

Disrupting discourses and (re)formulating identities:  
The politics of single motherhood in post-  
revolutionary Nicaragua

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by

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For Sadie Rivas  
1960-1999

# Contents

|   |            |
|---|------------|
| <i>List of figures</i>  | <i>vii</i> |
| <i>Abstract</i>   | <i>ix</i>  |
| <i>Preface</i>  | <i>xi</i>  |
| <i>Participants' profiles</i>   | <i>xix</i> |
| 1 Introduction: Motherhood, identity and revolutionary and counter-revolutionary politics in Nicaragua                                  | 1          |
| 2 Fieldwork in Nicaragua as an embodied researcher: Questions of methodologies, historical involvement, positionality and power         | 37         |
| 3 Redundant men: Single motherhood, absent fathers and the expressions of masculinity   | 77         |
| 4 Manipulating motherhood: The gendered dynamics of state power, revolutionary legacies and the negotiation of sacrifice and femininity | 123        |
| 5 Counter-revolutionary women: Anti-Sandinismo, reconciliation and the geographies of "Resistance"                                      | 177        |
| 6 Love and money in an age of neoliberalism: The complexities of gender and work in Nicaragua   | 223        |
| 7 Responding to Hurricane Mitch: Disasters, gender inequalities and the abnormality of everyday life                                    | 273        |
| 8 Single motherhood, cultural change and the politics of resistance and compliance  | 327        |
| 9 Concluding remarks  | 357        |
| <i>Glossary</i>   | <i>379</i> |
| <i>Abbreviations</i>  | <i>381</i> |
| <i>References</i>   | <i>383</i> |





## List of figures

|      |  |     |
|------|--|-----|
| 1.1  | Country map of Nicaragua   | 23  |
| 1.2  | The municipalities of Matagalpa and the municipality of Waslala  | 25  |
| 2.1  | Fieldsites   | 50  |
| 4.1  | 20 <sup>th</sup> anniversary rally, Matagalpa, 19 July 1999  | 125 |
| 4.2  | The Nicaraguan revolution inscribed on the landscape   | 127 |
| 4.3  | Miliciana de Waswalito   | 133 |
| 4.4  | FSLN leader Daniel Ortega speaking at the 20 <sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations, Matagalpa, 19 July 1999 | 171 |
| 5.1  | The inauguration of El Progreso, Waslala, by President Violeta Chamorro, 1995                                | 206 |
| 5.2  | Getting electricity at El Progreso, Waslala  | 208 |
| 5.3  | The primary school and <i>comedor infantil</i> at El Progreso, Waslala                                       | 209 |
| 5.4  | El Progreso, Waslala   | 212 |
| 5.5  | El Progreso, Waslala   | 213 |
| 7.1  | The settlement at El Mirador   | 287 |
| 7.2  | El Tambor  | 290 |
| 7.3  | El Tambor  | 291 |
| 7.4  | The <i>champas</i> at El Mirador   | 294 |
| 7.5  | The new houses at El Mirador   | 295 |
| 7.6  | Construction at El Mirador   | 305 |
| 7.7  | NGO saturation at El Hatillo   | 310 |
| 7.8  | NGO saturation at El Hatillo   | 311 |
| 7.9  | Flooding in central Matagalpa, October 1999  | 321 |
| 7.10 | El Chuisle   | 323 |
| 7.11 | A house destroyed by the 1999 rains  | 323 |



## Abstract

There is a clear relationship between motherhood and space in the sense that motherhood is constituted spatially, taking specific and shifting forms in different spaces and because gendered geographies are made, remade or contested in terms of how women practise motherhood and other social identities in particular spaces. The meanings of motherhood are subject to constant renegotiation when gender identity is lived and constructed in times of hardship, political change or upheaval. Over the last few decades, Nicaragua has experienced dictatorship, insurrection, revolution, Contra war, more than a decade of neoliberal structural adjustment policies and a number of disasters including Hurricane Mitch which hit Nicaragua in October 1998.

The social and cultural context in which women mother is a complex one. Family life is unstable and fluid and Nicaragua has large numbers of single mothers. However, a number of institutional actors have attempted to undermine this complexity by trying to fix the meanings of motherhood, family, femininity, masculinity and sexuality in simplified and reified ways. These attempts contribute to the pervasiveness of dominant discourses of motherhood.

In many ways, everyday practices of motherhood are at odds with dominant discourses and the goal of this thesis is to broaden understandings of the way motherhood intersects with other cultural processes in particular spaces and of how women negotiate competing facets of multiple identities.

Based on qualitative research conducted in Matagalpa with a group of single mothers, this thesis explores a number of arenas in which women negotiate motherhood, including family breakdown, revolution and counterrevolution, structural adjustment and disaster, and demonstrates how everyday practices challenge dominant understandings. Given that individuals participate in a number of discursive practices simultaneously, the intersection of dominant discourses and everyday practices work to create specific geographies of mothering. This means for example that women might adopt more masculine subject positions in relation to work and family while engaging in maternal politics in the political sphere or that male violence towards women can be condemned and single motherhood adopted as a positive form of identity assertion while uneasiness is expressed about the absence of fathers in children's lives. By contextualising the conditions in which women mother and focusing on how individual women feel about and reflect upon their lives, this study illustrates the multiple dimensions of motherhood which exist within Nicaraguan culture and the contradictions faced by women who mother in sites of intense cultural struggle.

This study has important implications for the epistemological transformation that is taking place within feminist geography in particular and within human geography more broadly. Motherhood has the discursive power to shape and define gender identities, but it can also be used to unsettle or destabilise gender and sexuality in material and discursive space.



## Preface

The theoretical and methodological framework of this thesis is a recent personal development for me and dates back to the completion of my Masters degree in International Cultural Change in the Department of Geography at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne in 1997. However, the processes which led me to researching the question of motherhood in Matagalpa date back much further and can be attributed to my friendship with a particularly special Nicaraguan woman, Sadie Rivas.

I first became interested in Nicaragua in the mid-1980s when I was an undergraduate student of Modern Languages at the University of Bradford. At the time, Nicaragua was at the height of the Contra war. The obsessive anti-communism of the Reagan administration had led to the United States funding and equipping a counter-revolutionary army to wage war against the Sandinistas who had overthrown the Somoza dictatorship in 1979. The Sandinista revolution and its stance against US imperialism became a source of inspiration to many people on the left in the UK and elsewhere and gave rise to a massive solidarity movement in which I became involved.

My political activism in the UK in the late 1980s and early 1990s centred almost exclusively on Central America and mainly on Nicaragua. At this historical point in time, in the middle of the Cold War, and given the situation in neighbouring Central American countries such as Guatemala and El Salvador, it was easy to idealise the Sandinista project and condemn US imperialism. Unlike many others within the solidarity movement, I did not visit Nicaragua in the 1980s. At the beginning of 1990, I moved up to Newcastle upon Tyne to take a lectureship in Spanish at the University of Northumbria. In February of that year, the Sandinistas lost the general elections, an event which came as a total shock to the UK solidarity movement as it had to people within Nicaragua, as all the exit polls had indicated they would win the elections. The Sandinista electoral defeat had a profound effect on me and I realised that I could not postpone visiting Nicaragua any longer. In July of that year I travelled to Nicaragua as part of a UK solidarity brigade and worked in Boaco on a reforestation and soil erosion project. After my visit, I became much more heavily involved in political campaigning, carrying out

fundraising and lobbying work within the Newcastle Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign (NSC). We ran a café on Sundays selling Latin American food as a fundraiser and frequently brought speakers to Newcastle from Central America to raise awareness of the political situation there. In addition, I introduced Latin American studies to a number of our courses taught at the university. I returned to Nicaragua twice more, in 1991 and 1993, this time with some support from my department to conduct research on the privatisation process and structural adjustment in Nicaragua and to collect both campaigning and teaching materials. At this point in my life, my political activism and my academic interests had begun to coincide. It was through the Newcastle NSC that I met my partner Philip Vine, a New Zealander with whom I later moved to New Zealand.

It was during my second visit to Nicaragua in 1991 that I first visited Matagalpa, the region which subsequently became the field site for my PhD research, and met and became friends with Sadie Rivas. At the time, the NSC had a scheme whereby for six months of each year, a member of the FSLN (Sandinista Front for National Liberation) would come to Britain to receive English tuition in Norwich and travel around the country campaigning for the FSLN. I was staying in Managua with Hal Brown, the NSC co-ordinator, and he suggested I travel to Matagalpa. The next person to visit the UK on this scheme was a Matagalpan Sandinista called Sadie Rivas and she was keen to meet someone from Britain who could speak Spanish and give her some valuable information.

So I travelled to Matagalpa and stayed with Sadie. At the time she was the co-ordinator of the local branch of the Communal Movement, a now autonomous neighbourhood lobbying organisation which had evolved from the Sandinista Defence Committees (CDS). I spent a fascinating few days with Sadie. While I filled her in on life in Britain and what to expect, she introduced me to a number of leading political and community leaders and showed me many of the Communal Movement projects in and around Matagalpa.

It was during this visit to Nicaragua that I also discovered that I was unexpectedly pregnant. Prior to my visit, José Lara, a Honduran resident in Nicaragua who had been studying in Newcastle, presented the Newcastle NSC group with a small gift before his

return to Nicaragua. It was a wooden carving of a Nicaraguan fertility goddess, which we passed round and subsequently placed in the café. When I arrived in Nicaragua after a few weeks in Mexico and Guatemala, I confessed my suspected pregnancy to Hal who dropped me off at a women's health clinic the following morning on his way to work so I could get a pregnancy test. It turned out the clinic did not actually have a laboratory but there was one close by to which I was directed. The women working in the clinic insisted however that I return to let them know whether I was pregnant or not. An hour later, still digesting the rather shocking information, I returned to confirm I was indeed pregnant. The first thing the women did was offer me a termination, although abortion was and always had been illegal in Nicaragua. Only when I declined and said I intended to continue with the pregnancy did they then congratulate me. My shock at my own unplanned pregnancy was augmented when I returned to Newcastle at the end of the summer to find that all the couples in the Newcastle NSC had fallen pregnant and the following spring four NSC babies were born. Inevitably, we have always blamed José and his Nicaraguan fertility goddess.

This experience meant that for me the question of motherhood, Nicaragua and solidarity with the revolution became inextricably linked. My visit to Sadie in 1991 was also marked therefore by the emotional enormity of my impending motherhood.

