

MANIPULATING MOTHERHOOD: *The Enduring Legacy of Revolutionary Gender Role Revisionism in Post-Sandinista Nicaragua*

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THE TWENTIETH CENTURY brought repeated political upheaval, economic disaster, and social revolution to Nicaragua. In the 1970s, after controlling the country for almost a half-century, the Somoza dynasty came to a bloody end with the rise of the popular Sandinista movement—a movement that sought to revolutionize every aspect of Nicaraguan life, from government to economy to society. Although the Sandinistas wholeheartedly pursued policies designed to eliminate class inequality, one of the main selling points of leftist ideology in Latin America, their particular brand of socialism also aimed to remedy non-class disparities, such as gender inequality. Their attempts to level the playing field between men and women took on many forms, among them support for increased female labor force participation, promotion of legislation supportive of women and repeal of legislation detrimental to women's position in society, and political organization of Nicaraguan women. In many ways, the Sandinistas represented a significant departure from the conservative views promulgated by the Somoza government, which maintained a healthy and friendly relationship with the Catholic Church until the final years of its reign in the early 1970s.¹

At times on purpose, and at times as a byproduct of their own failures, the Sandinistas proved remarkably successful in reinterpreting practices of female idolization that were hundreds of years in the making and utilizing them in the revolutionary context. Legacies of Spanish society—the strictly bifurcated traditional gender role structure, in particular—created the traditions of womanhood that were embedded in Nicaraguan history and culture and subsequently taken advantage of by the Sandinistas.² One of the most prominent themes in an examination of gender roles under the Sandinistas during the revolution is the enduring importance of images of motherhood in inciting women to action: Sandinista manipulations depicted the ideal revolutionary mother as a female guerilla, a

“combatant-bearing vessel who later enthusiastically sent [her] children off to war,” and an individual “willing to offer [her life] for the defense of [her] children and the country—the epitome of the selfless, self-sacrificing mother.”³ In addition to using their traditional roles in gestation and childbirth to mobilize women in support of the regime, the image of the Nicaraguan woman as a mother proved effective in mobilizing women for the economy and civil society to fill the vacuum created by the Sandinistas as they struggled to maintain the health of the economy and neglected to address women’s public health issues. This paper puts forth and supports the idea that the revolutionized gender roles advocated by the Sandinistas have seen enduring success and remain prominent in Nicaraguan society today, particularly when compared to the conservative gender agenda of the counterrevolutionary forces and other even more contemporary sectors.

The outcomes of this study provide insight into the importance of cultural sensitivity in promoting change. In particular, it helps determine to what degree drastic challenges to and revisions of tradition—in this case, traditional gender roles—can be carried out successfully if revolutionary motives are cast as reconceptualizations and revisions of tradition. Although I focus specifically on a case of leftist revolution that represents an instance of mass societal upheaval, the implications of my findings carry significant weight in comparable situations of alteration of the social status quo; for example, the methods used by the Nicaraguan revolutionary and counterrevolutionary camps, along with an analysis of their effectiveness, could contribute to the body of knowledge used in development agenda-setting and policymaking.

The first section of this paper provides the necessary historical and social context for understanding the main points on the road to gender role revisionism, namely female participation in the Sandinista revolution and the election of Violeta Chamorro to the Nicaraguan presidency in 1990. The second section presents the first revision of Nicaraguan motherhood undertaken by the Sandinistas, in which they allowed motherhood to become a woman’s choice rather than an expectation or a requirement. It examines the reproductive and sexual health policies of the revolutionary and counterrevolutionary regimes and provides evidence that the Sandinistas’ more permissive abortion and contraceptive policies retain continuing popularity in present-day Nicaragua. The third and fourth sections of this paper explore how the Sandinistas’ policy failures—not just their successes—served to reinterpret gender roles and change the image of Nicaraguan motherhood. The former details the Sandinistas’ role in increasing the role of women in the economy, while the latter illustrates how women participated actively in civil society in order to compensate for the government’s failure to reduce maternal mortality and modify the image of motherhood as the act of a mother dying in order to give birth to her child. Finally, the fifth section discusses the participation of women in Nicaraguan government, and how it compares rather favorably—both in numbers and over time—to other countries in Latin America. The final sections will review the arguments supporting the view of Sandinista success in gender role revisionism, shed light on the implications of this study, and provide insight to and interpretations of recent events in Nicaraguan politics that pertain directly to gender role depictions in that country.

WOMEN AND THE SANDINISTA REVOLUTION

When the Sandinistas took control of the Nicaraguan state in 1979, they wished to extend greater rights to the country's women in order to move closer to the movement's ultimate goal of social equality. They aimed to increase female involvement in national life—a term I will use to refer collectively to politics (political activism of any kind, such as voting or participating actively in government), civil society (involvement in grassroots organizations), economy (particularly the formal economy, although also the informal economy outside of the home), and society (all facets of life not encompassed by the other categories). The first divergences from traditional gender roles occurred as women participated actively in the movement to overthrow the Somocista regime and moved increasingly into the public eye for their significant contributions. Despite the apparent transformation of many female participants from traditional Nicaraguan women to empowered female revolutionaries, the reality of the change took on less drastic dimensions.

