Mobilizing for a Gendered Revolution:
Ideology, Identity, and Power in Sandinista Nicaragua

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April 23, 2010
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ABSTRACT

The Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) gained power in Nicaragua in 1979 through a militant revolutionary struggle that succeeded in accomplishing unprecedented popular mobilization of heterogeneous groups. The Sandinista revolution purported to construct a new Nicaragua, in which the realization of full citizenship and widespread prosperity would be feasible. Articulating this new vision of the Nicaraguan nation, the FSLN promised gender equality, as well as increased respect for human rights, freer political expression, and a higher overall standard of living. Through the implementation of the revolutionary project, the Sandinistas delineated gender relations in both explicit and implicit ways that were sometimes contradictory, because notions of femininity and masculinity helped constitute nationhood itself. This thesis focuses on constructions of gendered identity and their relation to nationalism, considering personal stories, public rhetoric, and institutional players all within a larger framework of change (and consistency) in social relations.

The gendered ideals that appeared often in FSLN publications and speeches were imbued with political meaning, and reflected larger strategic party goals. The dominant gendered ideals included the strong, militant Sandinista man whose relationship is with the state, the sacrificing revolutionary mother, a reproductive engine of society who gives up her sons to the revolutionary cause, and the female guerrillera, who laid aside her femininity to take up arms alongside men in service of the revolution. These powerful images of gendered citizenship became mythic identities that took on a symbolic significance of their own. In reality, though, gender relations were fluid, fundamentally not universal, and (particularly in the revolution's context of social upheaval) especially porous, being constantly renegotiated, they can be threatening; the heterogeneous identities that emerge from documents of popular mobilization hint at some of the fluidity and contested ground of these boundaries.

In 1990, after eleven years of working toward the revolutionary project, the FSLN conceded power in free elections. Nicaragua's revolution teaches historians and revolutionaries and activists the importance of recognizing the political dimensions of private life, and the personal and relational dimensions of revolutionary change. Though the Nicaraguan revolution failed to accomplish its radical goal of redefining social relations to create gender equality, it nevertheless had a significant impact on the way gender identity, political agency, and power are negotiated in Nicaragua today.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“This the type of joint you gotta dedicate to someone.”

I would like to acknowledge the incredible support and encouragement I have received throughout the process of envisioning, researching, struggling with, and writing this thesis. First, I would like to thank Professor Krippner and Professor Gerstein for their intelligent feedback and frequent words of assurance and kindness. To the wonderful faculty of the Haverford College History Department, who have pushed me to improve my scholarship and inspired me with their own insights, I owe many thanks. I am grateful to Haverford’s library staff, especially Margaret Schaus and Rob Haley, for their wisdom and hard work in assisting my research process.

I am greatly indebted to the Center for Peace and Global Citizenship for their support of my work in Nicaragua, both as an intern and as a researcher. I am grateful for the generosity and warmth of Mama Mina, Nohemi, Juanita, Enoe, and Junieth, the wonderful women who are my Nica family. And, finally, boundless thanks to my family and friends, who give me so many reasons to be happy.
INTRODUCTION

On July 19, 1979, the men and women who made up the armies of the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) marched triumphantly into Managua, Nicaragua to claim popular victory by overturning the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza Debayle, the latest in a decades-long series of Somoza family dictators. Within the ensuing struggle to implement the Sandinista revolutionary project, gender played an especially important, historical role because it produced and affected the relational dimensions of this social movement. The relational dimension denotes the social and personal relationships that define membership in revolutionary society, along with political relations. Personal, gendered relationships shaped the character and extent of popular mobilization, and consequently, the transformational power of the revolution itself. The boundaries governing gender relations in Nicaragua formed part of the system of oppression that existed under Somoza's dictatorship. The emancipatory euphoria of the revolution was accompanied by a social tension that emerged as people questioned these limits of gendered identity, which had by no means been immediately dismantled by Somoza's fall from power.

The FSLN's military triumph signaled a unique historic moment for the country, in which citizens participated in imagining the emancipatory future of social reorganization and socialist democracy. The revolutionary project's programs, including a far-reaching literacy campaign, agrarian reform, collective industry, and the implementation of large mass organizations, sought to further the growth of citizens' power and participation. Though the extent of popular participation in the revolutionary overthrow was historically unprecedented in Nicaragua, the FSLN had built upon many historical traditions of popular mobilization in constructing its official revolutionary nationalist ideology. Claiming the right to
governmental control by merit of its role as both the forward-thinking vanguard party and the champion of the people, the FSLN drew upon Nicaragua's history of anti-imperialist struggle, mestizo nationalist traditions, and celebration of the humble obrero (working) classes.

Examination of the FSLN's ideology and the rhetoric employed by its leaders in speeches and publications illuminates how FSLN leaders and ordinary Nicaraguans wrestled with defining their relational identity as part of a new Nicaragua. Throughout these forms of revolutionary expression, implicit and explicit gendered language became a means of signifying and allocating power, change, and authority.

Approaching this rich and complicated moment as a historian, the work of noted feminist historian and theorist Joan Wallach Scott is instructive: her theory suggests that the great potential for historically-grounded understanding of gender's relational dimension is to elucidate "the powerful role that symbols, metaphors, and concepts play in the definition of human personality and human history."\(^1\) Gender, as Scott defines it, is important in forming socio-cultural relationships at both a micro and macro level, and as a system of meaning formation in relationships of power.\(^2\) In this study of a historical moment in which power relations in both the public and private spheres were shifting and negotiating tensions between tradition, convention, and new conceptions of citizenship and nationhood, currents of gender ideology illuminate points of tension within the revolutionary project.

One important site of this tension was the revolution's treatment of machismo. In revolutionary Nicaragua, machismo structured the dominant social system regulating gender expression and relations. As Roger Lancaster defines it, machismo is:

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2 Ibid., 141.
...not simply a form of ‘consciousness,’ not ‘ideology’ in the classical understanding of the concept, but a field of productive relations...machismo’s ‘finished product’ is not only an array of gendered bodies but a world built around its definition of gender and its allotment of power.  

Despite the Sandinista revolution's goals of restructuring society, machismo remained a pervasive and powerful force in defining Nicaraguan gender relations. The FSLN's rhetorical commitment to overcoming machismo and its policies implemented to alleviate the practical burdens unique to women were not enough, given the fact that machismo permeated even FSLN leaders' perceptions of women. Though the FSLN promoted an explicitly progressive gender agenda, machismo was still produced and reproduced throughout the revolutionary years, particularly in instances in which the revolution faced ideological and physical attacks.

The Sandinista revolution purported to construct a new Nicaragua, in which the realization of full citizenship and widespread prosperity would be feasible. Articulating this new vision of the Nicaraguan nation, the FSLN made many promises to the Nicaraguan people: not only gender equality, but also increased respect for human rights, freer political expression, and a higher overall standard of living. The Sandinistas' vision of a new Nicaragua delineated gender relations in both explicit and implicit ways that were sometimes contradictory, because notions of femininity and masculinity helped constitute nationhood itself. The very idea of a new Nicaragua, and the re-birth of its citizens as new men and women, included new ideas of femininity and masculinity. However, the translation of these ideas into practical changes in gender relationships was contested in both public and private spheres. In many instances, the new ideals of femininity and masculinity coexisted with more conventional, entrenched norms. Did the spread of Sandinista ideology affect gender

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relations in Nicaragua in emancipatory and liberating ways? This question animates this historical study of gender and identity in revolutionary Nicaragua.

Within the context of the political and social upheaval of the Nicaraguan revolution, gender analysis can critique the suppression of ambiguities and contradictory elements in the process of national identity formation. This analysis of the systems of meaning and power within Sandinista rhetoric and ideology will reveal the ways in which gender was a source and a cause of persistent tensions and negotiations, and thus provides an ideal frame of reference for insight into historical change. This study of gendered political rhetoric and ideology over the course of the Nicaraguan revolution sheds light on the potential for participatory democracy in Nicaragua, while realistically examining the cracks in notions of nationalism that purport to provide representation and access for all citizens.

The Sandinista revolution has been subject to prolific scholarly writing and considerable public attention. Scholars, including feminist scholars, have written extensively about women’s participation in the revolutionary project and have documented women’s subjective narratives of life in revolutionary Nicaragua. These authors, including Katherine Isbester, Margaret Randall, Karen Kampwirth, and others, concur that the mobilization of women during the revolution disappointed many Nicaraguans and that Sandinismo fell short in its promise to offer women not just participation, but also decision-making power and positions in leadership. Though participation, in and of itself, represented a new form of political expression for many women (and, indeed, for many poor male citizens who were previously disenfranchised), the historical literature demonstrates little evidence to explicitly

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4Wallach Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” 139.
link participation to either broad social transformation, or to a transformational history that fully encompasses gender tension.

It is widely recognized that the Nicaraguan women’s movement began in 1977 with the creation of AMPRONAC, a movement generated within the FSLN which organized women in the struggle against the Somoza dictatorship. AMPRONAC and its successor, AMNLAE, along with women’s labor and professional organizations and mothers' groups, formed the core of institutionalized women’s organizing throughout the revolutionary years of 1979 to 1990. Such organizations were essential advocates for often-overlooked women’s issues and concerns, like reproductive rights and family planning. However, while these groups in their varied institutional forms provided important space for women’s participation and activism in various productive and constructive ways, they are not the focus of this thesis. Rather, by examining the dynamics of official, public expressions of gender and power as well as individual gendered experience of the revolution, we hope to expand the bounds of inquiry to consider the sweeping and personal ramifications of Sandinista ideology for gendered and national identity.

Feminine and masculine identities were important not only as articulations of political self-consciousness and belonging within political institutions, but were also important as weighty symbolic manifestations of revolutionary culture. Both men’s and women’s experiences of revolution were gendered; Cynthia Enloe is wise to caution historians against “explanations that are naïve in their descriptions of power and camouflage men in the garb of

5 Asociación de Mujeres Contra el Problema Nacional (Association of Women Confronting the National Problem).
6 AMNLAE: Asociación de Mujeres Nicaraguenses Luisa Amanda Espinoza; other groups included the Asociación de Trabajadores Campesinos (ATC), and the Confederación Nicaragüense de Profesionales- Héroes y Mártires (CONAPRO H-M), and local mothers’ organizations located across the country. For analysis of these institutions, see Isbester and Bayard de Volo.
ungendered actors.”7 Therefore, rather than using ‘gender history’ as a synonym for ‘women’s history,’ this thesis understands gender history as a study of the conflicted forms of exclusion and inclusion that arose from the FSLN’s attempts to fuse diverse realities into one, purportedly universal, national ideology. This argument focuses on constructions of gendered identity and their relation to nationalism, considering personal stories, public rhetoric, and institutional players all within a larger framework of change (and consistency) in social relations.

The first section of this paper shows that the FSLN's variant of Sandinismo built on popular, anti-imperialist traditions, stemming from Augusto Cesar Sandino's effort to drive out the U.S. Marines from 1927 to 1934, was fundamentally infused with a militant consciousness and a familial rhetoric of nationalist belonging. The second section jumps forward to the 1970s, and examines the constructions of revolutionary masculinity and femininity that became reified, mythic identities reflecting distinct aspects of revolutionary mobilization, but which still left sectors of the Nicaraguan populace unrepresented and excluded. The third section delves into personal accounts of the revolution to show the intimate character of revolution and the entanglements of personal experience and politics that made it difficult for the FSLN to rely upon generalized understanding of men's and women's experiences. The fourth section examines the FSLN's ideological reaction to a debilitating counterrevolutionary effort that dimmed some of the excitement felt in the immediate aftermath of the revolutionary triumph, exposing a shift in FSLN rhetoric toward more conservative gender expressions. This paper argues that throughout the entire

revolutionary period, from 1979 to 1990, the expression of gender identities and ideology is a
locus reflecting broader tensions and problems with the FSLN's consolidation of authority.