Sadie came to the UK shortly after I left Nicaragua in 1991. Although she was based in Norwich, we spent a lot of time together within the solidarity movement and she visited me in Newcastle. She became involved in the campaigning activities of our local NSC group and we became good friends. I returned to Matagalpa to visit Sadie again in 1993, this time with my partner, Phil, and daughter, Natasha.

Sadie grew up in a prominent middle class Matagalpan family which was bitterly divided during the revolution. Sadie, her mother and two brothers all took up arms against the Somoza dictatorship and joined the guerrillas. Sadie's father, on the other hand, was totally opposed to the revolution, and after the triumph of the revolution, he left Nicaragua for Miami and swore he would never return as long as the Sandinistas were in power. Sadie became a prominent FSLN activist during the 1980s, at one time heading

the local branch of AMNLAE (the Sandinista women's organisation) in Matagalpa and later leading the Communal Movement. Her husband and the father of her second child was killed in a Contra ambush in 1987. There is no doubt that Sadie's life, in particular her total political commitment to the principles of the Sandinista revolution and her role as the main income earner in the household to bring up her two children, has been the main source of inspiration for my research. And it is thanks to Sadie that I have so many friends and contacts in Matagalpa.

When I embarked on my PhD research, it seemed logical to go to Matagalpa and follow up the question of motherhood in Nicaragua which had fascinated me since the early 1990s. By this time, I had two children who accompanied me on my fieldwork. Sadie had left the Communal Movement and was now working for CARE on a sustainable agriculture project. In 1999, we went to live in Sadie's house with her two children and a niece and nephew. Her recent alienation from the Sandinista leadership did not deter her commitment to the most impoverished people for whom she struggled tirelessly. Sadie never benefited from her position in the party as many Sandinistas have done, but rather alienated herself from the leadership because of her willingness to openly criticise the way in which she believed the revolution had been betrayed because of personal interests.

Despite her long working hours, she always found time to make sure we were all right. She often invited me and the children to attend *atoleras* with her in communities in which she was working. These are gatherings held by *campesino* communities in order to celebrate successful corn harvests. Sadie seemed to be in her element at these celebrations, perhaps because of the way in which they are representative of the empowerment of marginalised groups.

Sadie did things that would be unthinkable to most middle class Matagalpans. She let homeless people sleep on our porch. The hungry children who knocked on the door daily asking for food were never turned away and because of Sadie's example, my own children learnt to fill bags with rice and beans left over from lunch and give them to the street children. Because of our friendship she was reluctant to become one of my participants in a formal sense but talked openly and honestly about her life, her family,



the political situation in Nicaragua, information which she said I was free to use in my thesis. She also talked to me constantly about my work and infected me with her love of Brazilian soap operas, playing cards and drinking rum.

Two months into my fieldwork, Sadie was killed in a car accident on her way back to Matagalpa from Managua. It was the saddest moment of my life and something that I was totally unprepared for. Being in Matagalpa without Sadie was incredibly painful and only when she died did I get a sense of how widely she was loved and how many people's lives she had touched. At 4am on the second night of her wake, I pushed my way through the dozens of people who had filled the house, and went out into the street. The street in front of her house was filled with hundreds of people who had come to pay their respects, from Sandinista leaders to *campesinos* from rural areas. We filled the cathedral for the funeral on the following day.

Sadie's accidental death in a car crash seemed terribly senseless when contemplating how she had lived and the risks she had taken to fight for what she had so fiercely believed in. She survived a 30-day hunger strike in protest at the Somoza dictatorship and as a teenage guerrilla fighter she managed to dodge Somoza's guard on numerous occasions.

While I am still dealing with my grief over Sadie's death, it is important to acknowledge publicly what she has meant for my life and my work. Because of Sadie's life and death, this project means far more to me than an intellectual endeavour. My area of research is inseparable from my friendship with Sadie and my perceptions of her political activism and her mothering. It was because of my friendship with Sadie that I ended up studying the topic that I did, in the place that I did.

As I wrote my thesis, I thought constantly about Sadie and what she meant to me. At times I felt uncomfortable about writing about her in this way and yet I simultaneously felt an enormous sense of responsibility to her struggle. I tell my children how lucky we are to have known Sadie and we must always remember how she never turned people away and try to emulate that as much as we can.

In Matagalpa, Sadie is remembered for the way in which she embodied revolutionary integrity. I remember her as my most inspirational friend, and could not therefore write a thesis which, in its observations on single motherhood, detaches itself from the emotional influence of my experience of Sadie's life and death. Consequently, I feel indebted to her life and her struggle, and could not begin my thesis without first acknowledging her contribution to it.

In addition to Sadie, there are a number of other people to whom I am deeply indebted and without whose help, support and encouragement, this thesis would never have been completed. Above all, I would like to thank my research participants for their openness and willingness to share their lives with me and for providing such rich data. I would also like to thank my partner Philip Vine and our two children Natasha and Ruben for their fantastic support and for tolerating my passion for Nicaragua, which I acknowledge has not always been easy for them. I am also hugely grateful to Eric Pawson, Sara Kindon and Camilla Cockerton, my supervisors in New Zealand, for believing in me and giving me the confidence I needed to keep writing. Thanks also go to the Department of Geography at the University of Canterbury for essential financial support, to Marney Brosnan and Dean Aldridge for their help with maps, figures and printing and to Nina Laurie of the Department of Geography at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne for helping me to find my niche as a Latin Americanist geographer.

In Nicaragua, there are numerous people and organisations who have helped me in a multiplicity of ways. My thanks go particularly to the Communal Movement of Matagalpa, especially Sergio Sáenz, Xilo Romero and Jeaneth Castillo, for their invaluable support with selecting participants, providing computing facilities and transport to El Hatillo and El Molino and also for helping me find a new home so quickly and efficiently when things became hard. I would also like to thank the following organisations; the Colectivo de Mujeres de Matagalpa, Grupo Venancia, Movimiento de Mujeres Madres Solteras y Desempleadas, Unión de Cooperativas Agrícolas and the Asociación de Madres Víctimas de Guerra for providing research participants and information and Puntos de Encuentro, especially Oswaldo Montoya, Veronica Campanile and Montserrat Fernández for enabling me to submit my work to a Nicaraguan audience

in Managua in June 2001. Thanks go also to ex-Contra combatants Pablo Roberto Fley and Esmérito Guido for putting me in contact with the women of the Resistance in Waslala and to Esvetlana Contreras for setting up an interview with the Minister of the Family. I would also like to thank Shelley McConnell and the Carter Center in Atlanta for selecting me as an international election observer for the 2001 general elections which enabled me to return to Nicaragua in October of that year.

I am especially grateful to my friends in Nicaragua who helped me through the hard times when Sadie died and with whom I have spent innumerable good times. Special thanks go to Irving Larios, Petronila Mejía, José Lara, Paul Leiba, Miriam Herrera, Zoila Hernández and Xilo Romero.

Additional thanks must also go to my friends in New Zealand who have been happy to listen to me talk about my work or have cared for my children at various times. In this regard, I would like to thank Guadalupe Rosales, Jane Harrison, Diana Manson, Suzanne Moffatt, Gerard Reissmann, Peter Mayell, Karen Ashbury, Antony Kennedy and Barbara Allen. Finally, I would like to thank the children of Beckenham School who collected vast quantities of stationery and school materials which we donated to children in Nicaragua and to Medical Aid Abroad in Christchurch for their generous donation of medical supplies.



## Participants' profiles

The following is a list of the 33 women who took part in this study as research participants. All names are pseudonyms. All ages and occupations refer to 1999.

**Adriana Silva**, 33, single mother, one child, born when she was 26, tertiary studies in teaching in Cuba, actor in women's theatre and Sandinista sympathiser, lived in central Matagalpa.

**Ana González**, 28, single mother, two children, first child at age 19, secondary education completed, Sandinista sympathiser and previous member of JS, pre-school educator and Communal Movement activist, lived in central Matagalpa.

**Azucena Mejía**, 27, single mother, one child, born when she was 17, secondary education completed, actor in women's theatre and Sandinista sympathiser, lived in central Matagalpa.

**Carla Martínez**, 43, single mother, five children, first child at age 24, secondary education completed, guerrilla fighter and clandestine member of AMPRONAC, Communal Movement leader, house severely flooded in the 1999 rains, lived in central Matagalpa.

**Clara Blandón**, 35, single mother, three children, first child at age 19, completing a university degree, Sandinista sympathiser and previous member of JS, worked as a radio presenter, lived in central Matagalpa.

**Claudia Moreno**, 39, single mother, four living children, one child died as a baby, first child at age 20, university degree, guerrilla fighter in 1970s, Sandinista militant and co-operative movement leader, lived in San Ramón.

**Elsa Jirón**, 50, single mother and widow, 12 children, had first child at age 16, no formal education, house severely damaged by Hurricane Mitch, member of Movement of Single and Unemployed Mothers, worked in domestic service, lived in El Tambor, Matagalpa.

**Evelyn Hernández**, 59, single mother and Contra widow, six children, 12 pregnancies in total, one son was killed in the war, had first child at age 21, primary education to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, Contra supporter, worked in subsistence agriculture, member of the Mothers' Association, lived in El Progreso, Waslala.

**Graciela Blanco**, 36, single mother, one child, had her when she was 24, tertiary studies completed, member of EPS in 1980s, worked in women's literacy, originally from the Atlantic Coast, lived in central Matagalpa.

**Isabel Quezada**, 39, single mother and Contra widow, seven children, eight pregnancies in total, first child at age 15, secondary education to 3<sup>rd</sup> year, founder of the Mothers' Association, lived in Waslala.

**Juana Granada**, 33, single mother, lived with her mother, three children, first child at age 15, secondary education completed, engaged in unpaid work for the Movement of Single and Unemployed Mothers, lived in central Matagalpa.

**Lucía Espinoza**, 39, financially dependent live in partner who was the father of four of her five children, first child at age 15, secondary education completed in 1996, guerrilla fighter in 1970s, Sandinista militant and Communal Movement leader, lived in Solingalpa, Matagalpa.

**Luz Marina Castillo**, 39, single mother and Contra widow, eight children, ten pregnancies in total, first child at age 23, no formal education, Contra supporter and combatant, worked in subsistence agriculture, lived in El Progreso, Waslala.

**Lydia Sánchez**, 35, single mother, three children, four pregnancies in total, had first child at age 19, secondary education to 4<sup>th</sup> year, Sandinista militant, previous member of JS, house destroyed by Hurricane Mitch, worked for a coffee exporting company, lived in Barrio Richardson in Matagalpa.