Although the Sandinistas' efforts seem to have removed women from their domestic sphere of influence, this was neither the intention nor the outcome; the Sandinistas sought not a substitution of national life for domestic duties, but rather an expansion of women's duties to include both national life beyond the home and within the home itself. The mother, long a symbol of traditional female gender roles in Nicaragua and Latin America, remained the ideal role for women during the guerilla war and Sandinista period; however, the Sandinistas' depiction of the mother—as a grinning young woman, holding a small child and carrying a rifle over her shoulder—represented a radical departure from traditional notions of Nicaraguan motherhood.⁴ The Sandinistas initially attempted to organize women into groups affiliated with the movement, such as AMPRONAC (Asociación de Mujeres ante la Problemática Nacional, or Association of Nicaraguan Women Confronting the Nation's Problems), and to mobilize them for security, as neighborhood guards; for society, in literary and immunization campaigns; and for the economy, in crop harvesting.⁵ Increasing involvement made females more attuned to the effects of their participation on various levels of national life, including the familial level of society. This realization lent women not only a sense of agency, but also a sense of duty. It seems, then, that the Sandinistas, whether purposefully or not, succeeded in manipulating motherhood by expanding the traditional female role of maintaining the well-being of the family beyond the boundaries of the home and into other arenas of national life.

Despite the Sandinistas' efforts to engage women more fully in national life, their progress took a significant blow starting with the 1990 election of Violeta Chamorro to the Nicaraguan presidency. A superficial glance makes Chamorro's win look like a victory for Nicaraguan women and the Sandinistas' project of social equality. A closer and more in-depth exploration, however, reveals that this female president actually wished to reverse many of the strides made to integrate women more fully into national life.⁶ In line with traditional lines of Nicaraguan motherhood, Chamorro's campaign and election essentially saw her acting as an extension of her deceased husband, Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, a popular news-

paperman and owner and editor of the *La Prensa* newspaper.⁷ Doña Violeta, as she was called, carried on her husband's conservative legacy, which featured a strong opposition to the Somoza dynasty, retention of fairly conservative views, and non-alignment with the revolutionary movement.⁸ During the course of the presidential campaign process, Chamorro presented a traditional view of womanhood that, despite a decade of revolutionary revisionism, still held deep roots in Nicaraguan society. Among the multiple images—all traditional—of womanhood projected by Doña Violeta, her role as a mother featured prominently.⁹ Like many other families during the revolution, Doña Violeta saw her family split by political loyalties.¹⁰ But unlike others, she held her family, mainly her four children, together, and they rallied around her despite their different political views.

In a country torn by war and civil strife for over a decade, Chamorro represented an opportunity for positive change for Nicaragua, namely the end to the civil war and the subsequent reassertion of Nicaraguan unity. Chamorro preached to the Nicaraguan public, saying: "We need to rise above this tragic inheritance for our country and for our children, be great and be generous in order to accomplish, once and for all, the reconciliation of the Nicaraguan family."¹¹ Chamorro's successful actions as a cohesive force in her family led Nicaraguans to envision her accomplishing similar feats on a national scale. If "maternal love had triumphed over political divisions...for Doña Violeta's immediate family, why not for the whole Nicaraguan family?"¹² This idea motivated the electorate to vote for peace and national reunification—two goals embodied by Doña Violeta.

Doña Violeta's promises proved attractive enough to allow her to defeat Daniel Ortega—the man who led Nicaragua into war and chaos and had not yet, over ten years later, managed to find the way out—for the presidency; however, her attempts to return Nicaraguan society to its conservative and traditional roots did not succeed in eclipsing the Sandinistas' strides in the field of gender roles. Contradictory fertility control policies over the years, continued high levels of female labor participation, female involvement in health movements, and significant female political involvement all illustrate the enduring effects of Sandinista policy successes and failures, and their manipulation of motherhood in post-revolutionary Nicaragua.

CATHOLICISM, NICARAGUA, AND THE RIGHT TO CHOOSE

The Sandinistas revised traditional views of motherhood by allowing motherhood to become a choice, rather than a requirement. Abortion and contraception did not occupy a prominent position on the Sandinista agenda and were not, in fact, actively promoted. The Sandinistas retained by-revolutionary-standards conservative policies in order to protect themselves from the probable backlash from the Catholic Church and more socially conservative members of the Nicaraguan population whose support they wanted to keep, and who would take issue with pro-contraceptive policies.¹³ For their own part, the Sandinistas saw Nicaragua as a large, underpopulated country that not only enjoyed ample room for population growth, but would also require population growth to sustain the revolutionary fighting against the *contras*.¹⁴ The idea of the "patriotic womb"—a woman's

ability to contribute to the revolutionary cause through her reproductive capabilities—is reflected in the following selection from the Gioconda Belli poem “We Will Bear Children.”

*We will bear children,
for every man or woman whom they kill,
we will give birth to
hundreds of children
who will continue in their footsteps.*¹⁵

In order to avoid contradicting their own interests and offending the church and more conservative sectors of society, the Sandinistas retained conservative policies regarding abortion in Nicaragua by not altering the “semi-legal” status it gained under the Somocista regime and continuing to allow women to obtain abortions only on medical grounds.¹⁶ The significant internal and external anti-fertility control forces notwithstanding, “access and availability [to abortion] increased during their administration,” and the Sandinistas did not prosecute women who obtained illegal procedures to terminate their pregnancies.¹⁷

The Sandinistas’ unwillingness to face popular backlash prevented them from promoting fertility control measures; however, they recognized public demand for such measures and responded by emphasizing contraceptives as the least undesirable method of fertility control. Despite their best efforts, such as providing contraception free of charge, Nicaragua’s economic situation limited the availability of such contraceptive methods, thus diminishing the utility of such a policy.¹⁸ In order to help remedy the failures of the system and keep providing women with the right to choose, the Sandinista government created policy “by 1988 [that] made it possible for a woman with more than six children to be sterilized without her husband’s permission.”¹⁹ In doing so, the Sandinistas set aside party politics and personal preferences, and tried to deal with economic difficulties in order to respond to popular demands and give Nicaraguan women what they wanted—control of their bodies, control of their situations, and the right to make decisions about fertility control for themselves.