The triumphant parade into Managua in 1979 was followed, more than a decade later,
by the electoral defeat of the FSLN in 1990, and a subsequent shift to more conservative
governments. Over the course of those turbulent eleven years, the FSLN contended with
various forms of upheaval that threatened its stability: most importantly, U.S. intervention
that funded the Contra war and undermined the Nicaraguan economy through blockades,
harbor mining, and other tactics. The space that the revolution allowed for re-thinking gender
roles demonstrates how Nicaraguan identity manifested itself during this period of
contradictions and change: that militarization and anti-imperialist struggle entailed valuing
masculine and even machista gender expression, and that women's participation became more
an instrumental tool of reinforcing revolutionary legitimacy than an independent
revolutionary goal. Gender was highly politicized, both on an individual, personal level, and
on a larger, strategic, geopolitical scale. Tracing the path of gender, egalitarianism and social
relations from the revolution to the early 1990s highlights the confusing nature of women's
marginalization in Nicaraguan society. In some senses, this marginalization was alleviated
by the revolution, but it persisted in many ways despite the incorporation of women into the
revolutionary project.
“OTHERS WILL FOLLOW US”: FOUNDATIONS OF SANDINISMO

This study of Sandinista revolutionary rhetoric and ideology using gendered analysis begins with an inquiry into the fundamental historical trajectories which shaped the rise of Sandinismo in the time of Sandino himself. The FSLN's revolutionary Sandinismo constituted a unique brand of Latin American, Marxist, nationalist thought that stemmed from the ideology developed fifty years earlier by General Augusto César Sandino during his insurrection against the United States Marines, who occupied Nicaragua from 1912 to 1933. In essence, Sandinismo is explained as an expression of Nicaragua’s right to national sovereignty as well as a socialist ideology of class-based justice. The early articulations of Sandino's rebel ideology already show manifestations of the double-edged potential for Sandinismo, in theory an emancipatory ideology, to be exclusionary and constraining.

General Sandino’s story is one of the most cherished and most frequently-recalled episodes in Nicaraguan history, to this day acting as a source of common Nicaraguan history, pride and identity. Sandino himself was a man of humble origins, a prolific writer who believed deeply in human rights and whose socialist ideas were heavily influenced by his experience working in the politically charged Mexican oil fields in 1925 and 1926. Beginning in 1927, Sandino organized a guerrilla army, the Army in Defense of Nicaraguan Sovereignty, to oppose the militarily superior forces of the occupying U.S. Marines. Despite the inadequate resources of Sandino's army, the Marines were unable to overpower

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8 From a widely known quotation attributed to General Augusto Sandino: “Nosotros iremos hacia el sol de la libertad o hacia la muerte; y si morimos, nuestra causa seguirá viviendo, otros nos seguirán.” (We will continue toward the sun of freedom or toward death; and if we die, our cause will continue living, others will follow us.)

9 Throughout this essay, the word “Sandinista” will be used to describe the thought and actions of the FSLN party and its leadership: the set of ideas that characterized the revolutionary role of the FSLN. Similarly, “the Sandinistas” refers to party leadership or members, depending upon context.

10 Ejército Defensor de la Soberanía de Nicaragua.
the Nicaraguan militias' resistance. Sandino lived to see the yanqui imperialists leave his country, but he was assassinated at the hands of Anastasio Somoza Garcia, who had risen through the ranks of the Guardia Nacional, the police force established by the United States Marines during their occupation. Somoza assumed power shortly after, and commenced a dynastic series of dictatorships characterized by the human rights abuses and widespread poverty that eventually catalyzed revolutionary unrest. Sandino's death is an event still regarded by many Nicaraguans as a national tragedy.

Jeffrey Gould and Richard Grossman explore the birth of the gendered, racialized nationalism that Sandino used to unite his peasant forces and provide several important observations for further study of revolutionary Sandinismo. Gould argues that Sandino was able to crystallize a cohesive identity by playing up the revolutionary raza indohispana, a people born of female pre-Columbian mothers and colonizing Spanish seed.\textsuperscript{11} The idea of a common family background created a homogenized racial identity that mitigated the self-destructive effects of internal hierarchies in favor of greater egalitarianism.\textsuperscript{12} However, such homogenization also alienated those who fell outside the bounds of Sandino's racialized definition of Nicaragua and who was Nicaraguan (such as Afro-Nicaraguans and pure indigenous populations). Valuing the strength of his movement above all, Sandino created a language of unification that also had the potential to exclude.

Basing his conception of national sovereignty on this idea of a blended, familial racial unity,\textsuperscript{13} Sandino also reinforced gender mores. Thus, the second implication of the explicit emphasis on familial relations which constructed nationhood were the ideas of brotherhood

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 155.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 138.
and motherhood that this nationalism created. As Grossman writes, "Sandinista nationalist discourse was both patriarchal and familial, and belonging to the nation was no different from being part of an extended family...the notion of an extended family also invokes authority based on a hierarchy that is deemed 'natural.'"\[^{14}\] Especially in the context of an anti-imperialist struggle, the natural connection and authority structure of familial rhetoric "is very effective when deployed against an 'outsider' (non-kin, a 'foreigner'), especially when this is done in defence of the mother (= 'the nation')."\[^{15}\] Sandino's soldiers were thus both socialized and mobilized as brothers fighting in defense of the suffering, assailed mother. Furthermore, Sandino mobilized his soldiers around the idea of defending a "virile, democratic, and mestizo Nicaragua."\[^{16}\] In many ways, this construction of the strong, macho, and militant Nicaraguan fighter makes strategic sense; Sandino contended with the U.S., a superior military power with a history of disregarding Nicaraguan sovereignty. The very experience of being subjected to U.S. imperialism was emasculating to Nicaragua as a nation, and Sandino's rhetoric reflects his resistance to that emasculation.

Sandino's relationship with the women who contributed to his movement is complex and reveals some of the dynamics that persist in more modern Sandinismo; Sandino praised women for their role as collaborators in his military effort, noting "the sacrifices that [women] suffered and the dangers that they confronted for love of the fatherland and all, peasant women, schoolteachers, nurses, housewives, and even upper-class society women,


\[^{15}\] Ibid.

\[^{16}\] Gould, *To Die In This Way*, 147.
rendered services without which our war would not have been possible.” However, the conception of femininity and women's participation that dominates his discourse is of women as the reproductive engines of Nicaragua, having birthed the robust mixed race militiamen of his armies and supplied the fighters with food and other necessities.

Stories about Sandino, references to his history, and even Sandino's own voice spilled over directly into the rhetoric, propaganda, and mobilizing language of the revolutionary Sandinistas half a century later. The FSLN’s groundbreaking 1969 publication that laid out the revolutionary project, the Historic Program, was also known as the Programmatic Inheritance of Sandino. The document opens with a quotation from Sandino stating: “The link of nationality gives me the right to assume responsibility for my acts... without letting the pessimists and cowards have any importance to me, as they give me whatever title that they please in their capacity as eunuchs.” Thus, Sandino claimed his place, his power and his right to act as a patriotic national of Nicaragua in defense of his country, and simultaneously painted his detractors as emasculated eunuchs not fit to pass judgment on his actions. The use of the Sandino quotation in the introduction to the Historic Program demonstrates the lasting potency of Sandino's arguments and mobilizing strategies, and also underscores the continuing threat of U.S. intervention, against which only a hard masculinity could provide some defense.

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17 “...los sacrificios que sufrieron y los peligros que enfrentaron por amor a la patria y todas, campesinas, maestras de escuela, enfermeras, amas de casa y aún señoritas de sociedad, rindieron servicios sin los cuales nuestra guerra no habría sido posible.” Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional, General Augusto César Sandino: Padre de la Revolución Popular Antiimperialista (Managua: Secretaría Nacional de Propaganda y Educación Política, 1984).

18 Programa Histórico del FSLN, o La Herencia Programática de Sandino.

19 “El vínculo de nacionalidad me da derecho a asumir la responsabilidad de mis actos... sin importarme que los pesimistas y cobardes me den el título que en su calidad de eunucos más les acomode.” Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional, Programa Histórico del FSLN, (Managua: Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional, 1969), 2.
Gould argues convincingly that the Sandinistas’ promotion of similar homogenous, unified identities, and their “attempt to mute class and gender contradictions that threatened their own vanguard role and their strategic multiclass coalition” ultimately proved detrimental to their ability to meet the people’s demands for political freedom.\textsuperscript{20} Following similar strategies as Sandino in order to consolidate power and unify people of different classes, the FSLN suppressed experiences and voices that diverged from the revolutionary project—which, especially in its beginning stages, was characterized by strength and militancy as the FSLN mobilized soldiers to fight in the popular army. To this day, Sandino is a powerful example of Nicaraguan valor and virtue, imagined and celebrated as a deeply democratic and egalitarian, but nonetheless machista figure.

The FSLN’s more modern variant of Sandinismo draws upon Sandino’s deep commitment to national sovereignty and anti-imperialist struggle, and also on Sandino’s moral conviction that human rights are sacred.\textsuperscript{21} The previously mentioned \textit{Historic Program} clearly expresses the FSLN’s promises of freedom and is exemplary of FSLN ideology. The \textit{Program} is often cited as an example of the FSLN’s commitment to gender equality from its inception, as its seventh clause is entitled “Emancipación de la Mujer.”\textsuperscript{22} In this section, the Program extends its emancipatory promise to the country’s women, “to forge, with popular power, a Nicaragua without exploitation, without oppression, without backwardness, a free fatherland, progressive and independent.”\textsuperscript{23}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 273.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Donald C. Hodges, \textit{Intellectual Foundations of the Nicaraguan Revolution} (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 256.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 8.
\item \textsuperscript{23} “El poder popular forjará una Nicaragua sin explotación, sin opresión, sin atraso, una patria libre, progresista e independiente.” Ibid., 3.
\end{itemize}
Published clandestinely in 1969, this document represented the collaboration of several young university students who formed a fledgling vanguard known as the Frente Estudiantil Revolucionario. As an ideological movement, early revolutionary Sandinismo was almost entirely articulated by male university students, most notably Carlos Fonseca, who is credited with theorizing many of the Program’s tenets. The Program was widely circulated, both before and after 1979, and was read not only by intellectuals but by many members of the popular revolutionary struggle. The Program is indeed an inheritance of Sandino’s project in that it denounces Nicaragua’s neo-imperialist subjugation, and calls for an affirmation of the rights of Nicaraguan citizens to land, education, work, personal freedoms of religion and expression, and just government.

Rather than existing as a central part of the overarching revolutionary ideology, the clause on women is only one of a litany of numerous other clauses concerning facets of the revolutionary government, everything from labor and social security to remembrance of martyrs killed in the revolutionary struggle. The clause on the emancipation of women proposes that the revolution “will abolish the odious discrimination that women have suffered with respect to men; it will establish economic, political, and cultural equality between woman and man.” To accomplish this goal, the FSLN proposes increased attention to mothers and their children. Concrete plans for increased social services include the provision of childcare centers, rights for children born out of wedlock, and standardization of maternity leave for working mothers. Such restructuring served the FSLN’s overarching goals of consolidating support by addressing the pressing, pragmatic concerns of women. To some

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24 Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional, Programa Histórico del FSLN, 1.
25 “…abolirá la odiosa discriminación que la mujer ha padecido con respeto al hombre; establecerá la igualdad económica, política y cultural entre la mujer y el hombre.” Ibid., 8.
extent, the restructuring also supported new social values, like education and workers’ rights, that the FSLN wished to propagate publicly. From the beginning, the FSLN envisioned a society that supported women more fully in their capacity as mothers. However, the politically risky issue of reproductive rights and family planning, a problem that deeply impacted women as family members, was conspicuously absent. Furthermore, the clause was silent about women occupying space outside the heterosexual, childbearing feminine paradigm.

