-feeding, will be given priority in the planning of health programs" (FSLN Program for National Reconstruction, 1979: 11; my own translation).

The title concerning the section on women is aligned with children's rights. Again, women are defined as being mothers, and their interests are concerned with fulfilling their motherhood roles. The language used here also assumes that women are objects, to be acted upon and changed by the new state. According to the document, she will be given "dignity" and her "full rights in society so that she will no longer be subject to discrimination." In addition, the fact that women are "lumped in" with the elderly and the children, as noted above, implies that "women" are weak "victims" to be protected.

In the 1984 FSLN party platform, the section on women acknowledges the participation of women in the general struggle, specifically mentioning their combative role in the front lines, It went on to say:

The destruction of the old order brought with it dignity for women. The Sandinista Front will make the greatest possible efforts for women to enjoy full participation in society, and will continue defending the nuclear family and integrity of the home" (Barricada, July, 1984).

The contradiction which can be pointed out here is that while the proclamation acknowledges women in a nontraditional role such as participating in front line fighting, in the same sentence, the category "women" is associated with the family and the private sphere.

Although, the Sandinistas wanted to change women's subordinate position in Nicaragua, the documents themselves referred to women as recipients and objects of social change rather than subjects and active participants in the Revolution.

#### FSLN POLICY ON FAMILY RELATIONS AND SEXUALITY

In this section, the actual policies of the family laws will be analyzed. The question here is, how did the FSLN define or reproduce gender inequality in family relations? Because the language in the official policy aligns the category "women" with primarily being responsible for the reproduction of society in the biological sense, analyzing the Sandinista policy towards the family may give some insights as to how traditional gender roles are defined and reconstructed by the state. As Maxine Molyneux wrote in 1981:

The family is regarded as an institution of primary importance in socialist societies. It is conventionally referred to as the 'basic cell of society,' functioning as an agent of socialization parallel to the institutions of the state, and as the main focus of day-to-day responsibility for the welfare of children and the elderly (Molyneux, 1981: 1027).

Thus, revolutionary governments tend to see the importance of women's needs in the first period of transformation for the purpose of accomplishing three goals. The first one is to extend the base of governments' political support. Second, to increase the labor force, and

third, to help bring the family in conjunction with the planning objectives of the state. Once the pre-revolutionary family has been restructured to be compatible with development goals, then the new family can act as a socialization agent of revolutionary values for the new generation (Molyneux, 1985: 246).

In order to evaluate the state's impact on gender equality, it is important to understand what interests are being met by the state's policies. Maxine Molyneux in 1985, distinguishes two kinds of gender interests; each one involves different implications for women's subordination.

The first type Molyneux identifies are strategic interests, which derive from analyzing women's subordination. These are interests which are derived at deductively. Abolishing the gender division of labor, alleviating the burden of domestic work and child care, attaining freedom of choice over childbearing, removing institutionalized forms of discrimination, achieving political equality, and obtaining adequate ways to stop male violence and control over women are all examples of strategic objectives that may be applied to overcome women's subordination.

The second type of interests are those arrived at by women themselves in the subordinate position within the division of labor. These are identified as practical gender interests. They are a response to "an immediate and

perceived need" and not to the goal of gender equality (Molyneux, 1985: 233). Unlike strategic needs, practical interests arise out of gender subordination without challenging existing inequalities. Using these distinctions of gender interests, the following section will describe and critically analyze the laws that affected the family and sexuality in Nicaragua under the Sandinistas.

#### FSLN Policy: 1979-1984

It was primarily the women's organization, "Luisa Amanda Espinosa Nicaraguan Women's Association" (AMNLAE) which drafted these laws, and presented them to the Council of State. Formerly called Association of Women Confronting the National Problem (AMPRONAC), the organization changed its name in 1979 to honor the first woman in the FSLN to die in combat (Chinchilla, 1990: 376). AMNLAE led the campaign to reform the legal status of women. This organization confronted the traditional status of men and women by directly removing certain male privileges, and challenging those that remained. It had a permanent representative in the Council of State who was responsible for drafting, circulating, and presenting new legislation to be ratified (Molyneux, 1985b: 153). The first law proposed by AMNLAE was the Ley de Adopción ("Adoption Law") in 1980, which gave single women the right to adopt fully, and it prohibited the export of Nicaraguan children for adoption abroad. That

same year, a law promoting breastfeeding was passed, and powdered milk advertizing was banned (Collinson, 1990: 111).