During her presidency, Doña Chamorro implemented policies that attempted to return the role of women in society to its more conservative and traditional pre-Sandinista state, in which motherhood was not only an expectation, but almost a requirement, of women. Chamorro and her party—the UNO (Unión Nacional Opositora)—repealed various maternal and child health and social programs, including state-provided childcare services, thus effectively forcing women back into the home on a full-time basis.²⁰ They also condemned any contraceptive methods other than the rhythm method, prohibited sex education from being taught in schools, and promoted anti-abortion campaigns; “right before the elections, Chamorro said during an interview...that one of her first tasks as president would be to shut down the private feminist clinic that performs abortions.”²¹ Changes in national sex education policies for the public changed drastically as well; billboards posted under the Sandinistas that read “Prevent AIDS, use a con-

dom,” were promptly replaced by Chamorro and the UNO with signs announcing “Prevent using condoms, be faithful to your partner.”²²

Despite the rabidly anti-fertility control policies enacted by Chamorro and the UNO, however, the Sandinistas’ strangely contradictory policies of birth control prevailed. As Nicaragua’s economy has recovered, comparatively speaking, the country has seen increasing contraceptive prevalence to the point of experiencing some of the highest levels of contraceptive prevalence in Latin America (Tables 1 and 2).²³ In this context, contraceptive prevalence refers to the proportion of married women aged 15 to 49 who use contraceptives.

Increasing contraceptive prevalence in Nicaragua can be linked to the country’s decreasing fertility rate. Nicaragua had the second highest fertility rate in Latin America for the period 1970-1975; however, between then and the period 2000-2005, the country has more than halved its fertility rate—one of the most drastic decreases in fertility in the region (Table 3).

Despite their reluctant approach to fertility control policies, the Sandinistas changed the perception of motherhood from one of requirement to one of choice by making available the means of contraception and abortion that allowed women to choose—or opt out of—motherhood. They also expanded the meaning of motherhood and the role of the mother in national life in Nicaragua’s unique revolutionary context. The Sandinistas effectively linked traditional female responsibilities to similar functions in national life outside of the home, thus fomenting a change that endures in present times and is reflected in the country’s continued high rates of female labor force participation.

NICARAGUAN MOTHER, WORKING WOMAN: SANDINISTA EXPANSION OF THE MOTHER’S TRADITIONAL SPHERE

The Sandinistas’ success in manipulating of the meaning of motherhood, as well as other, less purposive but equally effective methods of affecting its revision, is demonstrated by continued high levels of female labor force participation in Nicaragua. Rather than perceiving the economy as an arena of national life separate

Table 1
Contraceptive Prevalence Rate in
Nicaragua, Bolivia, and Honduras, 1977–2003

Country	Year												
	1977	1981	1983	1984	1987	1989	1991	1992	1994	1996	1998	2001	2003
Nicaragua	9	27						44			60	69	
Bolivia			26			30			45		48		58
Honduras		27		35	41		47			50		62	

Source: “Contraceptive prevalence (% of women ages 15–49).” World Development Indicators, World Bank. 1977–2006.

Table 2
Contraceptive Prevalence Rate in Latin America, 1995–2003

Country	Contraceptive prevalence rate (%) 1995-2003
Costa Rica	80
Colombia	77
Brazil	77
Paraguay	73
Peru	69
Nicaragua	69
Mexico	68
El Salvador	67
Ecuador	66
Honduras	62
Panama	58
Bolivia	53
Venezuela	49
Belize	47
Guatemala	43
Chile	No data
Argentina	No data
Uruguay	No data

Source: "Contraceptive prevalence rate (%)." United Nations Population Division Database on Contraceptive Use. New York: Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2005.

from the home, women increasingly saw its effects on their traditional sphere of involvement in national life, which was comprised of the home and the family. Women responded to this newfound awareness with the encouragement and support of the Sandinistas and continually expanded their participation in national life into the economy. They redefined motherhood to include external—and often less direct—factors that affect the family, rather than solely internal matters with immediate effects on the family in the home. Together, women and the Sandinistas redefined a mother's physical sphere of influence in society by knocking down the traditional walls that kept a woman enclosed in her home and rebuilding those walls to include the economy. In so doing, they rendered the formerly taboo idea of women working outside of the home a natural phenomenon, a mere expansion of the home beyond its actual physical space.

The expansion of the Nicaraguan labor force to include women was only one of the economic reforms undertaken by the Sandinistas to ameliorate the country's inefficient and severely structurally flawed economy. While the Sandinistas achieved some success in the short term, particularly in the areas of economic growth and social development, they failed to perform the economic restructuring

necessary to sustain growth and avoid backsliding.²⁴ Furthermore, because “the main thrust of Sandinista policy was economic change, pro-women policies were determined largely on their relationship to economic goals.”²⁵ While persuading women to pursue involvement in the national economy, the Sandinistas also emphasized that such economic participation not interfere with or subtract from their roles as wives and mothers.²⁶ Despite the various intervening factors that tempered the Sandinistas’ expansion of female labor force participation, women saw “an extension of their rights...in the workplace through legal reform...and [were] encouraged to participate in the defence and development efforts, entering various kinds of economic activity in large numbers.”²⁷

All factors considered, it would certainly be an oversimplification to suggest that evolving gender roles alone pushed women into production outside of their homes. As the revolution progressed, the economy continued to suffer as the twin burdens of defense costs and social spending inflicted increasing economic hardship, including “a large deficit and spiraling inflation.”²⁸ Realistically speaking, then, the policies implemented by the Sandinistas caused Nicaragua’s already-