**Marcia Picado**, 35, single mother, five children, six pregnancies in total, first child at age 17, primary education completed, made homeless by Hurricane Mitch, worked in *beneficios* or in the informal sector, lived in El Mirador, Matagalpa.

**Margarita Muñoz**, 45, single mother, two children, five pregnancies in total, first child at age 26, completing a Master's degree, guerrilla fighter in 1970s, second promotion Sandinista militant, Sandinista union leader in 1980s, worked in education and development, lived in central Matagalpa.

**María Dolores Gallegos**, 28, one child who had recently died, lived with her mother, secondary education completed, engaged in seamstressing and unpaid work for the Movement of Unemployed and Single Mothers, lived in central Matagalpa.

**María Julieta Vega**, 55, single mother and widow, nine living children, 17 pregnancies in total (included three sets of twins, lost 11 children), one son killed in the war, primary education completed, member of the Mothers' Association, worked in domestic service and as a community midwife, lived in Waslala.

**Marianela Tablada**, 31, single mother, three children, first child at 19, member of EPS in 1980s, army nurse in 90s, Sandinista militant, secondary education completed in 1996, lived in central Matagalpa.

**Marta Navarro**, 65, single mother, eight children, first child at age 15, primary education completed, worked with Somoza's guard in 1970s but became politicised through her Sandinista children, businesswoman, lived in central Matagalpa.

**Mercedes Hierro**, 25, single mother and Contra widow, three children, first child at age 14, primary education completed, Contra supporter, member of the Mothers' Association, worked as a hairdresser, lived in El Progreso, Waslala.

**Milagros Herrera**, 55, single mother, three living children, three others died as infants, first child at 19, no formal education, made homeless by Hurricane Mitch, worked in subsistence farming, seamstressing and unpaid community work, lived in El Hatillo, Sébaco.

**Mónica Avilés**, 30, single mother, four children, six pregnancies in total, first child at age 17, Contra combatant in 1980s, 1<sup>st</sup> grade of primary education, member of the Mothers' Association, worked in subsistence agriculture, lived in Waslala.

**Norma Aguilar**, 42, single mother and Contra widow, 7 children, 9 pregnancies in total, two sons killed in the war, first child at age 17, primary education to 4<sup>th</sup> grade completed, Contra collaborator, member of the Mothers' Association, sold *nacatamales* and did seamstressing, lived in El Progreso, Waslala.

**Olga Jarquín**, 33, single mother, one child and one "adopted" child, had her child at age 29, tertiary studies completed, graphic designer for women's organisation, lived in central Matagalpa.

**Patricia Cedeño**, 53, lived with father of children, nine children, 13 pregnancies in total, had first child at 18, no formal education, house destroyed by Hurricane Mitch, worked in subsistence agriculture, member of Movement of Single and Unemployed Mothers, lived in Apantillo Siales.

**Paula Montecino**, 14, single mother, lived with her mother and siblings, Ramona Dávila's daughter, one baby, first child and pregnancy, no formal education or employment, made homeless by Hurricane Mitch, lived in El Mirador, Matagalpa.

**Ramona Dávila**, 33, live in partner who was not the father of her children, five children (four biological and one "adopted"), five pregnancies in total, first child at age 16, no formal education but learnt to read and write in the Literacy Crusade, Sandinista militant, made homeless by Hurricane Mitch, worked in informal sector selling lottery tickets or *tortillas*, lived in El Mirador, Matagalpa.

**Rosa Laviana**, 38, lived with father of children after a reconciliation, six living children, nine pregnancies in total, lost 3 premature babies, first child at 18, primary education to 4<sup>th</sup> grade, house destroyed by Hurricane Mitch, engaged in subsistence farming and unpaid community work in health and hurricane reconstruction, community midwife, lived in El Hatillo, Sébaco,

**Rosario Peña**, 49, single mother, 14 children, 15 pregnancies in total, first child at age 17, raising six grandchildren, primary education to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, subsistence farming, brewed *cususa*, community midwife and health *brigadista*, lived in El Molino, Sébaco.

**Silvia Montiel**, 36, married to father of two of her children, three biological and two “adopted” children, first child at 20, secondary education to 3<sup>rd</sup> year, guerrilla fighter in 1970s, second promotion militant and Sandinista councillor, Communal Movement leader, house destroyed by Hurricane Mitch, engaged in subsistence farming and community work, lived in El Hatillo, Sébaco.

**Sonia Aguirre**, 19, single mother, lived with her parents, one child, born when she was 17, three pregnancies in total, primary education to 4<sup>th</sup> grade, Sandinista sympathiser, house destroyed by Hurricane Mitch, worked in unpaid community work or domestic service, lived in El Hatillo, Sébaco.

**Verona Mora**, 35, single mother, one child, had him at age 28, guerrilla fighter, member of EPS in 1980s, soldier in women’s prison in 90s, Sandinista militant, completing a university degree, lived in Solingalpa, Matagalpa.



## Introduction: Motherhood, identity and revolutionary and counter-revolutionary politics in Nicaragua

Los sueños revolucionarios encontraron en mí tierra fértil. Lo mismo sucedió con otros sueños propios de mi género. Sólo que mis príncipes azules fueron guerrilleros y que mis hazañas heroicas las hice al mismo tiempo que cambiaba pañales y hervía mamaderas.

He sido dos mujeres y he vivido dos vidas. Una de mis mujeres quería hacerlo todo según los anales clásicos de la feminidad: casarse, tener hijos, ser complaciente, dócil y nutricia. La otra quería los privilegios masculinos: independencia, valerse por sí misma, tener vida pública, movilidad, amantes. Aprender a balancear sus fuerzas para que no me desgarraran sus luchas a mordiscos y jaladas de pelos me ha tomado gran parte de mi vida. Creo que al fin he logrado que ambas coexistan bajo la misma piel. Sin renunciar a ser mujer, creo que he logrado ser hombre.

Revolutionary dreams grew within me like seeds in fertile soil. The same happened with other dreams typical of my gender. Except that my charming princes were guerrilla fighters and I carried out my heroic deeds at the same time as I changed nappies and boiled babies' bottles.

I have been two women and I have lived two lives. One of my selves wanted to do everything according to the classical annals of femininity: get married, have children, be compliant, docile and nurturing. The other wanted masculine privileges: independence, to stand on my own two feet, to have a public life, mobility, lovers. Learning to balance and unify their forces so that I would not be torn apart by their bites and hair pulling has taken up most of my life. I think that in the end I have managed to be both under the same skin. Without renouncing being a woman, I think I have managed to be a man.

(Belli 2001:12)

### **Introduction**

In this extract, prominent Nicaraguan writer, poet and revolutionary, Gioconda Belli, encapsulates the complexities of motherhood, sexuality and politics in Nicaragua. I have constantly been moved and inspired by women such as Gioconda Belli, Nora Astorga and my dear friend Sadie Rivas; by their revolutionary commitment and its intersection with their roles and identities as mothers in all its cultural and geographic specificity. While motherhood often comes into conflict with political action, it also often forms the basis of it. This thesis examines the spatial constitution of motherhood and gender identity in a

post-revolutionary and development context and focuses primarily on how women negotiate the gap which exists between dominant discourses<sup>1</sup> of motherhood and its everyday practices.

This thesis explicitly engages with post-structuralism in a politically committed way to challenge the totalising logic of dominant discourses of motherhood along with essentialist and unitary conceptions of women which confine women as mothers to certain spaces. This can be achieved by shifting the focus of the research onto the constitution of multiple identities and through an awareness of the contextualisation of these processes.

It is based on fieldwork conducted in Nicaragua in 1999 and 2001, which consisted mainly of in-depth interviews with single mothers. Single mothers were selected as research participants because cultural patterns in Nicaragua, along with political and economic imperatives, have meant that single mothers are numerous in society but are marginalised in dominant discourses. Through qualitative research, this thesis explores how women who are single mothers negotiate the gaps between official discourses and social practices in their daily lives. It focuses specifically on what Moore (1994a:50) has referred to as “the relationship between gender identity and gender discourses, between gender as it is lived and gender as it is constructed.”

The rationale for this thesis emerges from a combination of my own personal experiences in and perceptions of Nicaragua and the conceptual limitations of existing studies on motherhood. I believe a more nuanced conceptualisation of motherhood can be gained from a post-structuralist interpretation of motherhood in the context of post-revolutionary Nicaragua. In my Masters thesis (Cupples 1997) I addressed the question of the politicisation and institutionalisation of motherhood in Latin America more broadly and considered its feminist potential. At the time I was trying to reconcile my own identities as a mother and a feminist as I was developing a growing interest in motherhood as a lived experience in Latin America and the culturally specific meanings Latin American women attach to motherhood.

This chapter serves as an introduction to the qualitative data and analysis of subsequent chapters. It outlines the politics and practices of motherhood in Nicaragua, provides a brief historical background, examines the social, economic and political context in which most of the fieldwork was carried out in 1999 and provides specific information on the fieldsites under investigation. The chapter ends with a discussion of the limitations of existing literature, an explanation of the theoretical approach used and an overview of the thesis structure.

### **Motherhood in Nicaragua: Politics and practices**

Motherhood is undoubtedly an important source of identity for women in Latin America. Like other Latin American countries, Nicaragua is a deeply Catholic country<sup>2</sup> where gender imagery pertaining to the Madonna is potent and informs local discourses of good mothering. According to Stevens (1973), the cult of the Virgin Mary or *marianismo* in Latin America can be seen as a female counterpart to *machismo* and is based on notions of self-sacrificial motherhood and the idea that women, because they are mothers, are spiritually superior to men. Consequently, motherhood is elevated to a high status. While identifying women primarily as mothers could be considered oppressive to women in many ways, Stevens believes that many Latin American women would be reluctant to relinquish the privileges and status conferred upon them by motherhood.