While the Program clearly condemned the systemic imperialism, dictatorship, and poverty that oppressed Nicaraguans, one thing that the Program failed to accomplish was to clearly identify the pervasive and powerful machismo entrenched within Nicaraguan society. Nor does it discuss the idea of changing the relational dimension of gender inequality. For example, the Program implicitly reinforces women’s place in the home, as the primary providers of childcare within the family and never mentions restructuring men’s responsibilities, to include a greater share of housework and other ‘women’s’ tasks. The Program encourages women’s maternity, and, though it does identify social services that would alleviate the stresses of maternal provision, it fails to consider rearranging social relations by bolstering the idea of paternal responsibility.

The Program, furthermore, locates women’s emancipation as a single distinct goal of the revolutionary reforms, rather than acknowledging that gender relations are suffused within the public and private spheres and within economics, religion, culture, labor, and many of the other supposedly distinct clauses of action. Naming women’s reality—subservience within a system of machismo—was important because raising public

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consciousness was so integral in affecting reality during this time of popular political awakening. But the FSLN did not name machismo as such in its Program. Machismo was clearly a strong historical current that shaped the society that the FSLN sought to reform, and the omission of its influence demonstrates an underdeveloped consciousness and an inadequate understanding and recognition of the social forces constraining gender roles. As a system, machismo reproduced unequal relations of power just as imperialism and class hierarchy did.

The FSLN’s revolutionary Sandinismo risked falling into the trap of reproducing gender inequality without the recognition of this omnipresent relational oppression. In the same way that Sandino’s dismissal of his militarily superior opponents as emasculated eunuchs implicitly reinforced the notion of masculine dominance and power, the FSLN’s early years were also fraught with the threat of an enemy with far superior military power and political leverage. As a result, the FSLN simultaneously created and was thrust into an ideological environment in which militarized, masculine identities and forms of rhetoric held dangerous appeal. On one hand, the fledgling FSLN vanguard sought to build the strongest possible militant movement; on the other hand, they sought (and promised) to topple all systems of oppression plaguing the Nicaraguan people. Reliance upon militant language and mobilization strategies in pursuit of this goal provided fodder for machismo.

Gender takes on a strangely invisible yet deeply entrenched character during the revolutionary years. At its general foundational level, the Sandinista revolution certainly promised greater gender equality as well as more equitable social and economic relations for all citizens. However, as this section outlined, true consciousness of gender as a relational

\[27\text{Ibid., 74.}\]
concept did not play a large role in the construction of revolutionary Sandinismo. As a result, this consciousness did not increase much during and after the revolution. In the context of the historical reality of Somoza's repression, it was easier and more compelling to rely on masculine, machista militarization tactics than to organize an unstable, struggling new movement around the contested and controversial ideal of social change that more radical gender-equality activists would advocate.
MOBILIZING MYTHS: PROMISES AND LIMITATIONS OF FSLN IDEOLOGY

The FSLN's success in toppling the Somoza dynasty was neither a simple nor a quickly achieved feat. The Sandinista revolutionary movement required a well-executed ideological campaign that could persuade the populace of the imperative nature of the struggle, and also of its feasibility. In addition to the brutality of the Somoza regime and the low standard of living for the vast majority of Nicaraguans during Somoza's rule, another important reason for the FSLN's success was its compelling ideological outreach, which presented a hopeful vision of a new, emancipated Nicaraguan society, while also outlining ordinary peoples' place in the revolutionary effort itself. This section analyzes how the foundational tenets of Sandinismo were rendered into patterns and then into mythic characterizations, shaped by the historical needs of the time, which animated popular propaganda and mobilizing strategies. The word "myth" is used to describe these characterizations and embodiments, because it expresses the uniquely imaginative and constructed quality of these characterizations. Although based on objective individual experiences, these myths took on symbolic life of their own within public discourse and social imagination. By articulating the role that Nicaraguans could play in achieving the revolutionary vision, the FSLN also created these mythic gendered roles.

The dominant embodiments of femininity and masculinity illustrated the complex roles that gendered ideals played in the burgeoning discourse concerning the construction of national identity and mobilization to accomplish revolutionary projects. Women and women's place in the project of Sandinista nationhood are imagined and depicted in several mythic ways: as generative, nation-building forces whose reproductive capacity literally gives life to the nation as their nurturing role sustains society; as fierce, less feminine, independent
guerrilleras, who assumed conventionally masculine roles and spaces, essentially occupying the “New Man” ideal; and as self-sacrificing madres sufridas (suffering mothers) in the spirit of the Virgin Mary. Each of these images was grounded in practical realities of women’s experiences of the revolution, yet also took on symbolic significance as a representational form of femininity and women’s role in the new Nicaragua. Thus, this section tackles the complex webs of meaning associated with these practical and symbolic identities, teasing out the complex significance of each construction. Each myth of idealized manhood and womanhood carried with it emancipatory elements as well as social and ideological baggage that limited the scope of its liberating promise.

Gendered rhetorical tactics and propaganda discourses promoted mobilization and consolidation of the revolution, and thus provide rich analytical material in several ways. First, these forms of communication (propaganda, speeches, campaigns, etc.) express the FSLN leadership’s best possible ideas of how they might communicate their ideals and the necessity of revolutionary change. Furthermore, they reveal the strategies that the FSLN found most effective to attract enough of a popular base to make their movement viable. Lastly, the ideologies and ideas about gender expressed in publicly disseminated FSLN materials held social weight, for “changes in gender relationships can be set off by views of the needs of state.”

In this historical moment, the communications issued by the FSLN were highly influential in shaping public ideas about their role in achieving these needs of national importance. Therefore, this section will analyze the myths, promises, and limitations of mobilization ideology, and the gendered ideas of citizenship and participation that they...

28 Wallach Scott, “Gender:”, 144.
propagated, in both symbolic and practical terms. The ideologies that mobilized Nicaraguans in support of the revolution in some cases did entail a degree of re-conceptualization of gender roles, but often they existed first and primarily as a functional response to the political needs of the moment, and only secondarily in service of an independent gender equality agenda.

This section analyzes the speeches, propaganda pamphlets, songs, and other publications that disseminated FSLN rhetoric to popular audiences, examining evidence from the years leading up to the fall of Somoza in 1979, through the first free elections held in 1984. This span of years represents the time in which the FSLN strove to consolidate participation, mobilizing the Nicaraguan population first as armed guerrilla fighters and military support networks; after 1979, the goal of mobilization shifted toward the non-military projects of the revolution, notably including the agrarian reform and the literacy brigades. The elections in 1984 provide a useful date with which to bracket this section: though the Sandinistas won power again, these elections were the first instance of slippage in women's support for the revolutionary government, as it became clear that proportionally fewer women than men voted for the FSLN. Despite the ways that the FSLN had incorporated women and attempted to address gender equality, women's support had begun to flag. Participation had been a revolution, but revolution is a constantly evolving frame of reference, and there came a point when simply participating reached its limit in being able to satisfy women who believed in revolutionary promises. In the following exemplary cases of public articulations of gender, the complications of class, family roles, tradition, and

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29 Isbester, *Still Fighting*, 60.
education come into play and demonstrate the contradictions and pitfalls that the Sandinistas encountered in the attempt to use gendered identities as revolutionary tools.

Progress, Public Women, and the Revolutionary Project

Many women were severely limited in their ability to participate in the public sphere before the revolution. This meant that the space opened for women's participation in the revolution was itself a radical redefinition of roles. While it is important to consider women's position within revolutionary discourse on a symbolic and representational plane, the history of women's practical and material position during the Somoza regime also had a great deal of bearing on experiences of participation in the revolution. Before the revolution, women had largely been relegated to the private sphere, and often did not even appear frequently outside the home. It is easy to see why the Sandinista revolution was seen as synonymous with the opportunity to fight for women, for it certainly provided more space, practically and ideologically, for gender equality than any other political movement or situation had done previously. Participation was in and of itself a revolution. Therefore, the identities of public womanhood were especially powerful and also especially contested.

Within revolutionary rhetoric, social reforms such as the literacy campaign, the agrarian reform, and the cooperative movement all constituted individual elements that made up what was envisioned as a seismic wave of cultural change. The "Hymn of the National Crusade for Literacy," for example, proclaims "Advance, Brigadistas, warriors of literacy / Your machete is the primer, to cut out and destroy ignorance and error / We build barricades
of notebooks and chalkboards / We go forward toward the cultural insurrection.\(^{30}\) The hymn's language draws upon military metaphors, signaling the transition from mobilization toward the military effort to mobilization for social change; the language of popular participation is transcendent but the focus of the people's energy had shifted. Of women who were involved in AMNLAE, two thirds participated as brigadistas in the literacy and health campaigns.\(^{31}\) Thus, women took part in disseminating the entire revolutionary project's narrative of progress toward civilization and modernization, while simultaneously stepping into new, public roles. The progress narratives imbued within these campaigns were inherently loaded with values and implicit criticisms of "traditional" lifestyles; in employing such narratives, the FSLN walked a tenuous line between the liberal ideals of its radical vanguard, and appealing to its common base, many of whom lived firmly rooted in the systems of peasant life. The revolution had unified heterogeneous groups of people in opposition to Somoza, but Nicaragua was still a nation rife with internal difference; in particular, rural life was vastly different from urban life, and efforts like the literacy campaign, with many women at the front lines, sharpened and publicized those distinctions.

Because gender, as a system of signifying power, is intimate and embedded in relationships in the private sphere as well as the public sphere, the FSLN and its foot soldiers for gender equality encountered difficulty in effecting change both in ideology and in practice. It was much easier, and less likely to provoke controversy and dissension, to condemn backwardness and promote progressive values concerning education and literacy

\(^{30}\) "Avancemos Brigadistas, guerrilleros de la alfabetización / Tu machete es la cartilla para aniquilar de un tajo la ignorancia y el error / Levantamos barricadas de cuadernos y pizarras /Vamos hacia la insurección cultural."


\(^{31}\) Isbester, *Still Fighting*, 50.
than to take on gender relations and roles within the home. Gender is often in dialogue with social class; for Nicaraguans, both factors determined one's status before the revolution, and part of the revolution's promise was to scale down the importance of gender and class in favor of a more egalitarian social structure. Because of the entanglements of dealing publicly with issues of gender, the FSLN sometimes allowed the fight for gender equality and penetrating critique of gender relations to be subsumed by more intellectually familiar struggles for class equality.

What is a Sandinista? The New Man

One of the most widely recognized gendered ideals was the Sandinista “New Man,” conceived of by Carlos Fonseca. For men, the Sandinista “New Man” provided a moral ideal of the appropriate expression of masculinity in a revolutionary citizen. First published in 1975, the FSLN pamphlet “What is a Sandinista?” expressed an idealized vision of the Sandinista person, a depiction rendered in wholly masculine terms, with no mention of women. A reprint of the pamphlet published in 1980 demonstrates, from the very front cover, the prevalence of masculinity as the manifestation of ideal Sandinismo. A collage of photographs on the pamphlet's front cover picture several men, one wearing a military uniform, one a construction hard hat, and one a farmer's garb; all are hard at work constructing the new nation, and each represents a form of revolutionary masculinity.