Table 3
Fertility Rate, 1970–1975 to 2000–2005

Country	Total fertility rate (births per woman)		Fertility rate decrease (as %)
	1970-1975	2000-2005	1970-1975 - 2000-2005
Argentina	3.1	2.4	22.6%
Belize	6.3	3.2	49.2%
Bolivia	6.5	4.0	38.5%
Brazil	4.7	2.3	51.1%
Chile	3.6	2.0	44.4%
Colombia	5.0	2.6	48%
Costa Rica	4.3	2.3	46.5%
Ecuador	6.0	2.8	53.3%
El Salvador	6.1	2.9	52.5%
Guatemala	6.2	4.6	25.8%
Honduras	7.1	3.7	47.9%
Mexico	6.6	2.4	63.6%
Nicaragua	6.8	3.3	51.5%
Panama	4.9	2.7	44.9%
Paraguay	5.7	3.9	31.6%
Peru	6.0	2.9	51.7%
Uruguay	3.0	2.3	23.3%
Venezuela	4.9	2.7	44.9%

Source: “Total fertility rate (births per woman).” World Population Prospects 1950–2050: The 2004 Revision. New York: Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, 2005.

dire economic situation to deteriorate, thus necessitating multiple incomes to support a family and providing a driver for female emancipation from the home, so to speak.²⁹

Sandinista revisions of views of motherhood to include participation in the economy met with little resistance, particularly because Nicaraguan women tended to view changing—or more accurately, deteriorating—economic conditions in the country “in terms of how changes affected their families,” as opposed to men’s perceptions, which tended to use the market as the standard of comparison.³⁰ Many Nicaraguan women who work outside the home contribute the entirety of their earnings to household expenses, whereas their partners provide a portion of their earnings for such expenditures and retain the remainder for discretionary spending.³¹ Thus, women do not personally reap the benefits of their labor in the formal economy in the way that men do. As a result of the family-motivated and unpaid nature of female participation in the economy outside of the home, such work becomes decreasingly controversial as it begins to resemble women’s traditional work—also family-motivated and unpaid—in the home.

Despite the relative lack of empowerment and emancipation gained by women through their formal economic activities, Violeta Chamorro used growing female participation in the economy as evidence of the FSLN’s³² “moral decay of the country,” and tried to beckon women back into the home.³³ She depicted the FSLN as having a “military ambition that turned to nothing all that had been won” and implied that Sandinistas upheld “ideologies that destroyed [Nicaraguan] realities...and lies that obscured [Nicaraguan] history.”³⁴ But neither her rhetorical Sandinista-bashing nor her reduction of state-sponsored child care and other social benefits succeeded in stemming the flow of women into the formal economy.³⁵ Instead, Nicaragua has seen its female labor participation grow steadily during and after the Sandinista period; for example, female labor participation increased from 26.7 to 32 percent between 1977 and 1985, and to forty percent in 1990.³⁶ Labor force participation continued to expand through 2003, when Nicaraguan women participated in the formal economy at a higher rate than women in most countries in Latin America (Table 4), even as GDP per capita has grown steadily since the early 1990s.³⁷

In a 1990 edition of the Nicaraguan publication *Barricada*, Sandinista Magda Enríquez wrote that the Chamorro government was “not just sending women back to the house, but [was] trying to convince us that this [was] ‘our place.’ ”³⁸ Chamorro’s attempts to invoke tradition to drive women from the workplace to the home, including the promotion of breastfeeding to “facilitate an optimal relationship between mother and child,” have been somewhat counteracted by her structural adjustment policies.³⁹ Cuts to public sector jobs drastically increased the unemployment and underemployment rates (Table 5), while attempts to increase foreign investment in Nicaragua led to the establishment of a maquiladora industry seeking female employees.⁴⁰

Due to biases in the gendered division of labor, women tend to work for lower wages than men, which allows them to find employment more easily than men during times of economic hardship.⁴¹ Additionally, women tend to act as shock absorbers during economic crises and in Nicaragua during this period, “with the

rising cost of living and decreasing earning opportunities, more women were looking for paid employment to meet household needs.”⁴² These factors, when combined with the re-imagining of the economy as an extension of the home, contributed to the successful and enduring expansion of female participation in society beyond the home and into the formal economy.

The Sandinistas effectively reconceptualized participation in the economy as necessary for maintaining the well-being of the family and the home, without reducing the expectations of the mother in those traditional spheres of influence. As a result, female participation in the economy illustrates the willingness of women to make sacrifices for their families in the name of motherhood. That said, their decreasing willingness to endure literal self-sacrifice—death related to pregnancy or childbirth—is demonstrated by increasing levels of participation in health movements and initiatives promoting maternal health.

NO MORE DYING TO GIVE LIFE: MATERNAL SACRIFICE AND CIVIL SOCIETY

As times grew difficult and resources scarce for the Sandinistas, unfavorable circumstances forced them to start cutting back the social services that had seen so much success in improving life in Nicaragua.⁴³ This government failure pushed members of society to deal with cutbacks in their own ways, which women did by creating organizations to deal with female health problems. A legacy of the failure of the Sandinista regime, but a legacy nonetheless, the existence of community-run health centers and similar civil society movements has grown over the past two decades. These movements have helped redefine motherhood as a sacrifice or a series of sacrifices, rather than the ultimate sacrifice of a mother giving up her life in order to birth a child.