There were two other laws passed by the Council of State which specifically affected family relations. The first law was called, Ley de Relaciones Entre Padres y Hijos ("Law of Relations between Mothers, Fathers, and Children"), and was passed in 1981. The law replaced the practice of Patria Potestad (literally it means "father power") which gave men the automatic status of being the head of the family with complete property rights over women and children (Barricada, March, 1985: 5). This new law sought to create equal rights and responsibilities over children by both sets of parents, and it recognized the legal rights of illegitimate children (Molyneux, 1985b: 154). The second law called Ley de Alimentos ("Law of Nurturing" or "Provision Law") was drafted in 1982. This law put into effect a previous law which made it possible for women to receive support for their children by fathers who claimed paternity, but also, it charged children, parents, and grandparents with the responsibility of taking care of each other and with shared responsibility of domestic labour (Maier, 1985: 125-130).

Both of these laws were designed with the perspective of the family unit as being the basic institution of society. They sought to achieve several objectives. First, there was the desire to promote greater family cohesion. Strengthening the family structure was considered necessary

due to the historical erosion of family ties and prevalence of male migration. The lack of public resources also encouraged the idea of family unity in order to get basic needs met. The second objective was to redress some of the injustices suffered by women. It attempted to do this by securing a financial base within the family by protecting women against male desertion, migrancy and serial polygamy, which left many women to be sole providers for the welfare of their children (Molyneux, 1985b: 154).

The public debate regarding the social value of housework, and the "lack of a biological mandate for women's domestic labor and parenting" (Chinchilla, 1990: 380), generated controversy in the Council of State in October 1982, and was heatedly discussed in the "100 Popular Assemblies" which were attended by trade unionists, entrepreneurial market women, Sandinista Defense Committees, and public sector employees (Molyneux, 1985b: 154-155).

Here, a 27 year old peasant woman commented:

Women should no longer be just another tool of men. It must be recognized that today we women have demands and one of them is that we are no longer seen as simple entertainment. This is a problem because men go off womanizing whenever they want to. It seems like they see us as a sport, as one more leisure activity. We don't think it is right that men see us like this because we have seen that with the Revolution that everything has changed and our lives have to change as well (Maier, 1985: 104).

A taxi driver said:



This law has come to change everything. Before, if a guy liked a girl, he could talk to her a while and then go off to do with her what is natural. He never worried about anything. Now with this law of AMNLAE, first he has to ask the girl what she is using so she doesn't end up with a big belly and this takes the naturalness completely out of the thing (Maier, 1985: 115).

Despite all the public discourse these laws aroused, the "Provision Law" was passed by the Council of State, but not by the Junta,<sup>1</sup> and public discussion of the issues it raised was greatly diminished by 1983 (Molyneux, 1985: 239).

### Summary of Findings

In accordance with the socialist character of the FSLN, policies were targeted for the poorest sectors of the population, focusing on basic needs such as health, housing, education, and food subsidies. Because the majority of the women were poor, most women were positively affected by the government's redistribution policies.

From 1979 to 1984, the Sandinistas drastically reduced the illiteracy rate from 50.3 percent to 12.9 percent. They also doubled the number of educational establishments and

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<sup>1</sup> The five-member Governing Junta of National Reconstruction (JGRN or Junta) exercised formal executive authority, and was one of the three governing branches of the FSLN government. The other two branches were; the Council of State, and the Courts of Justice.

increased school enrollment (Barricada, July 9, 1984: 9). People were provided with basic health care, and fatal diseases such as malaria, polio, measles, and dengue (tropical fever) were largely eradicated due to the mass scale vaccination campaigns (Barricada March 12, 1984: 9). Compared to conditions under Somoza, housing programs greatly improved by integrating urban reform, national planning, rural housing, and marginal urban neighborhood programs into the national development policies (Williams, 1985: 385). With regard to land reform, land was distributed directly to thousands of rural workers or secure jobs were given in the state farms and cooperatives (Molyneux, 1985: 248).