This pamphlet was first published during a time in which the FSLN was engaged in clandestine guerrilla warfare, constantly seeking out trustworthy new recruits to build and strengthen the popular militia; therefore, the constant identification of Sandinistas as *militantes* makes sense within the context of the mobilizing goals. Recirculation of the
pamphlet later, in the early years after Somoza’s defeat, represented an attempt to educate the populace about vanguard ideas that drove the revolutionary project.

“The Sandinista is the most noble, most generous, most sacrificing, most enterprising human being; most able to do work that is difficult or impossible to accomplish, for no reason other than that he is a revolutionary.”32 A Sandinista, according to the pamphlet, is characterized by his modesty, ability to make constructive criticisms, his passion and collective consciousness, his willingness to put aside personal ambitions in service of the revolution and his compatriots, his serenity, and his ability to refrain from indulgence. While none of these traits are explicitly gendered, it is notable that the Sandinista man is never mentioned in relation to his family, nor are women mentioned at all; rather, his relational status is with the state, with the projects of the revolution, and with his fellow Sandinistas. The relational language is fraternal: “The revolutionary never forgets the title that Sandinista combatants hold: BROTHER.”33 The Sandinista man may have been virtuous and responsible, yet his responsibilities remain completely divorced from the private sphere and his role in the family. In some ways, the pamphlet’s encouragement of allowing one’s personal goals and ambitions to be subsumed by the public good inherently erases the home from the FSLN’s ideological sphere of influence. In this sense, the Sandinista vanguard failed to think broadly enough when conceiving of the new ideal; by reinforcing men’s space within the public, political realm, men’s absence in the home, and women’s invisibility, the pamphlet does not imagine change in one of the fundamental systems of oppression in Nicaragua.

33 “El revolucionario nunca olvida el título que ostentan los combatientes Sandinistas: HERMANO.” Ibid., 9.
The Proletarian Woman: Luisa Amanda Espinoza

During the first few years after the FSLN took power in 1979, the party's propaganda department published multiple pamphlets relating the life of Luisa Amanda Espinoza, the colaboradora who was the first woman to die for the Sandinista cause and who became AMNLAE's namesake. This public remembrance of Espinoza was a poignant case of one woman's life and contributions to the revolution falling into deeply politicized territory. Espinoza played a relatively minor, supportive role in the early revolutionary movement, but her participation was exalted and her person was elevated to the status of hero nonetheless. Espinoza lived as the legal owner in a safe house in Managua, running a sewing business to provide an income for the house's inhabitants and make uniforms for the growing ranks of Sandinista guerrillas. Thus, her own role fell into the realm of conventional women's activities: keeping house and sewing. The rhetoric that celebrated her as a Sandinista hero emphasized that she "showed a great deal of interest in the study circles"\(^{34}\) and demonstrated a desire to better herself through education. Luisa Amanda Espinoza represents for us the militancy and strength of the proletarian woman, who breaks with the traditional role assigned to her by society and becomes incorporated into the struggle...her example marks a landmark in the history of the Nicaraguan woman's integration into the struggle, because she provoked reflection on women's capacity to participate in the revolutionary process and propelled the gradual integration of many women into the war for liberation.\(^{35}\)


\(^{35}\) "...representa para nosotras la beligerancia y firmeza de la mujer proletaria, que rompe con el papel tradicional que le asigna la sociedad y se incorpora a la lucha... su ejemplo marca un hito en la historia de la integración de la mujer nicaragüense a la lucha, porque hizo reflexionar acerca de la capacidad de la mujer para participar en el proceso revolucionario e impulsó la integración paulatina de muchas mujeres a la guerra de liberación." Asociación de Mujeres Nicaragüenses Luisa Amanda Espinoza, Luisa Amanda Espinoza: Biografía, (Managua: Secretaría Nacional de Propaganda y Educación Política del FSLN, 1980), 1.
Many other notable women, including Doris Tijerino and Monica Baltodano, took on notable positions of authority as administrators, strategic leaders, and military commandantes. While the selection of Espinoza reflects a commemoration of women who experienced great oppression, suffering, and sacrifice, the selection also publicized a woman whose victimization, rather than her agency, constituted her most defining characteristic.

The decision to use Espinoza as a representative for AMNLAE was also a politicized decision; AMNLAE took her name as example, "in order to express the identification of women with Sandinismo and our commitment to the working class." In general, the characteristic that FSLN pamphlets celebrated most about Espinoza was her humble roots—a condition imposed upon her, rather than an inherent facet of her person. Along with the dearth of positive personal attributes, the pamphlets' descriptions afforded Espinoza little agency beyond the jurisdiction over the domestic space of the safe house. Yet it is important to realize the values that were associated with the condition that the FSLN called "humility," and with living "always in touch with the exploited class." Part of FSLN ideology was the valorization of the campesino and working class experience. Espinoza's particular campesina identity was expressed in the following terms in one pamphlet: "Luisa Amanda was a simple girl. She had a certain shame and a certain modesty of the peasant woman—very reserved with that which was unknown, and at the same time very respectful." Not only did Espinoza's life story reflect the hardships that many Nicaraguan women faced, therefore bringing a movement that had sometimes been written off as a product of elite,
internationalist Marxist imagination to a broader populace, but within Sandinismo the humble lifestyle itself was painted as desirable, an ideal environment for shaping responsible and active revolutionary citizens.

“Both a mother and...”

A rousing speech delivered by Comandante Tomás Borge on September 29, 1982 provides another striking example of the Sandinistas employing gendered rhetorical language as a mobilization tactic. Borge’s speech stresses the importance of women’s support for the FSLN and the party’s commitment to women’s liberation, but it also reveals constructions of femininity that reflect more traditional positions for women. His speech, addressing a crowd of several thousand in León, marked the first occasion that party leadership publicly discussed women’s issues with respect to the progress of the revolutionary project. Borge begins with an expression of ideological confidence in Sandinista Marxism as a force for emancipatory social restructuring, positing that “the liberation of women can emerge only with the total resolution of the class contradictions” and economic dependence that constituted Nicaragua’s social reality. Following this assertion, Borge assures the crowd that “relations between the sexes are transformed...in the process of transforming the means of production.” With this statement, Borge implicitly acknowledges an inequality and wrongness within gender relations, and also reveals his perspective that this inequality is founded, in some manner, on the physical distinctions of sex. He also indicates his belief that “transforming the means of production,” and working for “resolution of the class

contradictions" is the path toward gender equality. Many Sandinista government officials shared this belief, and faced criticism from more radical women's groups which maintained that there existed a need for more sweeping critique and reevaluation of the inequalities inherent within gender relations.

Within his speech, Borge clearly acknowledges and celebrates the role of women as generative, reproductive beings, and specifically as mothers; this feminine maternal identity is linked multiple times to the revolutionary cause. Borge's natalist view of women overwhelms any other potential roles, both practical and symbolic, that women might assume. In his introduction, Borge pays special heed to elderly mothers who have already lost children to the revolutionary fighting: "At the head of our revolution, I think it would be correct to say, are the mothers of our martyrs, these dear old women we have here in front of our eyes." Borge universalizes the experience of motherhood, equating it with womanhood, later in his speech:

How can we not guarantee their participation in social life, in work, and in the political leadership of the country? How can we not guarantee that a woman can be both a mother and a worker, both a mother and a student, both a mother and an artist, both a mother and a political leader, both fulfill all the tasks the revolution demands of her and at the same time fulfill the beautiful work of a self-sacrificing, capable, and loving mother?  

No trace of the independent, childless guerrillera identity is left here; the one thing that Borge does not guarantee to women is that she might live and fulfill her duties without bearing children. Valuing parenthood itself and celebrating mothers is not damaging or restrictive in and of itself; it is Borge's universal association of woman with motherhood that makes his

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42 Ibid., 11.
43 Ibid., 19.
speech problematic and builds limitations around women’s social roles. Later, he elaborates on the connection between fertility, providing children for the revolutionary cause, and women’s direct contributions to the revolution: “women have blazed a path of fire and tenderness that has given life and color to this revolution. Nicaraguan women have not only given the country the fruit of their bellies but also their enthusiasm and courage—selflessly, without limitations.” Here, Borge commends women’s role as reproductive providers, and the rhetoric of the sacrificing mother is particularly strong.

Borge’s speech, suffused with Sandinista rhetoric, aptly demonstrates the reasons why Sandinista doctrine gave women great hope for their emancipation, but also eventually created disillusionment about the progress toward gender-based emancipation. Despite his enumeration of women’s double burden and the role that men’s attitudes play in oppressing women, Borge never calls these trends by the name of *machismo*, nor does he address men’s roles in any depth. As Borge mentions, some of the areas in which the FSLN fell short were caused by instability and lack of resources due to the continuing Contra war. However, this speech also makes it clear that women’s liberation was a less integral project of the Sandinistas, often seen as a happy consequence of the revolutionary project rather than one of its primary goals. The specific construction of motherhood and femininity that characterizes women within this speech illustrates the FSLN leadership’s prerogatives at the time, of valuing women’s contribution as generative, giving forces propelling the revolution. The holes in Borge’s assessment of requirements for change in gender relations exemplify the pitfalls of examining women’s issues rather than gender issues.

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44 Ibid., 27.
"We never said we were equal-- we simply demonstrated it"

Other speeches by FSLN members elaborate on a more radical, feminist idea of Sandinista gender equality. Magda Enríquez, a prominent member of the FSLN who held various positions within the Sandinista government, went on a lecturing tour in the United States to educate women's liberation organizations, church groups, union organizations, and other organizations about Nicaraguan women's participation in and emancipation through the revolution. Her 1984 speech touches on Nicaraguan women's resistance throughout history, and delves deeper into the relational elements of gender inequality than Borge and Fonseca. Enríquez is clearly informed by broader global currents in feminist thought.

Before the revolution, women's reality was "enclosed within four walls in the cities, or at the hearths in the rural areas, in her wooden kitchens, the woman had the role of servant, actually, to her husband."46 Through the revolutionary process,

The image of women in Nicaraguan society started to change. Our people began to learn what we were capable of doing, as women. We never entered into a lot of theoretical discussions about women's liberation or the emancipation of women. In fact, we never said that we were equal-- we simply demonstrated it, in the battlefields, on the barricades, in the mountains, in the cities.47

This shift in consciousness is the revolutionary accomplishment that Enríquez emphasizes most strongly. Women not only participated in the revolutionary struggle, but also broke into new social roles and gained new public respect while doing so. The revelation, for many women, that "we had been born for other things besides the roles we had been taught-- that

47 Ibid., 260.
is, to be a good woman, you had to be a good wife and a good mother;" is certainly revolutionary; this was a period in which, for the first time, women began to become people, human beings. The fact that many women, before the revolution, did not even imagine their own liberation, is an important point to be made, one that once again explains why the FSLN was seen as advocates for women. Enríquez also spoke with pride about the different fronts of women's struggle in Nicaragua: forming AMPRONAC/AMNLAE, gaining a legal office for women, winning a seat in the executive Council of State, and working for adequate child care services and a governmental office protecting the family.

Enríquez also made a point about gender relations and the place of men in the fight for gender equality that took a decidedly more radical position than most of the FSLN's propaganda materials. The women's movement and particularly AMPRONAC, she explains, were started by men and women together and so they reflect the necessity of integrating a fuller understanding of the oppression that both men and women face: "in the Nicaraguan situation we could not talk about the emancipation of women without talking about the emancipation of men-- men and women of a society that was certainly not emancipated, but under oppression and repression." It is unclear here whether she is advocating a real critique of gender relations and the social mores that constrain both men and women in establishing their gender identities, or whether she is making the point that the fundamental problem is a class-based economic subjugation that both men and women experience. The former stance was a more radical one, which implied the necessity of gender liberation for

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48 Ibid., 259.
49 Isbester, Still Fighting, 48.
50 Ibid., 258.
both men and women, and the latter was more conventionally located within the FSLN's strong class-based social change rhetoric.