Starting in the months after assuming the presidency, President Chamorro demonstrated her withdrawal of support for women by cutting spending on women’s health programs by 11 percent, despite the fact that the reproductive role she emphasized most was one of the leading causes of death for Nicaraguan women.⁴⁴ At the time when these cuts were made, an estimated one in 66 Nicaraguan women who died during their childbearing years did so because of complications related to pregnancy, delivery, or post-pregnancy.⁴⁵ Estimates of Nicaragua’s maternal mortality through the 1990s range approximately from 100 to 400 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births, which equates to a maternal mortality rate of 0.1-0.4%. Furthermore, studies of Nicaragua demonstrate a 59 percent increase in maternal mortality rates starting shortly after Chamorro took office (1993-1998), thus resulting in Nicaragua gaining one of the highest levels of maternal mortality in the region.⁴⁶ Although national figures are comparable with those for countries of similar levels of economic development, they fall significantly short of the single-digit instances of maternal mortality in parts of the developed world; for example, in the period 1987-1988, Canada and the U.S. reported 4 and 6.6 instances of maternal mortality per 100,000 live births, respectively.⁴⁷

Table 4
Female Labor Participation

Country	Female Labor Force Participation Rate (% ages 15-64)	
	1990	2003
Argentina	33.7	45.4
Belize	No data	No data
Bolivia	46.3	49.7
Brazil	47.6	46.9
Chile	35.0	44.7
Colombia	45.2	52.6
Costa Rica	35.5	41.4
Ecuador	28.9	36.3
El Salvador	39.1	51.2
Guatemala	29.0	40.8
Honduras	34.0	44.3
Mexico	35.5	43.2
Nicaragua	42.0	51.6
Panama	41.4	47.9
Paraguay	35.6	39.9
Peru	30.6	38.3
Uruguay	52.4	59.6
Venezuela	40.0	47.8
Latin America & Caribbean	41.4	46.3

Source: "Labor Force Structure." Estimates and Projections of the Economically Active Population, 1950-2010, Yearbook of Labor Statistics, 4th edition. International Labor Organization.

Seeking to close the widening gap in social services, women's health organizations sprang up to do what the government would not: promote female health, not related solely to their reproductive role, but rather to "the total physical, social, and psychological health and well-being of women."⁴⁸ These organizations, usually non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with financial support from larger international organizations, provided services such as legal, psychological, and birth control counseling, midwife training programs, and clinics and "birthing houses" for women with high-risk pregnancies to over 125,000 women in 1992.⁴⁹ These programs were designed to manipulate motherhood by giving women greater knowledge and, therefore, control over their bodies and lives, and to change motherhood from a single instance of self-sacrifice—of a mother's life for that of her child—to a process of making sacrifices.

A majority of Nicaraguan women, 82 per cent in one study, expressed views that "being a woman implies making sacrifices or a greater effort than the one

Table 5
Employment Statistics, 1990–1995

	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995
Unemployment rate (%)	11.1	14.2	17.8	21.8	20.7	18.2
Underemployment rate (%)	33.2	38.0	32.5	28.3	32.9	35

Source: Cynthia Chavez Metoyer. *Women and the State in Post-Sandinista Nicaragua*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2000, p. 77.

done by men,” and “completing an endless number of activities that made life too tiring, a day of exhausting work. It is not only having children and a spouse, it is also being able to study, to prepare oneself, to complete a career and be able to help others; it is being flexible and being able to do a variety of things.”⁵⁰ This depiction of motherhood is not at odds with the image of the sacrifices of motherhood realized under the Sandinistas and today. Remaining undertones of subservience aside, women no longer have to perceive motherhood as the literal self-sacrifice, but rather are free to live, take care of their families, and formulate and pursue goals of their own, outside of the household.

New feelings of power and agency among women represent a positive sea change in Nicaraguan national life; however, the most important part of national life is arguably politics, because it is where the power to bring about change officially resides. In this arena too, present-day Nicaragua bears the mark of the Sandinistas’ efforts to incorporate women into national life.

POLITICIZING NICARAGUAN WOMEN, POLITICIZING NICARAGUAN MOTHERS

Through their manipulation of motherhood, the Sandinistas successfully empowered women to participate actively not only in the economy and civil society, but also in politics. The Sandinistas’ motives for encouraging female involvement were admittedly not altruistic, but rather geared towards broadening public support and creating a political cheer squad, so to speak, for the movement; however, their effective mobilization of women for political ends, regardless of the motivation, has contributed to a redefined image of motherhood in Nicaragua today.

The Sandinistas promoted mass mobilizations, not only for the revolution itself, but also for demonstrations of popular support for the movement and for its social campaigns, in literacy and health, for example. The participation in these projects by women helped set changes to the female Nicaraguan identity in motion. As Ana María from the Sandinista Women’s Legal Office describes the changes: “We women felt we had the right to make demands and to say that we can make our own changes. They made us feel important...Later the revolution demystified many myths against women. We awoke with force and with a great awareness of our reality.”⁵¹ Because of the efforts of the revolutionaries to mobilize women politically, Nicaraguan women enjoy relatively high levels of representation in government (Table 6).

Even after their fall from power, the Sandinistas continued to try to incorporate women into party politics. In 1996, the FSLN promoted female political par-

ticipation “by requiring that at least 30 percent of party nominees for the popular consultation election be women.”⁵²

The manipulation of ideas of motherhood played a significant role in the political mobilization of women, as they were often organized using maternal, rather than simply feminine, characteristics. Such policies of mobilization evoked subservience, self-denial, and service to others, thus allowing women to engage in politics without offending conservative Nicaraguan sensibilities and tendencies.⁵³ One prominent example of evoking maternal and feminine imagery for political ends occurred shortly after the 1978 assassination of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro—opposition journalist, Somoza critic, and husband of future Nicaraguan president Violeta Barrios de Chamorro. In their homes and on the street, women banged pots and pans in protest of his death, thus proving that women could contribute

Table 6
Female Representation in Government

Country	Women in government at ministerial level (as % of total)	Seats in lower house or single house held by women (as % of total)	
	2005	1990	2005
Argentina	0.1	6.0	33.7
Belize	0.1	no data	6.7
Bolivia	0.1	9.0	19.2
Brazil	0.1	5.0	8.6
Chile	0.2	no data	12.5
Colombia	0.4	5.0	12.0
Costa Rica	0.3	11.0	35.1
Ecuador	0.1	5.0	16.0
El Salvador	0.4	12.0	10.7
Guatemala	0.3	7.0	8.2
Honduras	0.1	10.0	5.5
Mexico	0.1	12.0	22.6
Nicaragua	0.1	15.0	20.7
Panama	0.1	8.0	16.7
Paraguay	0.3	6.0	10.0
Peru	0.1	6.0	18.3
Uruguay	0	6.0	12.1
Venezuela	0.1	10.0	9.7