These policies were particularly significant for women who, by their position in the gender division of labor, were disproportionately responsible for basic needs. Therefore, many of these policies met women's practical gender interests.

Prevailing interests however, were not challenged. The FSLN policy towards the family did show some concern in meeting women's strategic interests by attempting to end the irresponsibility of men for the welfare of their families and in making them "liable for a contribution paid in cash, in kind, or in the form of services" (Molyneux, 1985: 249). But, there seemed to be more focus on strengthening family unity than on challenging traditional gender roles. Most

policies did not seem to question women's traditional roles. While the "Nurturance Law" was an attempt to change the traditional division of labor in the home, it was never ratified. State policy towards the family did not adequately focus on eradicating other laws and attitudes that maintained male privilege, such as divorce, domestic violence, and family planning.

#### FSLN Policy: 1985-1989

A few years later, debate in the streets once again flourished over the drafting of the new Nicaraguan Constitution. From 1985, to 1986, open town meetings known as cabildos were held in each region of the country. These were organized as separate forums for peasant farmers, for soldiers, for youth, and for women. All of these groups gave their opinions on the Constitution, thus transforming a formal document into a nationwide debate. Many women attended these meetings, enthusiastically voicing their demands to the Constitutional Commission. For example, in the words of a participant, Lucinda Broadbent, with regard to the Managua meeting:

The hall was crammed with well over 1,000 women, seated in rows and standing in all the aisles, many with their children...Six members of the Constitutional Commission arrived to listen to them including town prominent government leaders, Dora Maria Tellez and Carlos Nunez, who invited anyone who had a point to make to step forward. There was a sudden rush as 75 women stood at once and poured to the front of the hall while the rest of us burst into applause... The majority made

very specifically feminist demands--insisting again and again that the Constitution must enshrine a woman's right to control her own fertility, including the right to abortion...Men were attacked for rape and domestic violence, for leaving housework to women, for abandoning women with children, being responsible for prostitution and failing to understand that the Nicaraguan Revolution includes women (Collinson, 1990: 113).

The outcome of these meetings was the new Constitution adopted in 1986 by the National Assembly (who replaced the Council of State after the 1984 elections), and inaugurated in January, 1987 (Zarate-Laun, 1987: 10). For the first time in Nicaraguan history, the Constitution established "the absolute equality of men and women." In addition, Article 5 stated "Nicaragua opposes all forms of discrimination..." Article 27 further stated, "All individuals are equal before the law and have the right to equal protection under the law. There shall be no discrimination based on...gender" (Zarate-Laun, 1987: 19).

AMNLAE played an essential role in drafting these parts of the Constitution. The Women's Legal Office, which opened in Managua in 1983, expanded its role to include education, research, and work on proposals for the Constitution. For example, by 1987, "2000 agreements"<sup>2</sup> for couples were drafted (Collinson, 1990: 112).

While AMNLAE received political and ideological guidance from the FSLN, it remained independent and

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<sup>2</sup> These agreements were drafted for the purpose of laying new ground rules for marital relationships.

autonomous (Harris and Vilas, 1985; 94). The relationship between AMNLAE and the Sandinistas, however, was and continued to be a close one. AMNLAE literally owed its creation to the Sandinistas, and, like other mass organizations, it consulted frequently with the FSLN on various campaigns and priorities (Chinchilla, 1990: 383).

By 1983, however, the frequent expression of women's discontent with their daily lives began to grow and be heard. The shortages due to the U.S. imposed blockade and the Contra War increased women's daily burdens without promises or plans for the future. In response to this discontent, AMNLAE began to integrate many more feminists' demands into their political platform. In April of 1985, AMNLAE organized an assembly to create new proposals. Over 40, 000 women in 600 base assemblies were in attendance to discuss their ideas with the 1,000 delegates who were elected to attend the Second National Assembly in September of 1985 (Chinchilla, 1990: 385).