Enríquez began and ended her speech with the relationship between women and oppressive systems of colonialism and neoliberalism. Reinforcing women's participation in the long history of resistance, Enríquez began by pointing out how women used their place as generative social forces to leverage power during the colonial period: “When the Spaniards came to conquer our lives the Indian women refused to bear children in order not to give the Spaniards any more slaves.” However, though women's agency was restricted to their capacity as child bearers, her interpretation does allow them a place as historical actors. In speaking of modern Nicaragua, Enríquez identifies a neoliberal imposition of U.S. consumer values and culture that has shaped an unjust and unrealistic feminine ideal: “To be a good wife and mother you had to be feminine enough to be successful in the marriage market. And then, feminine meant Revlon, Max Factor, and so on.” The association of femininity with consumer products created an ideal imbued with class prejudices, for only certain women could afford such products. Furthermore, this cultural imperialism reinforced a limited space for women's agency: women's power was derived from their marriageability and their appearance. In all, Enríquez's speech represented the progressive position of a woman steeped in global feminism, crossing international borders to try to explain and advance gender relations in Nicaragua.

The question of why these mythic gender identities, and their significance for national identity encapsulated within those myths, remains so prevalent and powerful is important.

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51 Ibid., 257.
52 Ibid., 259.
The Sandinistas faced the very real, perpetual threat of United States hegemony and intervention; thus, the project of national unification "required very hard, nonporous boundaries; any weak points, any slippage, any recognition would put the whole discursive edifice in jeopardy, before its boundaries had solidified." Jeffrey Gould wrote these words concerning the Sandinistas' relation with indigenous groups, but they ring true as well when considering the FSLN's approach to gender. Because gender relations are fluid, fundamentally not universal, and (particularly in the revolution's context of social upheaval) especially porous, being constantly renegotiated, they can be threatening; the heterogeneous identities that emerge from documents of popular mobilization hint at some of the fluidity and contested ground of these boundaries. The very terms used in defining identity are different and gendered; women are defined through familial relationships, and their role as mothers and bearers of children. Men, on the other hand, are defined through relationships with the state, with ideas, and with other men working toward the same goals.

INTIMATE REVOLUTION: GENDER AND THE ENTANGLEMENT OF PERSONAL AND POLITICAL

During the early 1980s, several accounts of women's experiences of the revolution were published. The most notable, Margaret Randall's landmark book *Sandino's Daughters*, achieved widespread circulation in the United States and served as a tool to raise consciousness about the situation of Nicaraguan people and the effects of U.S. support of the Contra war. These accounts serve as powerful records of women's perspectives during this pivotal historical moment, and also supported international activism in solidarity with the

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53 Gould, *To Die in This Way*, 286.
Sandinista cause. However, since those first few years of the revolution, few accounts of women's lives have been published. Roger Lancaster's anthropological study of gender relations and power in a Managua neighborhood is an exception.

Women's stories of experiencing and participating in revolution are infinitely valuable: they provide historians with a sense for how women conceive of progress, which goals they find most pressing for Nicaragua as a nation and a society, perspectives on where FSLN ideology succeeded and failed, and help ground the sometimes overly theoretical notions of revolutionary change within the context of people's lives. Thus, when embarking on the research for this paper, I was interested in talking with women about their perspective on progress toward gender equity, looking broadly at the trajectory of women's experiences since the revolutionary triumph to understand how Nicaraguan women conceive of their own history. More than twenty-five years have passed since Randall published her book; in this time, women's understanding of the significance of the revolution has evolved.

Many academic studies of the Nicaraguan revolution have remarked upon the necessity of appreciating the tangling of private and public, personal and political spheres. Norma Stoltz Chinchilla, for example, asserts that the family is the basic unit of Nicaraguan society, and thus was a site of acute tension in the revolutionary re-visioning of Nicaraguans' role as emancipated citizens in an egalitarian society. Family dynamics, relations between men and women, and reproductive rights all became deeply contested political issues within FSLN policy.54 When Chinchilla argues that Nicaraguan women don't agree on "what constitutes their strategic and practical gender interests,"55 she supports the understanding

55 Ibid., 393.
that politics in Nicaragua are deeply connected to social relations and personal circumstance. Given this understanding, gender as an analytic tool is well suited to delve into private dynamics of power and their relation to broader ideologies.

My personal interviews included conversations with staunch Sandinista supporters and AMNLAE organizers, as well as more radical feminists who were disappointed by the FSLN's approach to gender relations. Unlike other Latin American countries that experienced revolution, Nicaragua had little repressive backlash against revolutionaries in the years following the Sandinistas' electoral defeat in 1990. Thus, it was not difficult to find Nicaraguans willing to share their experience of revolution; in fact, many people were eager to share with me and appreciative that an American took interest in Nicaragua's revolutionary history. Many women also expressed happiness that a foreign student such as myself would want to write a gendered history of the revolutionary effort. Significantly, the women I spoke with had radically different perspectives on the successes and failures of the revolution-- and my interviews did not even include women on the right who had opposed the Sandinistas. As Wallach Scott suggests, gender theory can "account for persisting inequalities as well as radically different social experiences," adding depth to the abundant historical case studies that examine women's subjective experiences.\(^{56}\) As such, this section emphasizes the heterogeneity of women's experiences interacting with Sandinista ideology, and constructing conceptions of their own gender. Whatever women's interpretation of the FSLN and its progress toward creating a Nicaragua where gender equity prevails, though, all the women and men I spoke with had engaged with Sandinista gender discourses and had

\(^{56}\) Wallach Scott, "Gender:“, 135.
been profoundly shaped by the new forms of identity and new spaces opened by the revolutionary movement.

This section seeks to define continuities and consistent threads that made up the fabric of women’s lives, while drawing conclusions from the differences and inconsistencies that also exist in women's recollections of revolution. Understanding differences and commonalities will shed light on the types of emancipation and oppression that women experienced during and after the Sandinista revolutionary period. The section will conclude by taking a step backward, using Valentine Moghadam's theory of gender and revolution to frame these personal accounts and reflect on overall patterns in the lived experience of the revolution's emancipatory promises.

I am very truly Sandinista...\(^5^7\)

Several of the women I spoke with identify themselves as loyal supporters of the FSLN; they participated in the revolution, in collective organizations, and supported the FSLN throughout the years after the party's electoral defeat, rejoicing in the 2006 election when Daniel Ortega once again won the presidential office and restored the FSLN to power (albeit, a very different FSLN than the original vanguard revolutionary party).

Guillermina Castillo Meza was in her early thirties when the Sandinistas began mobilizing in the late 1970s. Married with four children, Guillermina (Mina) began working as a colaboradora, aiding in the revolutionary effort by acting as a courier and supplier in Esteli. As a colaboradora, she worked independently as an individual, since collective organizing was highly dangerous and the Guardia Nacional's punishment brutal. During the

\(^5^7\) "Yo soy bien Sandinista." Guillermina Castillo Meza, Interview by Madeline Kreider Carlson, January 3, 2010.
first insurrection in Esteli (the city would rise up in three insurrections against Somoza's Guardia Nacional; the final insurrection's triumph signaled the conclusion of the revolutionary fighting) her oldest son Juan Jose, age seventeen, joined the revolutionary effort and fought both in the surrounding mountains and in Esteli. Juan Jose's cousin, who lived with and was cared for by Mina in her home, also joined the guerrilla movement. Mina's face is marked with deep pain when she recounts the day when both Juan Jose and his cousin were killed in combat; Juan Jose was found beheaded by the Guardia. The tragic death of her son and surrogate son has forever altered Mina's identity and conception of herself as a Nicaraguan, a Sandinista, and a member of her community. After Juan Jose's death, Mina left her three young daughters in the care of family members and joined the guerrilla movement herself, fighting in the mountains around Esteli until the revolution's triumph.

Mina recalls her experience as a guerillera with pride and respect for what she and the other soldiers accomplished—both in terms of military success and redefining gender roles. As Mina explained, “In the guerrilla struggle, that was where respect for women began. We won the right to be respected through the revolution.” From her experience as a revolutionary fighter, Mina expressed her conviction that ideas of gender equality were forged in the mountains, where men and women fought together and men recognized the enormous abilities of women. “There was a great love, a great respect in the mountains,” recalled Mina. She noted that while women and men lived in close quarters and slept side by side, men respected women's space—a remarkable fact in a society plagued by physical and sexual abuse.

In the first few years after the FSLN came to power, Mina joined a group of mothers in Esteli who lost of children or husbands during the revolution. The group eventually
established the *Galería de Heroes y Martires*, the Gallery of Heroes and Martyrs, and worked to promote community memory of the revolution, as well as serving as an advocate and liaison between mothers and the government. Galerías organized by mothers' associations sprang up in numerous Nicaraguan cities, including Matagalpa, Masaya, and León. This broad campaign to preserve historical memory made frequent use of the language of sacrifice, suffering, and martyrdom in service of the revolution, in order to underscore the significant human cost of the revolution and also to valorize the efforts of Sandinista collaborators.

Today, Mina is the coordinator of the Association of Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs in Esteli, and she is also the caretaker of Esteli's Galería. As a grassroots community history museum, the Galería was assembled by mothers of young people who died during the revolution and the Contra war. The Galería commemorates Esteli's place in the revolutionary struggle and serves as a memorial to the many lives lost during the war that plagued Nicaragua for more than a decade. The Galería's presentation of history is deeply personal, moving visitors regardless of whether they can understand the Spanish descriptions of the revolution's progression. The Gallery conveys a history of faces, of personal mementos like diplomas, clothing, diaries, and letters, and of intimate biographies penned by surviving family members of fallen guerrilla fighters. In many ways, the Gallery exemplifies the entanglement of personal and political spheres that characterizes Nicaraguan society.

Sonia Gutierrez Ruiz lives across the street from Mina in one of Esteli's lower middle class neighborhoods. The two women have been friends for many years; during my interview with them, they often chimed in together. Sonia became involved with AMPRONAC during
its earliest days in Esteli, and has remained as a community organizer with AMNLAE since then.

Both Mina and Sonia credit the FSLN with providing the spark for the women's movement. Before the revolution, Mina and Sonia recall, women occupied a much narrower social space. Men were the masters of the household and did not see women as partners; very few women were given any control over finances or household management beyond the labor required to keep house. Nor did women occupy public space; their experience was bounded by their home.

In their recollections, both Sonia and Mina were more inclined to reflect on the current situation of women's achievements and the progress yet to be made than to critique the struggle for gender equality in the past. A common theme emerged from my conversations with staunch FSLN supporters like Sonia and Mina: they attributed the FSLN's failings in achieving women's equality to the enormous challenges that the FSLN faced in defending the nation against the Contra threat and the United States' imperialist interventions in support of the counterrevolutionary cause. Both agreed vehemently that the FSLN did all it could to advance gender equality during the 1980s, and that the party was hindered most by its constant need to defend against the Contra war; without this imperialist intervention, the FSLN would have achieved more of its foundational goals. Sonia dismissed the notion that women's dissatisfaction with the FSLN was one factor that contributed to the dissolution of popular support and the electoral defeat in 1990. Nicaraguan women, Sonia asserted, were much more preoccupied and worried by the great costs and damages incurred by the Contra war than they were by the symbolic struggle for gender equality; Nicaragua's freedom from
imperialist influence was a more prescient concern than accomplishing abstract political "liberation."