Sources: “Women in government at ministerial level,” (as % of total). Interparliamentary Union (IPU). Geneva, 2005; “Seats in lower house or single house held by women.” Nations Millennium Indicators Database. New York: Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2005.

to politics in unique ways, and that politicized females could, under the right circumstances, become a political force to contend with.⁵⁴

In 1990, Violeta Chamorro proved once again that women in politics are formidable opponents. Her victory over Daniel Ortega in the presidential election represented a landmark event in Latin American history. Although actually the third female president in Latin American history, Chamorro became the first elected and permanent female president in the region; her predecessors, Isabel Perón and Lidia Gueiler, assumed the presidencies of their countries due to a husband's death and an interim appointment, respectively.⁵⁵ When Julia Mena Rivera became Chamorro's vice president in 1996, Nicaragua became the only country in the world with a female-dominated executive branch.⁵⁶ Continued high levels of female involvement in politics represent a significant change in both Nicaragua and Latin America, one that the Sandinistas' gender empowerment measures likely contributed to.

THE STAYING POWER OF THE SANDINISTA REVOLUTION OF GENDER

Relatively high levels of female representation in Nicaraguan government and economy over the years, civil society participation in health movements, and current views of fertility control all point to the lasting influence of the Sandinista movement on redefining gender roles and, more specifically, manipulating motherhood. By framing motherhood as a choice rather than a requirement and as sacrifice rather than self-sacrifice and by extending the boundaries of the home to include politics and economy, the Sandinistas countered conservative and traditional views of motherhood forcefully enough to keep them retreating from popular imagination for almost three decades. The Sandinista project of manipulating motherhood was arguably so effective that it ultimately contributed to the FSLN's electoral downfall to Violeta Chamorro, who most effectively used maternal imagery as a means to her political end. Even in the face of Chamorro's reassertion of conservative notions of motherhood, the Sandinista re-creation remained firm. While one can call neither the Sandinistas nor Nicaragua a model of revolutionary success, it is important to note that the movement succeeded in bringing about enduring change to gender relations and identity in Nicaragua. As a result of both purposive policies and inadvertent political failures, the Sandinistas drew Nicaraguan women out of their homes and into all areas of national life.

The degree of success of the Sandinistas' project in manipulating motherhood presents an example of the synthesis and fusion of tradition with modernity, more specifically, traditional and modern gender roles. By depicting the expansion of female involvement as an expansion of the responsibilities of the woman as a mother, the movement was able to sell the idea not only to men who wanted to keep their wives at home, but also to women who subscribed to the traditional gendered divisions of labor and whose cooperation the Sandinistas needed to facilitate their entire project. The success of such methods of manipulation in Nicaragua indicates that the framing of development issues and their presentation to the intended audience are instrumental in determining a policy's ultimate failure or success.

Ideas regarding the subversion of tradition for political ends hold serious implications for fields related to the development of less developed countries (LDCs), whether by national governments or international organizations. Organizations dedicated to development objectives—the World Bank, for example—tend to undertake projects designed to foment social change. The mobilization of women often figures heavily into development efforts, whether dealing with problems related to health, education, economy, violence, human rights, or environment. As stated by the World Bank's Gender Action Plan,

. . . the global community must renew its attention to women's economic empowerment and increase investments in women . . . increased women's labor force participation and earnings are associated with reduced poverty and faster growth; women will benefit from their economic empowerment, but so too will men, children and society as a whole. Women's lack of economic empowerment, on the other hand, not only imperils growth and poverty reduction, but also has a host of other negative impacts, including less favorable education and health outcomes for children and a more rapid spread of HIV/AIDS. In sum, the business case for expanding women's economic opportunities is becoming increasingly evident; this is nothing more than smart economics.⁵⁷

Because successful mobilization of women in LDCs holds the potential to yield positive secondary effects that reverberate in all levels of national life, development organizations should—and often do—formulate policies with the importance of gender in mind. Unfortunately, however, organizations often seem to approach policymaking from an acultural perspective that may cause clashes and generate resistance, thus essentially dooming their plans from inception. In order to increase their likelihood of success, development organizations formulating social policies might consider undertaking projects similar to those implemented by the Sandinistas in their manipulations of motherhood—re-imagining traditional gender roles and shaping tradition as needed to fit it into the mold of modernity.

LOOKING FORWARD, MOVING BACKWARD?

On November 8, 2006, Sandinista revolutionary leader Daniel Ortega regained the Nicaraguan presidency during his third presidential bid since his defeat by Chamorro in 1990.⁵⁸ The elections were declared clean and transparent by international observers, including former US President Jimmy Carter.⁵⁹ Ortega has moderated much of the leftist rhetoric that gained him notoriety in the 1970s and 1980s, even proclaiming his religious rebirth in the Catholic faith.⁶⁰ While such moderation may have been merely a ploy to help get himself elected, Ortega's recent actions in the Nicaraguan Congress to help outlaw all abortions are of particular interest because of the success of that policy campaign.⁶¹ As of late October, Nicaragua joined El Salvador and Chile in the ranks of countries that prohibit all abortions, even those that could save a mother's life, and that seek to end pregnancies related to rape or incest.⁶²

This legislation certainly represents bad news for Nicaraguan women at present; however, it comes neither as a surprise nor as a drastic change, considering that the country has maintained conservative abortion policies throughout its history. Even if this conservative turn in fertility control policy remains, the legacy of Sandinista gender role manipulation remains with it. Ironically, women's rights groups across Nicaragua have sprung into action in response to the new law, using their political motivation to challenge the man who inspired them and taught them to be politically motivated.⁶³ Ortega's course in the presidency and Nicaragua's path in the gender rights discourse will undoubtedly continue to inform the study of the manipulation of motherhood in revolutionary and post-revolutionary Nicaragua and the current state of gender roles in the country.