The FSLN also responded to women's concerns by creating the Proclama ("FSLN Proclamation"), a policy document on women's oppression and participation in the revolutionary process. The document was made public on March 8, 1987, International Women's Day. First, the document acknowledged women's participation by describing some of the achievements of women. The following statistics are some examples:

31.4% of the leadership government positions are held by women.

26.8% of FSLN regional members are women, and 24.3% of the FSLN membership are women.

34.3% of the volunteer literacy teachers who participated in the 1980 literacy campaign were women.

Between 55% to 80% of the volunteer health workers are women.

5.40 % of unionized farm workers are women.

6.67% of Sandinista Defense Committee members are women.

(Through Our Eyes, 1987: 3).

The 1987 Proclama dealt specifically with such issues as irresponsible paternity, domestic violence, and the burden of the division of labor in the home, and was the first proclamation to define and condemn machismo. It stated: "Machismo exalts a supposed masculine superiority, excluding women from activities and work that are considered to be for men. Machismo provided men the right to mistreat women and to establish prerogatives and rights unavailable to women" (Through Our Eyes, 1987: 2).

As part of a strategy to end women's discriminatory status, the document called for all Nicaraguans to promote massive incorporation of women into the task of the Revolution, and to struggle against all forms of oppression. In this document, the FSLN rejected any separatist tendencies, proposing that the emancipation of women be carried out as a single struggle of women against men, favoring instead both working together (Collinson, 1990:

137). Unlike the Constitution, the Proclama was not a law. Therefore, to analyze FSLN policy towards the family and sexuality, further attention needs to be paid to the Constitution and the proposals that were and were not passed concerning women's specific problems.

To begin with, the Constitution gave single people the right to adopt children, and more importantly, a new definition of the family was formulated. The nuclear family was no longer the only legally sanctioned household unit which could claim rights and benefits of a family (Matthews, 1987: 29). At first, the family was defined as a married or unmarried couple and their children, but protests erupted by those women who felt that their children or relatives were a "nucleus of society" even though they did not live with a man in a couple relationship. In the final version, the family was defined as being the 'fundamental nucleus of society,' leaving the term "fundamental nucleus" open to definition (Collinson, 1990: 8)

According to a pamphlet published by the Legal Office of Women, before 1988, legislation controlling marriage and divorce dated back to the 1904 Civil Code (Benjamin, 1989: 105). The law stated that a man could divorce his wife on the grounds of "adultery" if she was ever caught being unfaithful. Infidelity by the husband, however, was considered "concubinage." As long as he was not scandalous with his mistress in public or brought her to live in the

household, the wife could not seek legal action for divorce (Ramirez-Horton, 1982: 149). Also, if a husband died without a will, a mistress could legally inherit more than a wife (Nicaragua National Network, 1982: 3). Section 130 of the Penal Code established that if one marriage partner caught the other in the act of committing adultery and murdered one or both participants, the penalty, if found guilty, would be 2 to 5 years in prison. Since only women are defined as "adulterers," this part of the law is only applicable to men. In addition, the law prohibited anyone divorced due to adultery from getting remarried. This, on the other hand, only applied to women (Williams, 1988: 285).

Almost a decade after the revolution, these outdated laws were replaced by the Nueva Ley del Divorcio ("New Divorce Law") of 1988. This law gave either party the unilateral right to divorce. A marriage could be dissolved by either spouse or by mutual consent. Another important provision of the divorce law states that work in the home and wages should be recognized when dividing up goods (Collinson, 1990: 15).