However, Stevens' approach to motherhood and *marianismo* fails to acknowledge the extent to which the paradigm is both temporally and geographically specific. It overlooks the ways in which maternal identities are constituted in space and vary geographically. While the *marianismo* paradigm can be identified across much of Latin America, it is subscribed to and subverted in culturally specific ways (Montecino 1995). The extent to which mothers are able to or wish to subscribe to notions of *marianismo* depends very much on local conditions. Conformity or otherwise with the paradigm is also a temporally dynamic process as gender roles, relations and identities shift over a woman's life course. Consequently, some authors have rejected or attempted to 'debunk' the *marianismo* paradigm. Ehlers (1991), writing on Guatemala, believes that the model is problematic because women's tolerance of men has little to do with women's elevated

status and more to do with the social, economic and sexual inequality of Guatemalan women with respect to men. Likewise, Lancaster (1992), writing on masculinity in Nicaragua, also rejects it on the basis that, unlike *machismo*, the term was not used by his informants and furthermore because sexual purity in the sense of virginity is not considered to be an appropriate ideal to which Nicaraguan women should aspire. Guy's (1997) historical study of motherhood in Argentina demonstrates how *marianismo* fails to capture the complexity of women's lives. Fuller (1995:245-6) has argued that we should view both *machismo* and *marianismo* not as "absolute and static realities but as ways of symbolising understandings of masculinity and femininity which are valid in different contexts and situations".

I accept that women's actual sexualities in Nicaragua have little to do with the Virgin Mary and any paradigm that attempts to explain womanhood over a vast geographical area and over time is conceptually untenable. However, there is no doubt that Nicaraguan popular culture places much emphasis on the cult of Mary and that this translates into an elevation of 'the mother'. One of the most important festivals in Nicaragua is the Feast of the Immaculate Conception or *Purísima* in early December. Many people make altars in their homes around an image of the Virgin Mary. The altar is surrounded in flowers and candles and guests are invited to sing hymns to the Virgin and gifts of fruit and sweets are handed out to guests. The celebration ends with the *gritería*, when people go from house to house proclaiming the immaculate conception. The revering of the Virgin Mary extends to mothers more generally who are seen to possess the capacity for sacrifice characteristic of the Virgin if not her sexual purity. This is reflected in the Mother's Day celebrations which take place on the 30 May. While, as in other countries, Mother's Day becomes an excuse for commercialism and the giving of gifts, the build up to the day is enormous, with all forms of media and corporations, government and non-governmental organisations constantly paying tribute to mothers in a multiplicity of ways.

The power of motherhood imagery in Nicaragua means not only that motherhood has frequently been politicised by mothers themselves in response to particular social, economic and political conditions, but also that ideologies of motherhood have also been constantly manipulated by political forces in Nicaragua, both on the left and on the right,

to achieve political goals. In addition, Nicaraguan popular culture is saturated with images and messages of the desirability of heterosexual romance.

Despite the cultural concessions to Catholicism which are made, there is no doubt that real life with respect to family, motherhood and sexuality in Nicaragua does not correspond to the inflexible morality of the Catholic Church. One of my participants said to me that in Nicaragua “what people say and what people do are completely different things” (Azucena Mejía, 30 May 2001).

Historical factors in Nicaragua such as the revolutionary experience of the 1980s and the neoliberal experience of the 1990s, which intermingle with the persistence of the cult of sacrificial motherhood, shape mothering practices in culturally specific ways. In many ways, however, dominant discourses and ideals of motherhood are at odds with actual mothering practices. The present government is attempting to promote a return to the morality of the nuclear family, values which to varying degrees also find resonance within the Church and the media. These values are being promoted in a country which has low marriage and high informal cohabitation rates, large numbers of single mothers and the highest birth rate, the highest teenage pregnancy rate and the highest maternal mortality rate in Latin America. Most women’s lives do not conform to idealised notions of motherhood, marriage and family. For most Nicaraguan women family life is unstable and fluid. The fluidity of family life, while clearly having a destabilising influence on notions of conventional femininities, does not tend to be discursively acknowledged and consequently, single mothers in Nicaragua tend to be marginalised by dominant discourses and overlooked in state policy.

There are therefore many ways that women mother in Nicaragua which not only demonstrate a high degree of fluidity with respect to mothering practices, but also a willingness or necessity to undermine the sanctity of biological motherhood. Pregnancy and motherhood start at an early age for many Nicaraguan women and most of my participants had children before they were 20. Consequently, many women give birth without ever having formed a family unit with the father of their children. Many women never live with the fathers of their children and may therefore depend on other extended

family members for survival. Informal cohabitation is far more common than legal marriage. The government health and demography (ENDESA) survey found that only 26 per cent of women aged between 15 and 49 were married, while 24 per cent were single, 33 per cent lived in a de facto partnership (*unión libre*) and 17 per cent were separated, widowed or divorced (INEC 1999).

Just as motherhood starts early for many women, for others it never seems to end. One participant, after having raised 14 children of her own in a fairly remote rural area in Sébaco, was now caring for six grandchildren. They lived with her as their mothers were all working in the capital, Managua.

The cultural emphasis on motherhood means that men are much more likely to identify with their roles as sons, rather than with their roles as fathers (Fuller 1995). Fuller, referring to Latin America more generally, states that the maternal image is further strengthened by the notion of father as absence. Frequently fathers do not have much input into raising their children.

At times, however, women also feel unable to look after their children themselves and it is not uncommon for children to be cared for and raised by other family members or by non-family. According to the ENDESA survey, 15 per cent of Nicaraguan households have an “adopted” child, or a child who does not live with his or her biological parents even though they are alive (INEC 1999). Sometimes children are raised by grandparents or aunts and uncles, with varying degrees of parental input. Occasionally children are simply given away or *regalados*. One of my participants was abandoned as a baby at the entrance to a convent in Granada and was raised by nuns until the age of four when she was taken in by a wealthy family to work as a maid. Another participant “adopted” a baby from a local woman who did not want to keep him and found he had been badly beaten and mistreated. Another was “maintaining” two girls, now teenagers, who spent a lot of time in her house when they were little and eventually never went home. In one case, the family moved away, but the child stayed with her “adoptive” mother.

While the anti-mother or the mother who refuses to nurture her child is absent in most public discourse, the newspapers often report (with a significant degree of moral judgement) on incidences of babies being abandoned or thrown into latrines shortly after birth (See, for example, Peralta 1999, Somarriba 1999). One of my participants told me her first baby died because she did not care for him properly.

Giving birth as well as raising children is also fraught with difficulties for many Nicaraguan women. Nicaragua has the highest maternal mortality rate in Latin America. While this rate can be attributed both to poverty and lack of access to antenatal care in rural areas, the widespread nature of illegal and unsafe abortions is one of the main causes of maternal death (Elmer et al. 1997, FNUAP 2000). While abortion has never been made legal in Nicaragua, it is estimated that around 6000 illegal abortions take place every year (FNUAP 2000). Research conducted in the 1980s showed that botched abortions constituted 60 per cent of hospital admissions in Managua's women's hospital, an average of ten women per day (Molyneux 1988). Maternal mortality rates are difficult to estimate accurately. The Ministry of Health estimates maternal mortality to be 133 deaths per 100 000 pregnancies, a third of which corresponds to teenagers (FNUAP 2000). As the FNUAP report indicates, given the extent of clandestine abortion in Nicaragua, the actual figures are probably much higher. The Women's Collective in Matagalpa recorded 25 maternal deaths in that region in 1998 but points out that deaths which result from illegal abortions are often not reported (Ara et al. 1999). Attempts to bring about reform in this area are met with a barrage of criticism, from both the Catholic Church and the right wing media. A proposed bill not to legalise abortion, but to reduce the penalties for those carrying out or having abortions, brought an extensive series of anti-abortion articles and editorials in Nicaraguan daily newspaper *La Prensa* in 1999.

In many ways, in the present socio-economic climate, there is a blurring between children's and adults' lives. Childhood for many children is cut short by poverty, adolescence for many teenage girls is terminated by pregnancy and motherhood and many adult women are attempting to finish the primary and secondary education they were deprived of as children (Cupples 2001).

Mothering practices in Nicaragua take place in a context of high levels of material deprivation and in a country which has experienced a period of revolutionary transformation. Nicaragua's unique geographical and geopolitical location and its concomitant historical trajectory meant that the Cold War was played out there during the 1980s. Despite attempts by successive governments since 1990 to erase the weight of historical memory, present-day Nicaragua is a product of the revolutionary struggle which took place there in the 1970s and 1980s. As former FSLN deputy leader Sergio Ramírez (1999:17) states, the revolution did not bring justice, wealth or development, but its greatest achievement was the consolidation of democracy with the recognition of the electoral defeat and other more subtle achievements, which remain "bajo el alud de la debacle que enterró también los sueños éticos..." or "buried in the avalanche of the debacle that also buried ethical dreams...".

Despite attempts at social transformation in the 1980s, today Nicaragua is the second most impoverished country in Latin America after Haiti. Per capita GNP for 1999 was only US\$370 per year<sup>3</sup> and 44 per cent of the population of 4,806,700 inhabitants (1998) live on less than US\$1 per day (UNDP 2000), while 75 per cent live on less than US\$2 per day (Ortega Campos 1999). In the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI)<sup>4</sup>, Nicaragua ranks 116 out of a total of 174 countries (UNDP 2000). Nicaragua also has one of the largest external debts per capita, with each Nicaraguan owing US\$1,135 to foreign and multilateral creditors (Potter 2000). Its economy is based mainly on the export of coffee, sugar, bananas and cotton and on the production of corn, rice and beans for domestic consumption.

### **Historical background to Nicaragua**

Nicaragua's independence from Spain in 1821 left it politically and economically weak with both British and United States influences continuing to direct domestic affairs (Fagan 1987). This foreign intervention was enabled largely by the way in which internal politics were dominated by violent conflicts between Liberals and Conservatives and was also encouraged by Nicaragua's strategic positioning between the Pacific and the Atlantic seaboard (Plunkett 1999). For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Nicaragua had to endure



significant US presence which culminated in the US-backed Contra war in the 1980s. In 1909, to protect US business interests in mining, fruit and logging, the United States intervened to destabilise the government of José Santos Zelaya and by 1910 had installed a pro-US government. To prevent rebellion against this government, the US Marines occupied Nicaragua from 1912-1925 and again from 1926-1933. During the second occupation, the Marines had to fight a nationalist and anti-imperialist guerrilla army led by Augusto César Sandino. The success of this movement and the popular support it enjoyed from workers and peasants affected the United States' "dollar diplomacy" and forced the withdrawal of the Marines who were replaced by a US-trained and backed National Guard headed by Anastasio Somoza. Within two months the National Guard had become a political instrument (Close 1999). Sandino was persuaded to come down from the mountains and negotiate with the government in peace talks. Despite assurances that his life would be respected, he was assassinated by Somoza's guard and Somoza then became the country's dictator.