NOTES

1. Williams, Philip J. "The Catholic Hierarchy in the Nicaraguan Revolution." *Journal of Latin American Studies* 17 (1985): 341-369.
2. Marianismo and machismo comprise the traditional conceptualization of gender roles in Latin America. Marianismo—the more relevant strand of this duality—is defined as "the cult of female spiritual superiority which teaches that women are semi-divine, morally superior to and spiritually stronger than men" (Stevens 315). Although marianismo has its roots in the Roman Catholic veneration for the Virgin Mary, an alternate version emerged that "erected a secular pattern of beliefs and practices related to the position of women in society" (315).
3. Bayard de Volo, Lorraine. *Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs: Gender Identity Politics in Nicaragua, 1979-1999*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.
4. Kampwirth, Karen. *Feminism and the Legacy of Revolution: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004.
5. *Ibid.*; Bayard de Volo, Lorraine. *Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs: Gender Identity Politics in Nicaragua, 1979-1999*.
6. Kampwirth, Karen. "Mother of the Nicaraguans: Dona Violeta and the UNO's Gender Agenda." *Latin American Perspectives* 23 (1996): 67-86.
7. Conliffe, Grafton J., and Thomas W. Walker. "The Crucified Nicaragua of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro." *Latin American Research Review* 13 (1978): 183-188.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Kampwirth, Karen. "Feminism, Antifeminism, and Electoral Politics in Postwar Nicaragua and El Salvador." *Political Science Quarterly* 113 (1998): 259-279.
10. Kampwirth, Karen. "Mother of the Nicaraguans: Dona Violeta and the UNO's Gender Agenda."
11. Barrios de Chamorro, Violeta. *Memorias de mi gobierno, 1990-1996, Tomo I, Gestión Presidencial*. Managua, Nicaragua: Gobierno de la República de Nicaragua, 1996.; Translation author's own. Original text reads: "Tenemos que superar esta triste herencia por nuestra Patria y por nuestros hijos, ser grandes y generosos para lograr de una vez para siempre reconciliar la familia nicaragüense" (Barrios de Chamorro, 1996: 98).

12. Kampwirth, Karen. "Mother of the Nicaraguans: Dona Violeta and the UNO's Gender Agenda."
13. Molyneux, Maxine. "The Politics of Abortion in Nicaragua: Revolutionary Pragmatism - or Feminism in the Realm of Necessity?" *Feminist Review* 29 (1988): 114-132.
14. Metoyer, Cynthia Chavez. *Women and the State in Post-Sandinista Nicaragua*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 2000. ; Bayard de Volo, Lorraine. *Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs: Gender Identity Politics in Nicaragua, 1979-1999*; *Contras*, which is short for *contrarevolucionarios* (counterrevolutionaries), is a term used to refer to the various rebel groups that acted, some with US support, against Sandinista forces in combat (Boyle, 1987: 86-87).
15. Bayard de Volo, Lorraine. *Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs: Gender Identity Politics in Nicaragua, 1979-1999*.
16. Molyneux, Maxine. "The Politics of Abortion in Nicaragua: Revolutionary Pragmatism - or Feminism in the Realm of Necessity?"
17. Wessel, Lois. "Reproductive Rights in Nicaragua: From the Sandinistas to the Government of Violeta Chamorro." *Feminist Studies* 17 (1991): 536-549; Metoyer, Cynthia Chavez. *Women and the State in Post-Sandinista Nicaragua*.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*
21. Wessel, Lois. "Reproductive Rights in Nicaragua: From the Sandinistas to the Government of Violeta Chamorro."
22. *Ibid.*
23. During the relevant periods, Nicaragua, Bolivia, and Honduras all had similar levels of economic development, as measured by GDP per capita (PPP, current international \$). Between 1990 and 1998, the range of Nicaragua's GDP per capita was \$2275-2808, while Bolivia's was \$1678-2332 and Honduras' was \$2239-2810 ("GDP per capita, PPP (current international \$)"). This period saw maternal mortality increase in Bolivia and Nicaragua (from 300 to 390 cases and 100 to 139 cases, respectively, while such incidences in Honduras decreased from 221 to 147 (Acosta, 2000: 126; Schwarcz, 2000: 356).
24. Metoyer, Cynthia Chavez. *Women and the State in Post-Sandinista Nicaragua*.
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*
27. Molyneux, Maxine. "The Politics of Abortion in Nicaragua: Revolutionary Pragmatism - or Feminism in the Realm of Necessity?"
28. Babb, Florence E. "After the Revolution: Neoliberal Policy and Gender in Nicaragua." *Latin American Perspectives* 23 (1996): 27-48.
29. Metoyer, Cynthia Chavez. *Women and the State in Post-Sandinista Nicaragua*.
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.*
32. FSLN is the acronym for the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (the Sandinista National Liberation Front), which was the Sandinista movement's political party. The