One of the major concerns that became public after 1985, was the issue of domestic violence. Fifty-one percent of the cases brought in to the Women's Legal Office dealt with some form of domestic violence (Benjamin, 1989: 99). Due to the high numbers of battered women who visited their offices, the Women's Legal Office and the Office on Family



Orientation and Protection conducted a study in 1985. The results showed that violence against women was pervasive in all social sectors, not just among the working class men. The study found that in a random sample of women between the ages of 25-34, 44% were victims of beatings (Collinson, 1990: 17). While the report challenged the "privateness" of the issue by helping promote public debate, domestic violence was not specifically outlawed (Benjamin, 1989: 99). The Constitution however, laid the basis for laws to prevent domestic violence because it guaranteed every citizen the right to physical, psychological and moral integrity, and any cruel, inhuman, or degrading behavior was deemed a crime punishable by law. Also, since the 1987 Proclama officially recognized male violence against women, the police could arrest and hold a man in custody for one day, and then bring him to a tribunal if the woman wished to take the matter further. New demands were also established in the 1988 Women and Law Conference. A law was proposed that would treat domestic violence as a crime comparable in punishment to other violent crimes that are committed outside the family structure (Collinson, 1990: 16-17).

Like domestic violence, the issue of rape and child abuse had also been kept quiet from public discourse until around 1988, when reports on rape and child abuse were more frequently reported in the press. As of February 1989, the penal codes concerning rape provided a sentence of 6 to 12

years; longer terms applied, especially if the rape was considered to be extremely cruel (U.N. Document Report on Women's Status, 1989: 41). However, an amendment was put forth by AMNLAE and the National Conference of Professionals (CONAPRO) to reform this law. In their proposal, the definition of rape would have been extended, and the sentences increased to 20 to 30 years (Collinson, 1990, 115).

The issue of reproductive rights was another "topic of silence" in the 1980s. This was primarily the result of two social trends. First, the Contra War and the war with Somoza had increased the public's general commitment to have families. This attitude needs to be seen in the context of Nicaragua as one of the major targets for U.S. birth control programs. Many Nicaraguans have associated family planning with imperialism because during the Somoza era, USAID followed a blunt doctrine: "It's cheaper to prevent a guerilla from being born than to get rid of him once he's grown" (Barricada, March 19, 1984: 9). USAID development policy put a tremendous amount of money, directly and indirectly into family planning programs. In the last years of the regime, 50% of all the loans and grants to the Nicaraguan government for health programs were targeted for these programs (Williams, 1985: 284). According to the United Nations projections, however, the population of Nicaragua is predicted to exceed five million by the year

2000. This is an annual growth rate of 3% (United Nations Population Fund, 1989: 4). Second, the Catholic church, with its strong impact on social relations in Nicaragua, has been adamantly opposed to any kind of birth control.

Recently, however, these traditional attitudes have begun to be questioned. To illustrate, in a conference organized by the Agricultural Worker's Union (ATC), and AMNLAE, women farmworkers argued that low-cost contraception should be made available nationwide. It should be "as accessible as a quart of milk," said Lea Guido then the National Secretary of AMNLAE, as she addressed the conference (Collinson, 1990: 117).

While ostensibly contraceptives have been free since the early 1980s, in practice, the war with the Contras restricted women's access to contraceptives. As with other health supplies, the amount that could be imported was limited by scarce foreign exchange reserves (Chinchilla, 1985-86: 23). In 1983, 22.1% of women between the ages of 15 and 49 were using contraception provided by government health facilities; 75% of these women were using the pill, 15% were using the IUD, as well as other methods. These figures however, are not very accurate since many women, for fear of embarrassment, preferred to buy their contraceptives from market stalls, rather than going to the state health clinics. In 1988, sterilization became possible for women without requiring permission from their husbands. Because

of government cutbacks in health spending, however, this service was limited to women over 35 years old. In addition, eligibility was granted only to women who already had at least 6 children (Collinson, 1990: 117).