The Somoza family ruled Nicaragua for more than 40 years. Anastasio Somoza was assassinated in 1956 and was replaced by his two sons, firstly Luis and then Tacho Jr. The regime was both brutal and corrupt, amassing wealth on an unprecedented scale and imposing extreme poverty on the majority of the population. While the Somoza family controlled 25 per cent of GDP, most Nicaraguans worked as seasonal plantation labour in appalling conditions (Dijkstra 1999). Protests and opposition to the regime were brutally repressed.

In 1961, a political and military organisation, the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN), was formed in opposition to the Somoza regime. While many Sandinista combatants were lost in the struggle against the dictatorship, including FSLN founder Carlos Fonseca, and sympathizers were tortured and imprisoned, support for the guerrillas grew and accelerated after a major earthquake which affected the capital city, Managua, in 1972. Thousands were killed and many more made homeless, and international aid poured in. However, aid was embezzled by the government earning Somoza widespread condemnation and increasing popular support for the FSLN. Many conservative and upper-class families also began to express discontent with the

dictatorship. In 1978, 50,000 people protested in the streets of Managua when the National Guard assassinated Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, the editor of Nicaragua's conservative daily *La Prensa*. As the indiscriminate brutality of the National Guard increased, the final insurrection by the FSLN gained momentum and they managed to take all of Nicaragua's towns and cities, finally entering Managua on 19 July 1979.

Women became politically active during the 1970s and formed a crucial part of the opposition to the dictatorship. The regime had promoted the cultural ideals of marriage, sacrificial motherhood and male breadwinners, but simultaneously adopted an economic model which accelerated the disintegration of the family. The agroexport economy tended to provide only seasonal employment and agricultural labourers would move around the country in search of work. The inability of the agroexport model to provide stable employment made it difficult for men to fulfil their traditional obligations to their families. As a result, men often abandoned their families on a temporary or permanent basis to go in search of work and often formed subsequent families elsewhere (Murguialday 1990, Randall 1994, Seitz 1994). Paternal irresponsibility meant that many women found themselves alone with sole responsibility for home and children, which forced their massive penetration into the labour market.

The Somoza regime collapsed as a result of its own internal contradictions which prevented people from occupying the spaces allocated to them and forced them to take up new positions (Chinchilla 1990). Women organised as mothers to protest at the deterioration of the standard of living, the lack of adequate health care and at the abuse of human rights. In 1977, a diverse group of women formed an organisation called AMPRONAC (Association of Women Confronting the National Problem). AMPRONAC was created to defend human rights and to encourage active female participation in the fight against the dictatorship (Solà and Trayner 1988). Both men and women were mobilised in the struggle against Somoza as combatants. Some 30 per cent of those involved in the final insurrection were women. The presence of women in uniform and the decisive nature of their contribution to the insurrection did much to transform notions of appropriate female behaviour in Nicaraguan society. The image of the heroic female guerrilla penetrated the popular consciousness. However, for most women their

traditional roles as wives and mothers continued in addition to increased political participation. In the process, the traditional spaces in which they carried out these roles often took on new meanings.

The triumph of the revolution in 1979 paved the way for a period of revolutionary transformation. The Sandinista government put emphasis on the mixed economy, non-alignment and political pluralism, principles which were later enshrined in the Constitution of 1987. Although it never set out to dispossess large and medium sized agroexporting landowners, it did attempt to implement a series of social and economic redistributive measures aimed at improving conditions for Nicaragua's poor majority. The main gains of the early years of the revolution were in health, education and agrarian reform. Health care and education were made freely available and women were mobilised on a massive scale in revolutionary health and education programmes as literacy workers or as health *brigadistas*. Vaccination programmes and clean-up days (*jornadas de limpieza*) vastly improved healthcare and rates of illiteracy fell significantly, particularly as a result of the 1980 Literacy Crusade when thousands of volunteers travelled to rural areas to teach people to read and write. The Sandinista government put in motion a process of agrarian reform, which redistributed Somoza's land to small rural producers (*campesinos*) initially in the form of state farms and co-operatives and subsequently in individual plots. In addition, the government provided credit, agricultural inputs and technical assistance to small farmers to revitalise the farming sector and to attempt to achieve self-sufficiency in basic foodstuffs. While the Agrarian Reform Law recognised women's equality with men with respect to access to land and land ownership, the law did not guarantee equal participation by women and very few women held leadership or management positions in co-operatives or state farms (Collinson 1990).

The Urban Reform Programme of the early 1980s led to the creation of a number of state-funded housing projects in poor urban districts (Collinson 1990). Politically and in keeping with the notion of the FSLN as a vanguard party, the party also fostered the development of participatory democracy through the formation of a number of Sandinista mass organisations. In addition to a number of trade unions, agricultural and co-operative organisations, and a youth wing of the party, the FSLN also created a mass women's

organisation called AMNLAE (Association of Nicaraguan Women Luisa Amanda Espinoza) named after the first female Sandinista to die in combat against Somoza in 1970.

The benefits of the revolution were, however, to be short lived. They soon came under threat after Ronald Reagan became president of the United States and began to fund and equip a counter-revolutionary army known as the Contra, which operated out of military bases in Honduras and Costa Rica. Initially the Contra was composed of former members of Somoza's guard, but as time went on, its ranks were increasingly filled by *campesinos* disaffected with the revolution as a result of Sandinista mismanagement and cultural insensitivity.

The demands of the Contra war meant that resources had to be diverted out of social spending and into defence. In 1983, the government introduced military conscription and young men were often forcibly recruited by the Sandinistas to fight the Contra. While between 30,000 and 50,000 Nicaraguans had died in the war against Somoza, a further 30,000 were killed in the Contra war of the 1980s. The schools, health centres and co-operatives that had been created by the revolution became Contra targets and were frequently bombed and destroyed. Many of those killed were teachers, farmers, health workers or environmentalists. While the United States never recognised the verdict, US aggression against Nicaragua was condemned by the International Court of Justice in The Hague in 1987. This court also condemned the Iran-Contra scandal, exposed the previous year, in which it was revealed that the Reagan administration had covertly (without the knowledge of Congress) funded the Contras through the illegal sales of arms to Iran. Despite the fact that the FSLN held general elections in 1984 in which they won 67 per cent of the vote, in 1985 the US government imposed a trade embargo on Nicaragua, which further deteriorated economic conditions.

As far as women were concerned, the massive participation of women at all levels in overthrowing the dictatorship led to great enthusiasm that gender equality would be firmly on the political agenda of the revolutionary forces. However, as is frequently the case in nationalist movements or in struggles for self-determination, the struggle against

gender subordination is often postponed until other forms of repression are eradicated (Molyneux 1986, Randall 1992, Cleaves Mosse 1993, Chinchilla 1992, Yaeger and Zimmerman 1994). This experience has parallels elsewhere in the region, most notably in Cuba and Chile. Women were mobilised by the revolution in a multitude of ways and a number of oral testimonies from Nicaraguan women illustrate quite clearly the way in which the revolution opened up spaces and enabled them to renegotiate their positions (See, for example, Randall 1981, 1994, Angel and Macintosh 1987, Heyck 1990). However, the incorporation of an explicitly feminist agenda was seen by Sandinista leaders as a potentially divisive action rather than one which would democratise and strengthen the revolutionary process. AMNLAE always remained subordinate to the party and goals were generally defined in relation to national rather than gender interests. AMNLAE's ideological work, directed principally at the Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs<sup>5</sup>, was linked to women's traditional roles. The importance of maintaining Sandinista unity prevented the organisation from addressing politically sensitive issues such as abortion or sexual orientation. Sadie Rivas was removed as the leader of AMNLAE in Matagalpa in 1987 after she spoke honestly and naïvely at a national meeting about the need for the measures to combat domestic violence and the need for the legalisation of abortion. She had based her speech on what she felt were needs which emanated from Matagalpan women at a grass-roots level (Sadie Rivas, personal communication).

The FSLN introduced a number of legislative and institutional changes which were, in theory at least, of benefit to women. Laws were introduced to address gender relations, paternal irresponsibility and the depiction of women in the media. The divorce law was modified to permit divorce on grounds of mutual consent or by any party. Free legal advice was offered to women in cases of rape, domestic violence or divorce. Employment legislation abolished discrimination and established the principles of equal pay for equal work, maternity leave entitlement, time off for breastfeeding and improvements in the health and safety regimes of factories. Abortion was never legalised, although the state did not prosecute those found practising or seeking abortion (Collinson 1990, Murguialday 1990).

However, the Sandinista leadership failed to internalise personally what gender equality would actually mean in practice and continued to generate a masculinist discourse which constrained women's agency and reproduced conventional notions of appropriate femininities. In addition, the continued gender segregation of the labour market made it difficult for women to benefit from existing legislation. However, in the short term at least, women did benefit from the literacy campaign and the adult education programme, the subsidies on basic consumer goods and the improvements in transport, housing and health care. Initially, rates of literacy rose and malnutrition and infant mortality fell. However, as the war progressed, these benefits became less and less tangible.

Although the Contras were never able to defeat the Sandinistas militarily, the war and the US trade embargo, along with Sandinista economic and political mismanagement, caused living conditions to deteriorate enormously over the course of the decade. The economic recovery experienced by Nicaragua between 1981 and 1983 proved unsustainable and the economy began to contract and stagnate. The country became more and more independent on international aid and its external debt grew (Arana et al. 1999). Towards the end of the decade Nicaragua found itself in a spiral of hyperinflation, forcing the Sandinistas to implement an austerity plan which further worsened living standards.

By the elections of 1990, the Nicaraguan population was visibly exhausted by the suffering and hardships caused by the military draft, food shortages and rationing, hyperinflation and austerity, and voted for a US-backed coalition, the UNO, led by Pedro Joaquín Chamorro's widow, Violeta. The electoral defeat of the Sandinistas came as a big shock to both Nicaraguans and international observers. In retrospect, it is clear that over the course of the 1980s, the FSLN leadership distanced itself from the people, at times committing abuses of power which betrayed revolutionary principles (Ramírez 1999). A number of writers have attempted to explain the Sandinista electoral defeat in terms of internal or external factors or a combination of the two (Cortés Domínguez 1990, FSLN 1990, González 1990, Vilas 1990, Williams 1990, Castro and Prevost 1992, Robinson 1992). While external factors such as US aggression and the trade embargo seriously undermined the Sandinistas' ability to implement social programmes, towards the end of the decade, many party leaders had begun to act like capitalists, using party

and state power to expand their wealth (Dijkstra 1999). After the 1990 elections, the FSLN publicly recognised that their authoritarian style of government, the silencing of criticism and the way in which the moral authority of the FSLN was undermined by the contrast between the lifestyles of many party officials and the difficult living conditions of most of the population, had contributed to their electoral defeat (FSLN 1990).