For Sonia and Mina, women's material gains constituted much more significant markers of the progress of the women's movement than symbolic or representational achievements. However, one powerful thread of their recollection was the emphasis on the space opened for women in the wake of the revolution. Compared to the pre-revolutionary containment of women within the home, Mina and Sonia recognized the new spaces-- both symbolic and physical-- that women entered through their participation in the revolutionary insurrection and the revolutionary project's mass organizations.

Mina and Sonia reflected on the two powerful, contrasting images of revolutionary womanhood: the madre sufrida and the independent guerrillera. Both affirmed that these images presented two ideals of Sandinista femininity. At this point in the conversation, Mina assumed an expert voice in speaking for mothers. Everyone, and certainly all women, respect the mothers who lost children during the revolution, said Mina; they are thought of as some of the most worthy supporters of the revolution. Mothers are proud to bear their esteemed title, but theirs is a tragic kind of pride. Sonia and Mina agreed that the one thing-- the only thing-- that differentiates what men and women are capable of is the fact that women can give birth. Mina continued that the experience of motherhood, bringing a child into the world, is the best thing that any woman can do with her life. This conviction in the role of women as mothers runs strong throughout FSLN rhetoric and constitutes a strong cultural force; even relatively progressive women, like Mina and Sonia, who celebrate women's entrance into new roles, still hold on to women's most important role as a domestic, reproductive agent.
Despite their faith in the FSLN's commitment to gender equality and women's issues, Sonia and Mina did identify multiple issues yet to be resolved. One of the biggest underlying problems remaining today, the two women suggested, is consolidation of consciousness. As Sonia articulated, "We are capable; what is missing is for all of us to realize this." The idea of space for women was a common theme throughout this conversation. Many women, Sonia said, still live in a state of fear, unable to recognize their own strength and potential. The home is not yet a safe space for many women, since domestic violence is still common. Reflecting on the situation of women's organizations and the push for gender equality after the FSLN's defeat in 1990, Sonia and Mina agreed that the proliferation of women's organizations that has occurred is detrimental to the movement as a whole, since there is less cohesion in women's consciousness and activist efforts. All these factors contribute to a less cohesive women's movement than that which existed during the revolutionary years, according to Sonia and Mina.

The interplay between the two women as they shared their stories was also informative, suggesting differences in women's identity and relationships with each other as social authorities based on their particular role in the revolutionary struggle. Especially when speaking about the role of mothers and mothers' groups, Doña Mina assumed the expert perspective, while Sonia's voice was subordinated. Mina's experience as a guerrilla and her tragic loss gave her more authority than Sonia's participation and leadership in AMNLAE. This dynamic also strengthens the idea that human personal experience was deeply tied to the revolution; it also reflects the currents of FSLN propaganda and discourse that prized the sacrifices of mothers and the role of militants, over the contributions of "mere" collaborators.
The Revolution does not just belong to the FSLN!58

Other women I spoke with belonged to a more radical, progressive sector of women's groups. Geni Gomez works at Grupo Venancia, a popular feminist organization located in Matagalpa, a town that was deeply divided in the revolutionary years between Sandinista and Contra forces. Matagalpa was home to a mothers' organization composed entirely of women whose children had been members of the Guardia Nacional; it is also home to several highly progressive women's organizations, including Grupo Venancia and the Matagalpa Women's Collective.

The birth of Grupo Venancia is part of the proliferation of women's organizations that occurred after 1990, to which Mina had alluded. Though Violeta Chamorro’s government promoted neoliberal politics and conservative gender roles that clashed with feminist groups’ objectives, the FSLN’s fall from power actually opened more space for radical and feminist women's groups to grow, as they were free to pursue their own agenda rather than aligning with the FSLN's platform and working under AMNLAE. As Geni describes it, Grupo Venancia began as an effort to create a positive identity for women outside of conventional patriarchal mores. From the beginning, Grupo Venancia was committed to autonomy from political parties, feminist orientation, and a democratic structure that also differed from AMNLAE's hierarchical, bureaucratic system of organization. Grupo Venancia established a series of networks to connect women working to abolish violence, promote health, and connect resources within Matagalpa.

Geni’s assessment of the space that the revolution created for women is less positive than that of Mina and Sonia: women certainly participated equally, Geni noted, but the

process of consolidating the revolutionary process nonetheless subordinated women and other disadvantaged, dis-empowered members of Nicaraguan society. The revolution, in many ways, reinforced a hierarchical social and political organization. Women still lacked their due leadership positions. "The revolution was not responding adequately to our interests," Geni stated, and there was little space for questioning. Furthermore, many women were dissatisfied with the lack of questioning and thoughtfulness reflected in FSLN leadership. The New Man ideal was supposed to leave machismo behind, noted Geni, but the truth was that many male leaders and participants in the revolution, even among the vanguard, committed abuses against women, including rape and sexual assault. While a compelling propaganda tool, the ideal of the Sandinista New Man did not provoke true, deep questioning of gender relations.

Moving Toward Modernization or Reinforcing Patriarchy?

Through the revolution, Nicaragua became a country of participating citizens who mobilized largely because of the injustices felt within their personal lives--especially the injustice of poverty, underdevelopment, and unequal economic systems. Participation in the revolution, though, also provoked many Nicaraguans to consider the relevance of revolutionary ideals to the private sphere of homes and family interactions. Class-based egalitarian ideals bled into gender equity, and ideals of popular representation and the elevation of the common campesino and obrero fed notions of representation for women and the recognition of the distinct conditions imposed upon campesinas and women bearing the double burden of housework and child-rearing along with work in the informal economy.
Valentine Moghadam synthesizes the dynamic role that gender played in twentieth-century revolutions into a theory that differentiates revolutions that promote women's emancipation from revolutions that reinforce the patriarchal system of authority.\(^{59}\) Moghadam draws the conclusion that the Sandinista revolution falls into the category of revolutions supporting women's emancipation, but a closer examination of her theory helps critique the contradictions in the FSLN's promises of gender equality, and identify the instances in which the FSLN slipped into supporting the patriarchal structures that run strong in Nicaraguan society.

Moghadam argues persuasively that the condition of gender relations in pre-revolutionary society has an enormous effect on whether a revolution's eventual outcome is patriarchal or modernizing.\(^{60}\) To distinguish between these two outcomes, Moghadam's patriarchal model reinforces a gendered female identity defined by a belief in fundamental gender difference as an inherent element of social organization and female domesticity; the “woman-in-the-family” model thus reconstitutes patriarchal forms of hierarchy, authority, and space.\(^{61}\) The modernizing, “women's emancipation” model, on the other hand, draws on socialist and Enlightenment ideological traditions and is notable for its mission to integrate women into public life, and its attention to concerns and interests that positively affect women occupying all or most social strata.\(^{62}\) Moghadam's contribution to the prolific theoretical literature on revolution is her attention to cultural, gendered currents of revolutionary change and the entrance of revolutionary ideas and practices into private


\(^{60}\) Ibid., 139.

\(^{61}\) Ibid., 142

\(^{62}\) Ibid., 162.
spaces. Her point that gender is a “central feature of concepts of the ideal society and of national identity” is an essential one in considering the entangled, personal-political nature of the Sandinista revolution.\(^\text{63}\)

In most ways, the Sandinista revolution fits the theoretical model of a revolution working toward women's emancipation. Yet history demonstrates that the revolution still ended with dissatisfaction among women, on both the progressive and conservative ends of the political spectrum. As previous sections have demonstrated, emancipatory discourse proved a highly effective and compelling means of mobilizing women and the general populace to support the revolution. However, the strength of emancipatory promises also meant that failures to accomplish these goals were felt acutely. Moghadam, like the FSLN leadership, emphasizes benchmarks such as integrating women into economic production and creating new legislation relating to gender roles. Yet what is lost in this theoretical analysis is the personal side of politics, the entangled and intimate nature of the forces that created obstacles to women's emancipation and the persistence of these obstacles within both public and private spaces.

THE IDEOLOGICAL BATTLEGROUN D: CLASHING PROMISES OF EMANCIPATION, 1984-1990

In the latter half of the 1980s, Nicaragua and its Sandinista government faced new, ever-mounting challenges and obstacles to consolidated authority and sovereignty. Beginning in the early 1980s, the United States had begun funding and training counterrevolutionary (Contra) forces, composed of former members of Somoza's Guardia Nacional, people

\(^\text{63}\) Ibid., 137.
disenchanted with Sandinista policy, and some people from the Atlantic coast's Miskito, Sumo and Rama indigenous groups. The Contra war intensified in the middle of the decade, and the FSLN began devoting more and more of its resources to national defense. Confronting this mounting Contra resistance was further complicated by the other logistical burdens and responsibilities that the party had taken on as part of the revolutionary project, such as organizing the agrarian reform and other economic reforms and social service initiatives. Thus, in the latter half of the 1980s, the FSLN's resources as well as its popular support began to be spread thin. As the momentum of revolutionary euphoria waned and as other ideologies, most notably the United States government's powerful anti-Communist rhetoric, arose to compete with the official revolutionary ideology, the FSLN struggled to consolidate support and bolster the nationalist identity and sense of collective purpose that had given the revolution its power.

The emphasis on a mythic unified national identity gained such strength during this period that it became exclusionary. This myth of universal nationalism had been an attempt to encapsulate a great deal of national authority. Charles Hale places great weight on the FSLN's revolutionary nationalism, positing that "mobilization of nationalist indignation at U.S. intervention...was undoubtedly crucial to the revolution's resolve for defiance and, indeed, its survival" (36). Unfortunately, this militant indignation spilled over into domestic politics, and Sandinista nationalism's designations of who belonged to the revolution also served to ensure the alienation of groups whose ideologies challenged official policy. Increasing militarization in defense of the nation meant the re-introduction of machista language and the devaluation of women as forceful agents in revolutionary society.
Paradoxically, the tightening of revolutionary nationalist ideology exacerbated internal tension and, in some cases, fostered counterrevolutionary sympathies.

**Nationalism and Woman As Victim: a Conservative Shift**

In this ideological battlefield, the discourse of human rights became a means of strengthening moral position and justifying action; human rights language appealed to universal, international sympathies and served as a sort of political 'trump card' in diplomatic relations. The FSLN, and most of all AMPRONAC, had effectively utilized the language of human rights to garner international support since its inception mobilizing against the Somoza regime. However, during the Contra war, both the Contras and the FSLN, in reality, perpetrated abuses of civil liberties and human rights, and human rights denunciations often became totalizing, generalized condemnations made to affect the balance of power, rather than productive criticisms that engendered dialogue and advanced the peace process. Furthermore, in the language of human rights abuses, both the FSLN and the United States created an implicit dichotomy between guilty and innocent parties, between perpetrators and victims. This dichotomy created a distinction between actors and passive subjects. Recurrent throughout both forms of rhetoric is the relegation of women to the sphere of innocent, passive subjects. Truthfully, women did suffer greatly in the Contra war, both from economic loss, personal violence and the death of sons and other family members, but the rhetorical shift reflected more than just the extent of women's suffering; rather, it was a political move designed to elicit sympathy and consolidate support.

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Women's position in revolutionary society had changed since the insurrection against Somoza; one large factor was that mandatory military conscription under the Sandinista government was limited to men, and women in the 1980s made up a significantly smaller portion of the Nicaraguan militia than they had during the fight against Somoza. Women could join the militia voluntarily, but fighting in a counterrevolutionary war imposed upon a society that had already been ravaged by the consequences of the first revolutionary struggle was less compelling to both men and women than the original revolutionary struggle had been. The radical changes in men's conception of women that had occurred when both fought together during the first mobilization, then, began to fade into memory. In the mid-1980s, as the Contra forces intensified their attacks, the language that the FSLN used to mobilize the populace became increasingly militarized and masculine.