In the first years of the Revolution, the Sandinistas did not view sex education as a priority. With the 1987 Constitution, however, sex education became an established right. In 1985, AMNLAE, the Sandinista Youth, and some trade unions organized a National Commission on Sex Education funded by the United Nations. The committee has promoted and co-ordinated teaching and communication activities through newspapers, radio, and television. Due to the cutbacks mentioned above, however, there were not enough funds available to upkeep the video technology upon which the committee had been largely dependent (U.N. Population Fund, 1989: 7). Despite this, creative resources were implemented. For example, in 1989, live theatre was used as a medium to teach sex education. Puppets, music, and class participation have also been used as teaching techniques (Dinur, 1989: 12). In one class, a 40 year old woman with 10 children and 18 grandchildren learned about the female reproductive organs when the teacher used jocotes (a small oval-shaped fruit), string beans, and an avocado half to represent the ovaries, fallopian tubes, and uterus. Later, when she learned the fertilization process, she exclaimed:

"The men plant the seed in the fields and they grow. We women harvest the plants... I thought it was the same with babies...the men plant the seeds in us and the baby grows and we harvest it. Now you're telling me I have eggs and they have something to do with it? Then why have women been putting up with so much crap from men for so long?!" (Wessel, 1989: 6).

Another comment made about family planning and sex education by Flor Ramirez who is one of the leaders of the tobacco section of the Union of Agricultural Workers, was:

"In Nicaragua, we're beginning to tackle the need for sex education. Just imagine, had I been taking the pill I would never have had seven children. Now I'm more in control of my life, but that's me. Many others aren't, and abortion isn't the answer. Both men and women tell you it's God's will. Is God going to provide dinner for all her children? I'm not criticizing anyone's belief, let them believe in the devil, but we want to have the choice whether to be pregnant or not. I mean, if the conditions aren't right because of the war and economic blockade, why the hell burden yourself with another mouth to feed? Now we women are trying to get a law passed to make abortion legal. We don't want anymore back-street abortions..."(Angel & MacIntosh, 1987: 127-128).

Perhaps the biggest controversy regarding women's reproductive rights has been the issue of abortion. In Nicaragua, abortion is still illegal, punishable by up to four years in prison. Nevertheless, it was FSLN policy not to prosecute the women who have had illegal abortions or those who perform them (Collinson, 1990: 118).

A study done by the staff at the state run Bertha Calderon Women's Hospital titled "Illegally Induced Abortion: Its Costs and Consequences", made public for the first time the shocking statistic that illegal abortion is

the single greatest cause of death for women who are of childbearing age at the Hospital (Sangree & Hunter, 1986: 25). From 1983 to 1985, 45% of the admissions to the Hospital were from women who had undergone an illegal abortion. Of these, 26% were left sterile and 10% of the women died (Ruchwarger, 1986: 196-197).

The main reason that the provisions for legal abortion were left out of the Constitution was strong Church opposition (Zarate-Laun, 1987: 19). With a country that is 80% Catholic, the FSLN leadership feared a clash with the Church hierarchy and with the religious right, which was also a strong opponent of legalizing abortion.

The dramatic increase of the labor shortage caused by war casualties was another stated reason for not changing the law. In a 1987 'Face the People' meeting to celebrate the 10th anniversary of AMNLAE, President Daniel Ortega argued that U.S. policy towards the population of Nicaragua was to limit its growth, based on the logic that a population increase could cause a revolutionary change. This 'policy of genocide' was also evident in the U.S. sponsored Contra war, which caused an estimated 40,000 deaths. These numbers are very high considering Nicaragua's population is only about three million people (Molyneux, 1988). Making abortion legal was one way to collaborate with this 'genocide.' In response to audience comments on legalizing abortion, he said:

The ones fighting in the front lines against this aggression are young men. One way of depleting our youth is to promote the sterilization of women in Nicaragua--just imagine what would happen then-- or to promote a policy of abortion. The problem is that the woman is the one who reproduces. The man can't play that role...some women, aspiring to be liberated, decide not to bear children. A woman who does so negates her own continuity, and the continuity of the human species (Chinchilla, 1990: 386-387).

Responding to the argument that Nicaragua needs to increase its population, Vilma Castillo, a clinical psychologist, said:

People in our country have always used the argument that we need to populate. What have the results been? Unwanted children, abandoned children, mistreated children. No population nor political law can be defended which manipulates the reproductive capacity of women. INSSBI (The Ministry of Social Welfare) still doesn't have the capacity to care for these abandoned children. This is the reality. In this country paternal irresponsibility continues to exist. To have children should be a conscious act (Ruchwarger, 1987: 196-197).