The government of Violeta Chamorro (1990-1996) inevitably represented a setback to the process of revolutionary transformation initiated in 1979. Subsidies on basic goods and services were eliminated, state enterprises were privatised and part charges for health and education were introduced. While the end of the Contra war and the draft came as a great relief to the majority, the implementation of IMF economic stabilisation measures followed by structural adjustment meant that living standards did not improve for most Nicaraguans. The assumed partiality of these economic policies has been questioned. Although many observers considered the Chamorro administration to be a good example of a technocratic government, the economic policies of this government were more influenced by political considerations than by technical ones (Dijkstra 1999). In the early 1990s, many people commented to me how, despite shortages during the war, rationing at least guaranteed most people three meals a day. After 1990, the supermarkets became filled with every imaginable product but these were out of reach of the majority, and nutritional levels fell.

Furthermore, structural adjustment packages tend to have a distinctively gendered impact. A number of authors have demonstrated how reductions in social services and welfare provision and falling formal sector employment have increased the burdens of low-income women, both in Latin America and other developing countries generally (Elson 1991, Benería and Feldman 1992, Afshar and Dennis 1992, Safa and Flora 1992, Moser 1993, González de la Rocha 1994, Sparr 1994, Benería 1996) and in Nicaragua specifically (Pérez-Alemán 1992, Babb 1996, 2001b, Fernández-Poncela 1996). Consequently, women in Nicaragua and elsewhere in Latin America have had to develop an increasingly complex range of survival strategies.

The early 1990s were marked by massive unrest caused by increasing levels of unemployment and the failure of the Chamorro government to reintegrate thousands of demobilised soldiers from both sides into civilian life. Despite the fact that Violeta Chamorro came to power on a platform of national reconciliation, her mandate was marked by high rates of political violence with armed and rearmed groups operating throughout the countryside (Close 1999). These groups also attracted common delinquents who lacked any clearly defined political vision. The early 1990s were also dominated by conflicts over property. Pressure from former owners to regain properties lost or confiscated during the previous decade and the move to privatise state farms and enterprises created a climate of insecurity (Cupples 1992). The Chamorro government also began to promote more traditional identities for women, promising in its electoral campaign to recover the traditional nucleus of the family (Kampwirth 1996a, Chavez Metoyer 2000).

This period also saw attempts to modernise and reform the FSLN end in the party splitting, with the FSLN deputy leader, Sergio Ramírez, forming a breakaway Sandinista party, the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS). Over the course of its period in office, the UNO, a fragile coalition of 14 parties, also began to disintegrate.

The Nicaraguan women's movement, which is now a proliferation of autonomous NGOs, political movements, pressure groups and women's collectives, only began to flourish after the Sandinista electoral defeat. Despite the revolutionary role of women, the Sandinista revolution was characterised by a fear of feminism, but once the Sandinistas leaders had become common individuals and were no longer the representatives of a revolution in power, the feminist movement could develop its own autonomy which made it much easier to publicly adopt a critical position (Randall 1999).

By the 1996 elections the Sandinistas had failed to form a coherent alternative and the elections were won by former mayor of Managua, Arnoldo Alemán and his Liberal party, the PLC. Arnoldo Alemán is a virulent anti-Sandinista who was imprisoned for seven months in 1980 when he was found guilty of a series of counter-revolutionary activities (Blanco 1999). During his mandate as mayor, the landscape of the capital changed



considerably. After 1990, many anti-revolutionary and wealthy Nicaraguans returned from self-imposed exile in Miami, demanding the lifestyles and consumption patterns to which they had become accustomed in the United States. A number of highly localised and exclusive infrastructure improvements became visible, with the creation of luxury shopping malls, restaurants, a new cathedral and Nicaragua's first traffic roundabout. Various people commented to me on the superficial impact of government policies and the greater concern with image rather than substance, often describing the government as a cosmetic government or *gobierno de maquillaje*. According to Vargas (1999a), this approach promotes an image of governability and reconciliation, when in reality both social decomposition and exclusion are on the increase. Babb (1999) believes that the changing face of Managua reflects the government's desire to both erase Nicaragua's revolutionary past and create a city image appealing to foreign investment and wealthy returning Miami exiles.

Attempts to provide more traditional role models for women initiated under the government of Violeta Chamorro intensified under Arnoldo Alemán. In 1998 the government created a new Ministry of the Family, to promote the ideals of marriage and the nuclear family. The government's proposals were rapidly condemned for their moralistic tone by the Nicaraguan feminist movement. Women argued that these proposals were incompatible with Nicaragua's social realities, and amounted to attempts to confine women to domesticity. The Ministry also represented direct contravention not only of a number of articles of the 1987 Nicaraguan Constitution, but also of a number of international agreements on women's rights which Nicaragua had ratified (Cupples 1999). As Stuart (1996) has noted with respect to the Caribbean, the dominance of Eurocentric and western ideals of the nuclear family means that the presence of more fluid and varied family structures leads to a perception that the family is in crisis. This notion of crisis has led many politicians and religious leaders to assume therefore that the family is under attack. In Nicaragua, the defence of 'family values' led to the creation of the Ministry of the Family. But as Castillo (1997) states, no-one is attacking the family, no-one is proposing other forms of bringing up children that differ from the ones which already exist.

After 1995, the Nicaraguan economy began to recover and for the last few years has been growing steadily. However, any macroeconomic gains have been more than cancelled out by the high birth rate and per capita incomes have still not reached 1980 levels (WFP 1997, UNDP 2000). The 1990s brought both an end to the war and economic stabilisation but these factors have not resulted in improved living standards for most Nicaraguans for whom poverty has intensified. The fragility of the economic and social system was revealed by the scale of devastation caused by Hurricane Mitch in 1998, which left 3,000 dead, 800,000 homeless and destroyed infrastructure, crops and animals.

### **Nicaragua in 1999**

It was just a few months after Mitch that I embarked on my fieldwork. In 1999, Nicaragua was a country where the needs for post-war reconstruction after more than a decade of military conflict had proved incompatible with the demands posed by structural adjustment policies. These incompatibilities were revealed by the magnitude of the disaster. In many parts of the country, including my fieldsites, the hurricane further weakened not only fragile ecosystems but also precarious family and household economies. Consequently, most Nicaraguans live in poverty or extreme poverty, with unemployment or underemployment far more common than salaried formal sector employment. Prior to Mitch, only 47 per cent of the active population was in the labour force (WFP 1997). Nicaragua lacks programmes to stimulate the productive sector and as private banks have spread, credit for agriculture has declined. Despite the importance of primary agricultural products for the Nicaraguan economy, more Nicaraguans work in the services sector than in agriculture. But this is, as Close (1999:120) has indicated, because the tertiary sector is “inflated by a large informal sector, an economy of last resort by those unable to find wage labour”. Therefore, many of those deemed by official figures to be employed include informal sector workers who eke out a precarious subsistence selling newspapers, *tortillas*, lottery tickets and water on the streets.

Thirty six per cent of the population does not have access to safe water and 70 per cent does not have access to sanitation (INEC 1999). Although the 1980 Literacy Crusade reduced illiteracy from 50 to 12 per cent, by 1997 illiteracy levels had risen to 36 per cent

(WFP 1997). Infant mortality decreased from 83 per 1000 in 1985 to 40 per 1000 in 1998 but this decrease can largely be attributed to the decrease in fertility which has fallen from an average of six children per woman in 1980 to 3.9 children per woman in 1998 (INEC 1999). Areas of the country which have higher than average fertility rates also have higher than average infant mortality rates.

The cost of living does not correspond to earnings. The average monthly salary in Nicaragua for 1998 was C\$1205 (US\$100) while the *canasta básica* (a basic market basket of 53 goods and services considered the minimum required to support a family) cost C\$1540 (INEC 1999). Many of my participants earned far less than the average salary, supporting several children on earnings of only C\$500-600. Disparity in salaries in Nicaragua is considered to pose a difficult political and ethical challenge to democracy. In 1999, a school teacher earned C\$600 a month, a registered nurse C\$1000 a month and a specialist doctor C\$2000, while deputies earned C\$50,000 a month and high ranking politicians C\$100,000 a month (Delgado Romero 1999).

Over the course of 1999, Nicaraguans saw the cost of many basic services, including electricity, water, transport and telephone, as well as food, increase. One of my participants, Lucía Espinoza, described the devastating effect of an increase in the local bus fare from C\$1.50 to C\$2.00. With four daughters who all needed to travel daily to Matagalpa from Solingalpa to attend school and Lucía's travel to work, her weekly transport costs increased from C\$75 to C\$100 a week. This consumed almost all of her basic salary of C\$500 a month. Other costs had to be met from informal productive activities to supplement that income.

The high cost of living is making access to health and education difficult. My participants frequently complained of the unaffordable nature of health care, claiming that the only medical attention people receive nowadays is a piece of paper, a prescription which they cannot afford to purchase. Luz Marina Castillo cynically said to me: "When I come back from the hospital with yet another piece of paper (prescription), my father always tells me to swallow it to see if it will be make me better, or to try wrapping it around the bit that hurts" (22 May 2001). Thirty five per cent of children under five are malnourished and

many suffer respiratory illnesses, often as a result of living conditions in which cooking takes place indoors on open wood fires (CCER 1999). Nicaragua also continues to have high incidences of cholera, dengue, tuberculosis and gastro-intestinal diseases.

The cost of sending children to school has also become prohibitive because of the cost of school fees, uniforms, shoes, books and stationery which parents have to provide. Over the last few years, the Ministry of Education (MED) has seen its budget decrease markedly. Between 1994 and 1998, MED's budget fell 25 per cent (Arana et al. 1999). Average school attendance in Nicaragua is only 4.5 years (WFP 1997) and the school attendance rate for 1998 was 53 per cent, which means that 47 per cent of school age children did not attend school in that year (Vargas 1999a). Nicaraguan streets are filled with children trying to make a living by street selling, shoe shining or begging for money or food.

With a total external debt of US\$6 billion in 1999, Nicaragua was still spending more on debt service than on health and education (Yuill 1999). Figures for 1998 showed that debt service swallowed up more than a quarter of all export revenue (UNDP 2000).