In contrast with previous speeches by FSLN leaders that highlighted goals for specific sectors of society and the steps the Sandinista government planned in order to implement progress towards these goals, FSLN rhetoric in the late 1980s shifted toward a more defensive position. On October 2, 1984, Daniel Ortega, then part of the Junta of National Reconstruction, spoke before the United Nations General Assembly in New York, in a speech that demonstrated shifts in the FSLN's presentation of its own ideology and position, and its approach to gender issues. Rather than triumphantly celebrating the FSLN's accomplishments, as many propaganda materials and speeches did in the early years of the revolution, Ortega speaks from a defensive position, as a representative of a small nation that suffered "a legacy of backwardness, brutal exploitation and the absence of justice and

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freedom—in short, the absence of democracy.” Ortega's appeal on behalf of Nicaragua celebrates the country's historic task of “building an authentic democracy, becoming an example of patriotism, nationalism, independence, and nonalignment.” Ortega explicitly identifies the United States as the force that opposes the successful completion of this task, citing examples of the U.S.'s imperialist interventions and human rights abuses throughout the world, and emphasizing Sandinista Nicaragua's progressive stance against “colonialism, neocolonialism, imperialism, apartheid, and racism.”

Ortega's speech conveys a particular sense of Nicaraguan identity: as a people universally assailed by violent imperialist threats. Ortega uses the idea of a collective national body to express the suffering of the Nicaraguan people:

The winds now blowing over Central America presage of a holocaust for our peoples. Today as we appeal for peace in this body, which itself emerged from the ruins of war in order to fight for peace, Nicaragua continues to be subjected to the genocide of the terrorist policies of the United States authorities. Amidst all this horror, we are making truly exceptional efforts to institutionalize—by means of elections—our democratic, nationalist, nonaligned, pluralist revolution.”

The metaphor of the suffering national body served to rhetorically unite all Nicaraguans with the revolutionary cause, to stress oneness through a common experience of victimization under imperialism, and to valorize sacrifices. Linking Nicaraguans to a common history of resistance to U.S. encroachment on national sovereignty, Ortega affirmed that the struggle

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67 Ibid.
68 Ibid., 354.
69 Ibid., 356.
will continue “even though it means more sacrifice, suffering, threats, and extermination for
the heroic people of Sandino.”\textsuperscript{70}

While the national body is united in its popular revolutionary history and its
experience of suffering under U.S. influence, some victims are given particular weight and
attention in Ortega's speech. In describing the brutal violence of the Contras, Ortega notes
that “children, young people, women, teachers, and doctors, are murdered”\textsuperscript{71} and that “To
date more than 7,000 Nicaraguans have been casualties-- including children, mothers, youth
and the elderly.”\textsuperscript{72} Ortega's special highlighting of these victims marks them as weaker and
more vulnerable members of society. Here, the dual mention of women and mothers
demonstrates the feminized character of the victimization as articulated by Ortega. The
characterization of women as victims stands in sharp contrast to earlier revolutionary rhetoric
celebrating women as integral contributors not only to the revolutionary project, but
explicitly to the revolution's military successes. The shift from descriptions of woman-as-
guerrillera to woman-as-victim is understandable in the context of the case that Ortega is
making, and the fact that his aim is to arouse sympathy from his audience.

Another speech, also delivered in October 1984, this time by Tomás Borge, reinforces
this shift. Borge's speech, which celebrated the power of the mass organizations and
commemorated the work of the Nicaraguan Ministry of the Interior, ended with a call for
tactical progress toward the revolution's strategic goals. Specifically, Borge lays out the
fundamental goals that drive this progress; included are designations of revolutionary roles
for men and women. Borge envisions the Sandinista revolution as, “A revolution that

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 354.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 355.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 356.
immortalizes man's participation in his work, in his community, in the economy, in defense, and in political decision-making. A revolution that liquidates discrimination against women, leaving her gentleness, the miracle of her motherhood, intact.\textsuperscript{73} Borge, whose previous speeches also celebrated women's role as a mother, went a step further here in clearly contrasting the man's participation and action toward the goals of the revolutionary project, while the woman's role was explicitly feminine, soft, and above all reproductive. Borge's mention of liquidating discrimination held little weight, since he failed to identify the ways in which women face discrimination. As these speeches demonstrated, during the latter half of the 1980s, political representation of women in Nicaragua became more sentimental, more sympathetic, and decidedly further from the female guerrillera ideal of the early revolution. As internal and external frictions increased, treatment of women in FSLN rhetoric became more conservative.

The image of the mother who endures sacrifice in service of the revolution gained great potency during this period. A FSLN propaganda pamphlet published in 1987 expressed the paramount practical and symbolic significance of mothers:

As mothers, they were transformed into a symbol of courage and wholeness, representatives of the morality and dignity of our people; mother of political prisoners, mothers of the disappeared, mothers of the tortured, mothers who carried their pain with dignity, fighting in the streets, denouncing the genocide committed by the Guardia in the mountains, declaring hunger strikes, or accepting clandestine fighters like their own sons.\textsuperscript{74}


\textsuperscript{74} “Como madres, se convirtieron en símbolo de coraje y entereza, representantes de la moral y dignidad de nuestro pueblo; madres de presos políticos, madres de desaparecidos, madres de torturados, madres que acarreaban su dolor con dignidad, luchando en las calles, denunciando al genocidio cometido por la guardia en las montañas, declarándose en huelga de hambre o acogiendo como un hijo a los luchadores clandestinos.” Dirección Nacional, FSLN, El FSLN y la Mujer en la Revolución Popular Sandinista (Managua: Editorial Vanguardia, 1987), 18.
Mothers who endured great sacrifice had existed since the inception of the revolution, of course; however, during this period, the mother became the dominant publicized mold for women's participation in society.

Stemming from the FSLN's conservative shift in approaching women's issues, the late 1980s also saw increasing tension between AMNLAE and the FSLN leadership. In addition to AMNLAE's traditional primary goal, which had always been to incorporate women into the works of the revolution, women active in AMNLAE began to demand more radical FSLN action on issues like abortion, birth control, and sexual education. Furthermore, AMNLAE's more feminist members agitated for greater autonomy from the FSLN as a political organization, which would allow AMNLAE to pursue its own agenda independently, instead of having its agenda relegated to a secondary position after the FSLN's interests. Among Nicaraguan women, the tension between AMNLAE and the FSLN led to a drop in participation and membership in both groups.

**The United States, Gender, and Imperialism**

To understand the FSLN's changes in ideological and rhetorical focus, it is also illuminating to examine the United States' official perspective on the FSLN, and how the U.S. used its portrayal of Nicaragua to sow seeds of instability within the revolutionary government. In these ideological debates, the stated role of women changes, and the issue of gender equality is obscured by more sweeping, generalized and extreme ideological battles. In these clashes, the discussion of Communism looms paramount, and the Cold War context

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75 Isbester, *Still Fighting*, 83.
76 Ibid., 85.
of the debate is abundantly clear. Equating democracy and capitalism, this Cold War rhetoric
denies the possibility of participatory democracy coexisting with socialist society. This
shallow analysis of the FSLN's emancipatory goals exemplifies the nature of this ideological
clash, which was characterized by a reversion to sweeping accusations of imperialism,
totalitarianism, and threats to national security; the debates are couched within the discourse
of human rights, but lack deep and thoughtful dialogue. The nuanced appraisal of gender
relations is wholly subsumed within these hostile interactions.

A hearing before the United States Senate Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere
Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Relations, conducted on February 25th and March 1st,
1982, and entitled Human Rights in Nicaragua, foreshadows the ideological clashes that
intensified later in the decade as the Contra war escalated. By the time of the hearing,
President Reagan had already offered $19 million in aid to the Contras, which funded
supplies and military training in Honduras. In his testimony during this hearing, Elliott
Abrams, Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, denounced
the Sandinistas for perpetrating human rights abuses against the displaced indigenous
populations of Nicaragua's Atlantic coast. Abrams makes the claim that Sandinista Nicaragua
is a threatening offshoot of “the Marxist-Leninist model of the Cubans and the Soviets,” a
nation under the sway of “Soviet imperialism.” By shifting the dialogue on imperial
powers and influence in Latin America toward Communist imperialism, Abrams takes the
spotlight away from claims of U.S. imperialist interventions and establishes a distinct,

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78 United States Senate, Human Rights in Nicaragua: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Western
Hemisphere Affairs of the Committee on Foreign Relations, Ninety-Seventh Congress, Second Session, 25
dangerous other. In his descriptions of Sandinista actions, Abrams conveys senselessness and lack of purpose, other than an extreme commitment to Communist control, "in which nobody gets to live independently of the government," and the FSLN is portrayed as a party without ideological discipline, devoid of political goals besides the consolidation of power.

Strikingly, the position that President Ronald Reagan took on Nicaragua and on politics in Central America more broadly relies on several of the same rhetorical patterns as FSLN mobilization material; namely, the appeal to considerations of national defense in justifying militarization. Reagan's speech, which argues for an increase in aid to the Contras, begins with his point that Nicaragua, and all of Central America, are the United States' "fourth border," the nation's closest neighbors and therefore the most dangerous and threatening zone for threats for potential Soviet invasion. Reagan's language exemplifies Cold War dichotomies: the Sandinistas are described as "Communists," "armed guerrillas controlled by extremists," allied with "Soviets and their own Cuban henchmen," and acting out the plans of "Soviet military theorists;" the Nicaraguan revolutionary forces, then, are described as "dangerous armed enemies of liberty;" as a "large, hostile military presence on our border," an imminent "Marxist-Leninist takeover." On the other hand, the United States and the Contra "freedom fighters" it supports are painted as the agents of democracy and freedom, fighting for human rights and economic and political reforms rather than military change. "Adverse economic conditions" affecting Central American nations were appraised without historical understanding, which afforded Reagan the opportunity to suggest further freedom for U.S. economic leadership in the region. Actual human conditions and

social relations do not fall under Reagan's analysis; the broad, sweeping strokes with which he paints the geopolitical situation allow no space for considering gender. Nevertheless, Reagan's depiction of the Sandinistas is of macho, highly militarized, brutal and inhuman fighters.

In the Sandinista rhetoric found in speeches by FSLN leaders in the period from 1984-1990, the expression of gender identities and ideology is a locus reflecting broader tensions and problems with the FSLN's consolidation of authority. During this period, the FSLN contended with a strongly articulated United States anti-Communist ideology that supported a debilitating counterrevolution. Thus, in the second half of the 1980s, fissures in the FSLN's hold on power resulted in the constricting of roles, less progressive gender ideology, and less attention to gender issues overall.