Thus, while the arguments given by the FSLN to keep abortion illegal may have been valid to some degree, they were open to interpretation and debate.

### Summary of Findings

In the second half of the Revolution, concern for meeting women's strategic interests was increased by the shift in policy-making towards the family and sexuality. During the first five years, state policy seemed to accept the division of labor and the subordinate status of women within it, but in the latter half of the decade, policy was

aimed more towards challenging fundamental structures of gender inequality. For example, the new definition of the family and the new divorce laws challenged a rigid definition of the nuclear family and the privilege of men within the family structure. The increase in public recognition of domestic violence and rape was also very important in addressing women's strategic concerns; yet, the proposals presented to the National Assembly to change the definition and increase the prison sentencing of these crimes remain to be ratified. Acknowledgement of women's reproductive rights became more prevalent by the creation of sex education programs and the increase in the availability of contraception, yet abortion remained a closed issue.

Even though women's strategic needs were more seriously addressed in the last five years of the Revolution, there may have been other motives besides the more obvious one of women's emancipation. The Sandinistas were aware that conservative sections had coopted frustrated housewives into reversing progressive change in other Latin American countries. For example, in Chile during the political economic crisis of the Unidad Popular ("Popular Unity") socialist government of Salvador Allende in 1972, the conservative opposition successfully manipulated upper- and middle-class women to mobilize against the government by organizing street demonstrations and provoking officers in the armed forces to intervene and overthrow Allende



(Chavkin, 1989: 205-206). To avoid a similar situation in their country, the Sandinistas were pressured to critically evaluate and change their approach to women's subordinate position. In the presence of growing discontent, keeping women from being co-opted by the opposition may have been a major reason for the policy changes of the last five years.

### CONCLUSION

This study has tried to show that the existence of gender inequality may have been reproduced by the Sandinistas' state policy towards women through the use of language in their early documents, and by largely meeting women's specific not strategic gender needs. It may be impossible to find another government in the world which was more willing to listen to women's demands and more committed to abolishing all forms of oppression, than the Sandinista government. However, abstract proclamations of women's rights were not always matched by concrete implementations of those rights. That is, the findings of this study show that the gender-state relationship in Nicaragua was a dialectical one.

While the Sandinista government policies made the greatest gains in the history of Nicaragua towards eradicating gender inequality, women's traditional roles were not changed; instead they were politicized, taking on a new meaning (Molyneux, 1985: 228). In fact, most of the

women who became members of AMPRONAC, did so out of their traditional roles as mothers, grandmothers, and spouses, rather than out of any desire to change their specific gender roles. For example, in 1978, AMPRONAC politicized Mother's Day by saying that this day is used for commercial purposes, as a day in which women are commercialized and objectified. Working class women used street theatre to portray their situation with the slogan; "Instead of gifts, we want a free country" (Barricada Oct. 11, 1984: 7). Thus, the concept of "combative motherhood" was born.

Another example of the exaltation of the traditional role of motherhood was President Ortega's acknowledgement of the heroic role women played in the struggle to overthrow Somoza and in the Contra war. He placed particular emphasis on the "conscious and steadfast strength" of the women who had lost their sons in the wars, claiming they were a great example of revolutionary tenacity and heroism (Barricada, Oct. 11, 1984: 6).

Traditional gender roles may have been blurred by some women who took leadership roles in the militia to overthrow Somoza and fought alongside the male combatants. However, participation in front line fighting by women in the Contra war became minimal after "the Triumph." As early as 1979, the uneasiness of the Sandinistas in maintaining women as fighters became more apparent during the process of forming a new professional army. Comandante Luis Carrion, a member

of the general command, proposed that there should be separate training for men and women and that special units should be created for women soldiers (Collinson, 1990: 155). In addition, regarding the new Ley de Conscripcion ("Conscription Law") of August 1983, which called for two years of compulsory military service for young men between the ages of 18 and 25, women could register as volunteers but they were not to be called for military service (Collinson, 1990: 157-158). These state policies encouraged and "honored" women's traditional role as mothers of combatants, instead of being soldiers themselves.