The mandate of Arnaldo Alemán has been dominated by allegations and perceptions of widespread corruption and misuse of public funds. According to Transparency International, Nicaragua is one of the most corrupt countries in the world (Solís 1999). Nicaragua's two main dailies *La Prensa* and *El Nuevo Diario* reported on 3,827 cases of corruption between 1990 and 1999, the majority of these taking place since 1996 (Vargas 1999b). As Vargas says, these figures are only the tip of the iceberg, and it is probably impossible to know the full extent of corruption. In 1999, when thousands of families were still living in makeshift shelters after losing their homes in Hurricane Mitch, Arnaldo Alemán was building a presidential palace at a cost of more than US\$10 million (Morel 1999) and organising his wedding banquet in Miami after a stag party at a luxury hotel in the Dominican Republic. The president also appeared to be acquiring land at a voracious pace, particularly in the south of the country where an interoceanic railway line ("dry canal") is proposed (Cano Esteban 1999). Between 1990 and 1999, Alemán's personal assets increased by 900 per cent. Alemán allegedly also used state utilities to

gain preferential access to water and electricity on some of his land acquisitions (González 1999).

The comptroller-general, Agustín Jarquín, had been demanding that Arnoldo Alemán account for the massive increase in his personal assets and called on the National Assembly to lift Alemán's immunity so an investigation of his assets could begin. After several months of conflicts between the president and the comptroller-general, on 10 November 1999, Jarquín was imprisoned and charged with fraud, mishandling public funds and falsification of documents (Meza and Carrillo 1999, Guevara Somarriba 1999). Public opinion was overwhelmingly opposed to his arrest and imprisonment (Orozco 1999) which were widely seen as a campaign by Alemán to prevent people knowing the extent of corruption. International donors, including the EU and the IMF, warned that Nicaragua could lose aid as a result of the imprisonment of Jarquín. He was freed on 24 December when the appeals court dismissed the charges. Donors in general have repeatedly expressed concern about the lack of institutionality in Nicaragua and have frequently stressed how concerns about corruption levels put aid projects in danger (Notimex 1999, Reuters 1999, González 1999).

Political life has continued to be dominated by political patronage with supporters of the government being awarded with government jobs (Brown 2000). This has also meant that many people, including some that I know personally, have lost government positions as a result of having a Sandinista past. The Ministry of Health, for example, seems unwilling to employ doctors and other health professionals who were trained in the 1980s in the Soviet Union or Cuba under the revolutionary government's overseas scholarship programme. Alemán also appears to have initiated a persecution campaign against development NGOs in Nicaragua, out of fears that NGOs have the capacity to mobilise broad sectors of the population (Torre 2000). The campaign has included proposals to pass a law preventing NGOs from soliciting funds outside of the country without authorisation from the government (Ewig 1999).

In 1999, the FSLN continued to enjoy a solid base of popular support and thousands of supporters attended rallies to celebrate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Nicaraguan revolution

on July 19. However, in many ways the party displayed an ongoing disregard both for the founding principles of the revolution and for democratic expression more broadly. The party also failed to respond to allegations of sexual assault made against FSLN leader, Daniel Ortega, by his stepdaughter, Zoilamérica Narváez. According to Nicaraguan sociologist, Oscar René Vargas, the Sandinistas appear to be losing all residues of ideology and are becoming more interested in business interests and carving up quotas of power (Vargas 1999b). This became particularly evident in October 1999 when the FSLN signed a pact with the ruling Liberals. This pact had the effect of both closing democratic spaces in Nicaragua and of making it more difficult to fight political corruption which many people view as one of Nicaragua's most serious endemic problems. As a result of the pact, popular subscription has been eliminated and the post of comptroller-general is now split among several people appointed by the main parties. In addition, for the 2001 elections the percentage of votes required to avoid a second ballot was reduced and the outgoing president, Arnoldo Alemán, was guaranteed an automatic seat in the National Assembly. Consequently, there is a crisis of political leadership in Nicaragua, which is accelerating social and political decomposition amidst a context of economic hardship.

### **Fieldsites**

Nicaragua, which has both a Pacific and Atlantic coast, can be divided into three natural areas; the volcanic plains of the Pacific region, the central mountainous area and the Atlantic region. In addition, it has two major navigable lakes, the highly contaminated Lake Managua or Xolotlán and the much larger Lake Nicaragua or Cocibolca. The fieldwork for this thesis was conducted mainly in the central mountainous region. The Pacific region is much more ethnically homogeneous and is dominated mainly by *mestizos*, people of mixed Spanish and indigenous descent, while the central and Atlantic regions tend to be more ethnically diverse.

Administratively, Nicaragua is divided into 15 departments and two autonomous regions and it has a total of 147 municipalities (see Figure 1.1). The participants in this study are drawn primarily from the department of Matagalpa. Most participants lived in the



Figure 1.1  
Country map of Nicaragua  
Source: Marney Brosnan

departmental capital of the same name, with a smaller number from the municipalities of Sébaco and San Ramón. In addition, a smaller number of participants were from the town of Waslala. Waslala is located just outside Matagalpa's departmental boundary in the RAAN (Autonomous Region of the North Atlantic), but because of its geographical distance from the RAAN capital is politically administered from Matagalpa.

The department of Matagalpa is located in the central region of the country and is an important coffee-growing region with a large population but not insignificant outmigration to the capital. The department of Matagalpa has 12 municipalities (See Figure 1.2) and a total population of 383,776 (1995), with 130,000 living in the departmental capital. Matagalpa is located in a valley, 700 metres above sea level. It is a city that has constantly demonstrated high levels of pro-revolutionary activism. The level of organisation during the insurrection was so high in Matagalpa that it was possible to deploy combatants from this region further to the south (González Janzen 1979). A youth uprising against the dictatorship in 1978 held the city for a week and young people were active in procuring weapons from the guard for the guerrillas, running safe houses and occupying public spaces such as the cathedral. In the final weeks before the triumph, the streets of Matagalpa practically emptied as the guard murdered more and more young people suspected of involvement in revolutionary activities. Many were killed by snipers operating with infra-red sights in the surrounding hills. During the last two weeks of June 1979, Matagalpa was subjected to heavy aerial bombardment by Somoza's planes.

During the Contra war, Matagalpa was heavily affected. Its geographical location in a mountain valley meant that it was frequently cut off by Contra activity. During this period, Matagalpa developed strong and active regional branches of national mass organisations in which women played a significant role. During the 1980s many people migrated from rural areas to the departmental capital to escape heavy fighting. This process intensified during the 1990s for economic reasons. Consequently, the departmental capital has continued to grow rapidly causing the city's boundaries to spread as makeshift settlements have sprung up along the riverbank and on the hillsides which surround the valley. The flimsy homes contrast with the well-established and largely middle class houses, which make up most of the old central city.



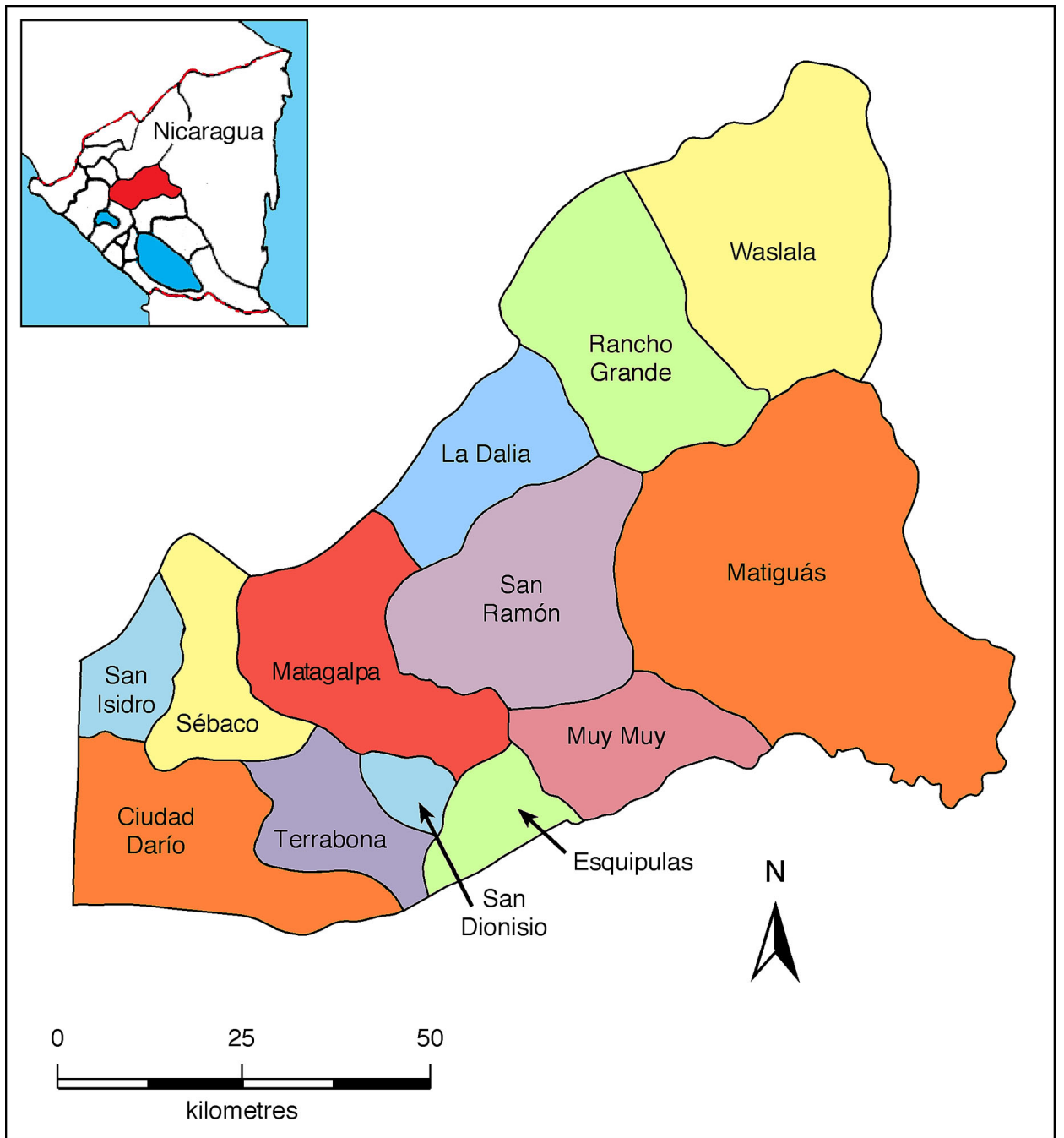


Figure 1.2  
 The municipalities of Matagalpa and the municipality of Waslala  
 Source: Marney Brosnan

The authorities in Matagalpa have been unable to keep pace with the growing demands for infrastructure. The absence of adequate infrastructure, in particular roading, the incomplete provision of water and electricity services and the lack of parks or recreational spaces, is felt daily by the city's inhabitants. Without doubt, one of Matagalpa's most serious problems is its water supply. The water system built to provide water for 20,000 inhabitants is woefully inadequate for a population of 130,000 (Hernández and Martínez 1999). While some homes are not connected at all to the piped water supply and depend therefore on rainwater, the river or commercial water vendors, many homes that are connected find that supply is erratic. In many areas, water will flow from the taps only once or twice a week, sometimes only for an hour or more, which means families then must fill as many barrels and containers as they have to use until the water returns. The irregular water supply impacts more harshly on women who are responsible for cooking and washing clothes.