- FSLN continues to exist as a political party in Nicaragua and is the party of the country's president, Daniel Ortega.
33. Metoyer, Cynthia Chavez. *Women and the State in Post-Sandinista Nicaragua*.
 34. Barrios de Chamorro, Violeta. *Memorias de mi gobierno, 1990-1996, Tomo I, Gestión Presidencial*. Managua, Nicaragua: Gobierno de la República de Nicaragua, 1996.; Translations author's own. Original text reads: "...una ambición militar que echaba a perder lo ganado," "...ideologías que destruían nuestras realidades," and "mentiras que ocultaban nuestra historia" (Barrios de Chamorro, 1996: 78).
 35. Metoyer, Cynthia Chavez. *Women and the State in Post-Sandinista Nicaragua*.
 36. *Ibid.*; "Labor Force Structure." *Estimates and Projections of the Economically Active Population, 1950-2010, Yearbook of Labor Statistics, 4th Edition*. International Labor Organization.
 37. GDP per capita growth (annual %) declined during twelve of the fifteen years in the period 1979-1993. Since 1993, GDP per capita has grown slowly, at a rate of 1-5% per annum. The positive relationship between of labor force participation and GDP per capita since 1993 suggests that forces other than declining economic wellbeing may be active in determining changes in female labor force participation ("GDP per capita growth (annual %)").
 38. Wessel, Lois. "Reproductive Rights in Nicaragua: From the Sandinistas to the Government of Violeta Chamorro." Although Barricada self-identifies as an independent source of news with no party or other political affiliation, I find that it tends to portray a point of view that falls to the left of the center. The edition of Barricada quoted in Wessel, 1991: 545 is: Callejas, Magda Enríquez. "A Propósito de los Cien Días: Hablemos de las Mujeres," Barricada, 3 August 1990, 3.
 39. Barrios de Chamorro, Violeta. *Memorias de mi gobierno, 1990-1996, Tomo I, Gestión Presidencial*; Translation author's own. Original text reads: "facilitar una relación óptima entre madre e hijo" (Barrios de Chamorro, 1996: 172).
 40. Metoyer, Cynthia Chavez. *Women and the State in Post-Sandinista Nicaragua*.
 41. *Ibid.*
 42. *Ibid.*
 43. *Ibid.*
 44. *Ibid.*; Ewig, Christina. "The Strengths and Limits of the NGO Women's Movement Model: Shaping Nicaragua's Democratic Institutions." *Latin American Research Review* 34 (1999): 75-102.
 45. Metoyer, Cynthia Chavez. *Women and the State in Post-Sandinista Nicaragua*. During a similar time period (1997-1998), one in fifty women of childbearing age in Bolivia, a country with similar levels of economic development as Nicaragua, was expected to "die from a maternal cause" (Valongueiro, 2001: 13).
 46. "Nicaragua: Maternal Deaths Up 59% According to UNICEF." *Women's International Network News* 26 (2000): 79; Quiros, Ana. "Women's Health and Status in Nicaragua." *Women's International Network News* 17 (1991); There exist significant discrepancies among the data on maternal mortality rates, likely resulting from a combination of factors including inconsistent and incomplete reporting of such cases, varying definitions of maternal mortality, and different methods used to estimate figures for total maternal mortality from reported cases.

47. Acosta, A.A., et al. "Present and Future of Maternal Mortality in Latin America." *International Journal of Gynecology and Obstetrics* 70 (2000): 125-131; During the relevant periods, Nicaragua, Bolivia, and Honduras all had similar levels of economic development, as measured by GDP per capita (PPP, current international \$). Between 1990 and 1998, the range of Nicaragua's GDP per capita was \$2275-2808, while Bolivia's was \$1678-2332 and Honduras' was \$2239-2810 ("GDP per capita, PPP (current international \$)"). This period saw maternal mortality increase in Bolivia and Nicaragua (from 300 to 390 cases and 100 to 139 cases, respectively, while such incidences in Honduras decreased from 221 to 147 (Acosta, 2000: 126; Schwarcz, 2000: 356).
48. Ewig, Christina. "The Strengths and Limits of the NGO Women's Movement Model: Shaping Nicaragua's Democratic Institutions."
49. *Ibid.*
50. Tenorio Sánchez, Gloria Esther, et al. *Mujeres, realidad, y nuevas perspectivas: Aportes a las investigaciones con enfoque de género*. Managua: Instituto de Investigaciones Mujer y Cambio, 1997; Translations author's own. Original text reads: "el ser mujer les implica hacer sacrificios o un esfuerzo mayor que el de los hombres," and "realizar un sinnúmero de actividades que le tornan la vida muy agotadora, una jornada de trabajo bastante pesada. Es no solo tener hijos y marido, es poder estudiar, prepararse, coronar una carrera y poder ayudar a los demás; es combinar y poder hacer cosas diferentes..." (Tenorio, 1997: 23-24).
51. Kampwirth, Karen. *Feminism and the Legacy of Revolution: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas*.
52. Metoyer, Cynthia Chavez. *Women and the State in Post-Sandinista Nicaragua*.
53. Bayard de Volo, Lorraine. *Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs: Gender Identity Politics in Nicaragua, 1979-1999*.
54. *Ibid.*
55. Aviel, JoAnn Fagot. "Political Participation of Women in Latin America." *The Western Political Quarterly* 34 (1981): 156-173.
56. Metoyer, Cynthia Chavez. *Women and the State in Post-Sandinista Nicaragua*.
57. *Gender Equality as Smart Economics: A World Bank Group Gender Action Plan (Fiscal Years 2007-10)*. Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 2006.
58. McKinley Jr., James C. "Rival's Concession Clears War for Ortega, Once and Future President of Nicaragua." *New York Times*, 7 November 2006, late ed., sec. A: 10; Tayler, Letta. "Chances good for Ortega; A softer image and a divided electorate could help leftist make historical comeback in Nicaragua presidency." *Newsday*, 6 November 2006: A26.
59. McKinley Jr., James C. "Rival's Concession Clears War for Ortega, Once and Future President of Nicaragua."
60. Aleman, Filadelfo. "Nicaraguan Congress votes to ban all abortions, even where mother endangered." *The Associated Press*. 26 October 2006.
61. *Ibid.*
62. *Ibid.*

63. Ariès, Sophie. "Women protest new law banning all abortions." *The Telegraph* [London], 28 October 2006: A22.

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