While the emphasis on "combative motherhood" is an example of reproducing traditional gender roles, it is important to remember that a mother's role in Nicaragua was not a passive one of taking care of the family and being subordinate to her husband. Instead, women's roles as mothers most often entailed full economic and emotional responsibility for their families (Ruchwarger, 1989: 75).

It appears that women's traditional subordinate roles were challenged on the condition that they coincided with national development policies. This may explain the contradictions in the state's action towards women's roles which has been shown to exist in both the language of the early FSLN documents, and in their policies towards women. For example, as already mentioned, one of the first laws that the Sandinistas passed specifically to challenge

women's traditional role as sex objects was the "Provisional Media Law." This new legislation prohibited the use of women's bodies for commercial purposes such as advertising and for public display of women as sex objects (Collinson, 1990: 111). In 1988, however, on the grounds that a "morale boost" was needed for the troops, the Sandinista Youth, the army, and the Sandinista TV system sponsored a series of beauty contests. During the event, young army men escorted young women in bathing suits and high heels before the judges. Tomas Borge, Interior Minister, implicitly endorsed the beauty pageants by his sometime attendance (Benjamin, 1989: 103).

This evidence suggests that women's traditional roles may have been reproduced for the purpose of meeting the wider development goals of the state, thus illustrating the dialectical relationship of gender-state relations in Nicaragua. In this example, internal security, not gender equality was the overriding concern of state policy-making.

#### Limitations of Study

While this study has attempted to enrich the link between the research on gender and the state, its limitations should be noted. First, an analysis of state policy towards the family and sexuality was limited to studying legislation primarily through the use of documents and newspaper articles. While this has its obvious

advantages such as providing a clear focus for the study, the main disadvantage is that it is difficult to grasp the particular flavor of Nicaraguan society by just studying documents. Questionnaires and interviews with state elites and Nicaraguan women and men would provide a more thorough understanding of the prevailing attitudes and the implementation of state policies towards sexuality and its control. Second, this study has focused on only one out of four dimensions of Bourque's gender-state analytical framework. Studying how the other three areas of analysis are interrelated and how they affect each other may further illuminate the ways in which the Sandinista government has defined and reproduced gender roles.

### Postscript

The Second General Election since the 1979 Triumph, occurred on February 25, 1990. To the surprise of many international spectators who sympathized with the Nicaraguan Revolution, Sandinista President Daniel Ortega was not re-elected. Instead, the presidency went to the U.S. backed National Opposition Union (UNO) candidate, Violeta Chamorro (Chinchilla, 1990: 390). Because her husband, a famous newspaper editor, Pedro Joaquin Chamorro was killed by Somoza's National Guard, President Chamorro identifies with thousands of women who lost their loved ones in the overthrow of the dictatorship (Collinson, 1990: 188). This

solidarity however, does not mean that the policies of her administration will benefit women's strategic gender needs or create more egalitarian gender roles. In fact, it could be that her image of a traditional Nicaraguan mother and her emphasis on the traditional family will engender the opposite. Future areas of study could entail a comparative analysis of UNO's state policies with the Sandinistas' policies towards women. While UNO's political platform is silent about women's liberation, its "social program" strongly implies a conservative ideology of the family and women's roles.

In fact, according to some feminists in Nicaragua, the new economic adjustment plan announced by UNO in March 3, 1991 is greatly contributing to the feminization of poverty. Aimed at reducing hyper-inflation, the "stabilization plan" is cutting back on social gains such as health care, education, and social security which were created during the ten years of the Sandinista government. Since the UNO government took power a little less than a year ago, 460,000 people have lost their jobs, with women often being the first to be laid off (Barricada, April, 1991: 19). In addition, there is a strong wave of religious influence from the new government which, in its fundamentalism, advocates that women return to their traditional role of housewife (Barricada, April, 1991: 18).

Other interesting areas for future research are women's

responses to the changing policies of the new state and the effect of women's organizations on state autonomy. These are especially important considering the conservative ideology of the UNO coalition and the fact that many Nicaraguan women have acquired much independence and self-confidence in the past decade.

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