CONCLUSION

In 1990, eleven years after the revolutionary project began, Nicaragua held free governmental elections. The election pitted President Daniel Ortega against the Unión Nacional Opositora (UNO), described in a February 20, 1990 Washington Post article as a "disjointed coalition of 14 parties including everything from contras to communists," which supported Violeta Barrios de Chamorro's presidential bid. Chamorro was the widow of La Prensa editor Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, and together they represented some of Nicaragua's oldest and most powerful political elite families. Pedro Joaquin Chamorro's assassination on January 10, 1978 at the hands of Somoza's Guardia Nacional, as retaliation for his public

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denunciations of the dictator, produced international shock waves that galvanized Nicaragua's elite against the dictatorship in the last stages of the revolutionary insurrection. Because of this position, Doña Violeta, as she was often called, easily assumed the public persona of a suffering wife and mother. Furthermore, during her campaign Doña Violeta emphasized the split within her family (one son supported and the other opposed the FSLN) and cast her own role as that of the reconciler of differences, the devout, Catholic, motherly candidate who could forgive and unite the "squabbling family" that Nicaragua had become.\footnote{Lancaster, \textit{Life is Hard}, 291.}

Chamorro also had the support of the United States, and was the only candidate who believably promised an end to the U.S. economic blockade that had contributed to the crippling of Nicaragua's economy—in 1989, the annual inflation rate had reached 36,000 percent.\footnote{MacPherson, “In Nicaragua, A Widow’s Calling.”} In a war-torn nation exhausted by giving its sons to the draft and by giving all its money to military defense, this promise alone was weighty. The FSLN derided Chamorro for her unsubstantial policy, treacherous alliance with neoliberal capitalist interests, and lack of political experience—the same \textit{Washington Post} article quotes the Sandinista Minister of Propaganda, Dionisio Morenco, as saying, “She [Chamorro] has been placed by the Americans because of her popularity, being a widow, a saint. She was just a housewife.” The derogatory jab at housewives demonstrates the lack of progress toward valuing the work of maintaining a household and sharing domestic responsibilities, even among top FSLN leadership. Despite Morenco’s scoffing, Chamorro’s popularity was real and her appeal as an apolitical political actor was powerful.
Demographic data on voting trends in the presidential elections demonstrated the increasing dissolution within the FSLN's once-solid popular base. In the 1984 elections, the FSLN had won 63% of the popular vote; in 1990, that number had plummeted to 41%. Of Nicaraguan women who worked outside their home, 59% voted for the FSLN in 1990. However, women who worked in the informal sector or solely within their homes had the lowest rate of support for the FSLN of any demographic block, at 46%. This contrast demonstrated the significance of the incomplete shift in women's roles and political and social space. Women who had broken with their conventional space within the home and had entered the workplace, following the path to formal employment as the FSLN encouraged women to do, were more likely to support the FSLN; on the other hand, women who, for many reasons, had not entered the formal workplace were less likely to support the FSLN; the housewives sided with Chamorro.

Furthermore, in terms of women attaining political office, the women who won legislative seats were from established, elite political families that had made politics into long-term careers, and did not represent lower socioeconomic classes or new political actors who engaged in politics as a means of social change. This data demonstrated the salience of cultural and class differences that were not erased by the FSLN's campaign to educate the Nicaraguan populace and fundamentally change social relations. Chamorro's election, as a woman, to the top political leadership role did not necessarily signify progress toward redefining women's place in society, since Doña Violeta explicitly encouraged traditional gender roles. As Lidia Amanda Araúz Meza, a coordinator of the AMNLAE office in Estelí,

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84 Ibid., 282-283.
85 Isbester, Still Fighting, 99.
86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
explained, “Doña Violeta was an obstacle to women’s advance toward equality. She went back to traditional modes of thinking: biologically, women should be nurturers and childbearers...we don’t just want women in office, we want women who have a progressive consciousness.”

Doña Violeta won the presidency, and the revolutionary years of FSLN governance ended. While Chamorro’s electoral win in 1990 was not the type of transformational progress toward gender equality that many Nicaraguans had imagined, the struggle for gender equity continued nevertheless. With the end of the FSLN's regulation of political organizations under its banner, many women organized in new autonomous groups, and feminism in particular thrived and was nourished through conferences, continued grassroots organizing, and collaborative efforts that bridged social divides. Many of the burgeoning feminist organizations, such as Grupo Venancia, arose in rural areas as collective efforts not of university-educated women steeped in Western feminism, but of women whose feminism was molded by the hard and sometimes brutal life of campesina women. In independently articulating their own interests, these organizations explicitly broke with AMNLAE and implicitly criticized and distanced themselves from the FSLN's leadership as a vanguard party guiding progressive thought. In doing so, many organizations struggling for gender equality have taken the revolution out of the FSLN's hands and into their own.

88 Lidia Amanda Araúz Meza, Interview with the author, January 11, 2010.
90 Ibid., 115.
Gender constructions, both fluid and reified, public and private, traditional and progressive, emancipatory and oppressive, pervaded Sandinista revolutionary nationalist ideology. The relation between FSLN ideology and Nicaraguan gender identity demonstrates clearly that the FSLN attempted to educate a populace to become active revolutionary citizens, seeking to change patterns of thought and action. However, the FSLN's progress toward this ideal became entangled in the complexities of gendered ideology and gender identity in revolutionary and post-revolutionary Nicaragua. The revolution made important steps toward opening new space for women in both the political and personal realms, but the constraints of wartime governance, the nature of the overwhelmingly male party leadership (some of whom were deeply entrenched in machista perspectives), and a belief that gender issues could be de-prioritized until a more convenient historical and political moment limited the efficacy of these steps.

The documents and speeches that disseminated FSLN rhetoric propagated a bold vision of an ideal Nicaragua in which women would participate equally in politics, would be afforded all their rights as citizens, and would act and be treated as men's equals in the home. However, this rhetoric failed to substantially identify, critique, and change the social, economic, and psychological systems of oppression that already existed and subordinated women. By failing to take on machismo and to rigorously attempt to change conceptions of what is masculine and what men's place in the home should be, the FSLN left women with a deficit in their ability to participate. Constant militarization and the removal of men from the home for mandatory military duty fractured the structure of the family, reinforcing paternal irresponsibility and cementing women's confinement to the domestic sphere and, often, to the task of raising and providing for children unaided.
For a revolution attempting to overhaul an entire society, oversights and shortcomings in some areas are inevitable. For the FSLN, the Contra war and the constant need to mobilize people toward supporting this war confounded the egalitarian struggle on many levels. Under attack, the FSLN used its popular base instrumentally, to ensure its own survival. Prizing the interests of the party above the interests of seemingly more marginal movements, like the women's movement, ultimately eroded the FSLN's base of power, because this action actually contradicted the party's progressive ideals.

The forging of new gender identities through the Sandinista revolution was full of half steps and contradictory elements. Women participated in unprecedented numbers, yet were not able to assume leadership roles. Women became public, powerful symbols as guerrilleras and most of all as mothers, that helped bolster popular mobilization and epitomize the best features of the revolution, but these public characterizations became so powerful that they were constricting, limiting the kinds of identities and roles that women could publicly take on. Many women truly believed in revolutionary ideas and in emancipation for the Nicaraguan people from oppression based on class, gender, and other social systems, yet eventually voted against the revolution when the FSLN's promises had not been kept and pressures on their own existence and survival for their families became too great. Also, and importantly, it is easy to point to changes in women's lived experiences through the revolution, but more difficult to point to ways that the revolution changed how men participate in Nicaraguan society. The FSLN's revolution was emancipatory, but the party's attention to gendered dynamics and gender equity demonstrated a belief that gender was a marginal concern, rather than a central and essential issue pervading the FSLN's other
projects and actions. This ideological limitation hampered the FSLN's political success in the long run and allowed oppressive gender mores to continue reproducing themselves.

The story of gender politics and the Sandinista revolution is complex and sometimes confusing, not least because it is difficult to determine its end point. Certainly, the Sandinista revolutionary project struggled for and with gender equality as part of its effort to transform society. Is it possible to say there was a gender revolution in Nicaragua? Did the revolution contribute toward women's emancipation, and a widespread challenge to the unjust elements of machismo? What does it mean that Nicaragua has experienced women in the highest levels of national leadership? Where is the revolution located, today? When Geni Gomez exhorted that “The revolution does not just belong to the FSLN!” she made the claim that the revolution lives on, in the everyday efforts of groups like Grupo Venancia working toward the accomplishment of revolutionary ideals at a local level.

Across the nation, local women's organizations have blossomed, many led by women who felt empowered by mobilizing in some capacity under the revolution. Government services and international development agencies alike have recognized that women in enterprise are much more likely to invest wisely and be able to pay back loans, thus leading to more support for female entrepreneurs.91 In the words of Lidia Araúz Meza, “we cannot turn off the sun—these women are brilliant.”92 Despite the conservative governmental shift since the revolution, many women in Nicaragua are taking up their own revolution.

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91 Lidia Amanda Araúz Meza, Interview with the author, January 11, 2010.
92 “No podemos apagar el sol—esas mujeres son brillantes.”
Today, nearly twenty years after the FSLN was voted out of power, Daniel Ortega is back in power in a different Nicaragua. Ortega’s propaganda invokes the revolution frequently, but his politics have shifted radically since the 1980s, as evidenced by his alliance with the Catholic Church and his support of the 2006 ban on all abortions. In fact, the story of Daniel Ortega and his wife, Rosario Murillo, encapsulates many of the frustrating contradictions and conflicting conclusions of the revolutionary struggle for gender equality. Murillo, a former colaboradora and guerrillera who has, for many years, stood as a symbol of women’s empowerment, has a great deal of influence on Ortega. “She is our ideal now,” said Guillermina Meza. “While Daniel fights for men, Rosario fights for women.” While Mina and Sonia believe that Rosario has helped increase Ortega’s consciousness of gender issues, others criticize the couple for their approach to gender. In 1998, Ortega’s stepdaughter, Zoilamerica Murillo, came forward and accused Ortega of having sexually abused her from 1979 to 1990. The scandal produced international outcry, and Rosario publicly dismissed the accusations. Quoted in an article in *Time* on March 23, 1998, Rosario declared that the issue should be “dealt with as a family problem.” Rosario’s insistence that the issue be kept private was partly influenced by a desire to salvage her husband’s political reputation, but it also points to a continued tendency to hide the messy and inconvenient truths about the nature of machismo and gender injustice and the fact that even top revolutionary leaders were trapped within such systems of violence.

Both Rosario Murillo and Violeta Chamorro have attained high levels of political leadership and carved space for themselves in a conventionally masculine domain. However, in order to step into that politicized space, each has had to make political and personal concessions. Chamorro assumed a depoliticized political role, explicitly cultivating an image
of a woman who eschewed the corruptions of politics and simultaneously reinforcing the
cultural association of womanhood and femininity with apolitical identity. Murillo, on the
other hand, who makes her politics more explicit, has still capitulated to her husband’s
interests and avoids critically examining the politics of her own family. In both women’s
experiences, the common thread is the necessity of hiding, dulling, and painting over the
political meanings of personal experience. By associating femininity and women with the
apolitical, women’s agency is again confined to the domestic, the private and personal
spheres, and the inherent political meaning of those spaces is ignored.

What can be gleaned, ultimately, from the case of Nicaragua? Nicaragua’s case
demonstrates the pitfalls of transitioning from a militarized movement to a democratically
governed revolutionary project. Militant nationalism necessarily creates hard, absolutist
distinctions; when these distinctions and divisions are imposed on a civil society, injustice
and rigidity results—particularly when the bounds of nationhood are articulated through
gendered identities, when masculinity is synonymous with militant action and femininity
with natalism and reproduction. The Sandinista case also demonstrates the importance of
revolutionary leadership engaging in thoughtful analysis concerning the convergence of
ideology and practice. While progressive Sandinista ideology appealed to many as a vehicle
for social change, the noticeable disconnect between theory and practice created resentment
and disillusionment. Nicaragua’s revolution teaches historians and revolutionaries and
activists the importance of recognizing the political dimensions of private life, and the
personal and relational dimensions of revolutionary change. Despite these lessons in failure,
the heartening progress of small-scale women’s mobilization and the new spaces opened for
women’s participation show that Sandinista rhetoric of equality and the incorporation of
many women working alongside men in the projects of the revolution did have a significant impact on the way gender identity, political agency, and power are negotiated in Nicaragua today.
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