Matagalpa, like many other urban centres in Nicaragua, has become a dangerous place particularly at night. It is plagued by a growing delinquency problem with gangs roaming the streets after dark and many people I talked to had experienced being mugged in the street. Likewise, rural areas too are plagued by delinquency and murders and kidnappings of *campesinos* are not uncommon.

The hillsides surrounding the town of Waslala are also violently unstable. One of my participants felt that in some ways the situation is more dangerous now than during the war, when there were only two sides, and therefore you only had to avoid the enemy. Today there is more uncertainty about the identities and motivations of those roaming the hillsides. Many of them are prepared to kill and kidnap in return for very small amounts of money.

Unlike Matagalpa, Waslala did not display such a degree of commitment to the revolution and has been an area of significant Contra support. Its location meant that in the early 1980s it often received propaganda by radio from Honduras which had a significant influence on the population. For many revolutionary vigilance in Waslala amounted to harassment, turning many people against the Sandinistas.

Women in Matagalpa and the RAAN have higher rates of both fertility and teenage pregnancy than the national average. While the average fertility rate is 3.9 children per woman, and 3.0 children per woman in the capital Managua, women in Matagalpa have an average of 4.8 children while women in the RAAN have an average of 6.1 children (INEC 1999). In Nicaragua, 27 per cent of 15-19 year olds are pregnant or already mothers. This increases to 29.5 per cent in Matagalpa and to 31.9 per cent in the RAAN (INEC 1999). Educational levels in Matagalpa and the RAAN are relatively low in comparison with other parts of the country. On a national level, 22.3 per cent of women have no schooling whatsoever. In Matagalpa 32.1 per cent of women have no schooling, a figure which rises to 37.8 per cent in the RAAN. Only 17 per cent of Matagalpan women and 12.6 per cent of women in the RAAN have completed their secondary education (INEC 1999).

### **Limitations of existing literature**

This thesis draws on several bodies of literature: Gender and Development literature on Latin America, particularly that which focuses on the transformation of cultural identities; literature on the spatial dimensions of identity formation and shifting masculinities and femininities within cultural and feminist geography and cultural studies; and finally work in interdisciplinary feminist studies on the cultural constructions of motherhood and the relationship between motherhood and feminism.

Much of the literature on motherhood and feminism, written largely in English, tends to either dismiss motherhood as a myth which is oppressive to women or to glorify and celebrate it as a uniquely female experience (Gordon 1990, Walker 1995). While a number of early feminists from Simone de Beauvoir (1949) to Adrienne Rich (1976) began to attack the institution of motherhood, others began to focus on the positive aspects of women's ability to give birth. Neither of these positions is particularly helpful to women who are mothers and feminists. The sense that motherhood and feminism are somehow incompatible has been questioned by Roiphe (1997) who believes that the feminist movement has failed to seriously address the question of motherhood, focusing largely on children as burdens and women as slaves.

Despite considerable scholarship on women in Latin America, and significant contributions from geographers, motherhood has also received fairly limited treatment from them. A number of geographers have recently turned their attention to the question of motherhood (Dyck 1990, Gregson and Lowe 1994, England 1996, Holloway 1998, 1999), exploring the spatiality of mothering practices and daily social reproduction. These studies concentrate exclusively on developed country contexts and place a significant emphasis on spatial equity in terms of access to childcare. They are however a useful starting point in taking analyses of motherhood beyond the recognition of its culturally constructed nature to a consideration of how the relationship between motherhood and space leads to the contestation or reproduction of gendered geographies and identities.

Most of the writing on motherhood in Latin America within the Gender and Development (GAD)<sup>6</sup> literature has focused largely on the politicisation of motherhood under dictatorships or military governments. It explores how women took advantage of the meanings of motherhood to oppose repressive regimes and protest at human rights abuses in countries such as Argentina, Chile, El Salvador and Guatemala (Fisher 1989, Schirmer 1988, 1993, Agosin 1993, Guzman Bouvard 1994, Stephen 1994, 1995) or to organise collectively to carry out reproductive tasks that become too onerous as a result of economic crisis (Jaquette 1989, Vargas 1990, Jelin 1990, Lind 1992, Fisher 1993). The politicisation of motherhood of this kind has come under feminist attack within Latin America for the way in which it reproduces, in the public sphere, women's traditional roles as protectors and nurturers of the family (Lavrín 1993).

As Kabeer (1994) has stated, while mothers are visible in development discourses, they are rarely perceived as competent actors and are therefore often subject to inappropriate policy agendas. Most of the attention to motherhood within the Gender and Development literature either ignores motherhood or assumes motherhood but does not problematise it. Other studies tend to focus on motherhood within one particular sphere of women's lives, usually the household, the labour market or within NSMs and do not look at how motherhood intersects with other multiple identities. Logan (1997), in a review of testimonial literature on women in Latin America, believes the value of these studies for

understanding the transformations taking place is limited by their lack of wider contextualised analysis. Some of these limitations can be addressed by engaging geographically with motherhood, in particular with the spatially embedded nature of identity formation. Similarly, Radcliffe and Westwood (1996) have stressed the need for research which acknowledges the ‘internalities’ of political protest and here they include gender and political identities as well as images and symbolism.

A number of authors within the Gender and Development vein have focused on the question of female-headed households (Stuart 1996, Varley 1996, Chant 1997a, 1997b, Buvunic and Gupta 1997, González de la Rocha 1999, Datta and McIlwaine 2000). These works have to some extent led to a recognition that household heads are not necessarily male and that families take diverse forms. The widespread notion within development discourse that female-headed households are disproportionately represented in poverty often leads to development interventions on their behalf. Recent research in geography by Varley (1996) and Chant (1997a, 1997b) has attempted to critique this approach which not only is based on stereotypical images of these types of households but might also be exaggerated. A recent collection based on research in Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala and Mexico concludes that the majority of female-headed households cannot be considered to be poorer than those with a male head (González de la Rocha 1999). Furthermore, Varley (1996) is concerned how the conflation of woman-headed households with single mothers with dependent children renders other types of woman-headed households invisible. In terms of development practice, Peters (1995) believes that targeting female-headed households has produced “analytical blinkers”. The tendency to equate these households with poverty and disadvantage means that the heterogeneity of female-headed households is obscured.

Estimates on the number of female-headed households in Nicaragua vary too widely to be reliable and the emphasis on female-headed households fails to acknowledge the fluidity of family life. This thesis is not therefore a study of female heads of households. While all of my participants were or had been single mothers, in the sense that they were bringing up children with limited or no financial or emotional support from the fathers of their children, they could not necessarily be considered to be female heads of households.

While some were bringing up children alone and were the main source of income in the family, there were many other diverse and alternative family arrangements. Some women lived with their mothers or other female relatives, effectively making up households with two female heads. Others were teenage mothers still dependent on their parents. Some women had male partners they had taken on after a period of single motherhood with whom some did or did not have children. Some women did not live with their children. Some women cared for and maintained other people's children. One participant lived communally with a group of friends and another lived with a female partner in a lesbian relationship.

Some recent works have attempted to capture the diversity of mothering practices, their relationship to hegemonic models and the contradictory ways in which other identities interact with motherhood (Hill Collins 1991, 1994, Walker 1995, Segura 1994). These studies have largely been in non-Latin American contexts, although Segura has considered Chicana and Mexican immigrant mothers in the United States. Scheper-Hughes' (1992) work on mothers' responses to high levels of infant mortality and their failure to grieve in North Eastern Brazil, however, powerfully exposes the culturally constructed and culturally specific nature of motherhood. In addition, a number of authors within Latin America have begun to address the notion of gender identities as unstable, shifting and dynamic entities (Lagarde 1990, Vargas 1991a, 1991b, Arango et al. 1995).

Literature on women and gender in Nicaragua has focused almost exclusively on women's roles during the revolution and the extent to which the revolution enabled gender interests to be addressed (Randall 1981, 1994, Molyneux 1986, 1988, Stephens 1988, Angel and Macintosh 1987, Chinchilla 1990, Collinson 1990, Heyck 1990, Murguialday 1990, Walta Hart 1990, Chuchryk 1991, Lancaster 1992, Seitz 1994, Fernández-Poncela 1997, Kampwirth 1998a). With the exception of works on structural adjustment in Nicaragua by Babb (1996, 1997, 1998, 2001a, 2001b) and Fernández-Poncela (1996), a feminist analysis of the transition of state power (Chavez Metoyer 2000) and a number of studies of electoral politics and feminism (Kampwirth 1996a, 1996b, 1998b, Luciak 1998), little scholarly attention has been paid to the situation of

women in post-revolutionary Nicaragua. Apart from one study on mothers whose sons and daughters were 'disappeared' by the Contra (Tully 1995) and an epidemiological study on teenage pregnancy in León (Zelaya et al. 1996, 1997, Berglund et al. 1997), research on motherhood in Nicaragua has focused exclusively on women within AMNLAE or groups of Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs (Solà and Trayner 1988, Mulinari 1996, 1998, LaRamie and Polakoff 1997, Bayard de Volo 1998). Within Nicaragua, recent studies have been conducted on gender and economics (Renzi and Agurto 1997), women and the media (Montenegro 1997), domestic violence (Montoya Tellería 1998) and Nicaragua's sexual culture (Montenegro 2000).

Many of these works, which are valuable in terms of documenting political and social change and its gender implications, suffer from a simplified perspective on women in Nicaragua. Despite its importance as a source of gender identity and its extreme political manipulation, post-revolutionary motherhood in Nicaragua has not been a focus of scholarly interest. As Logan (1997) has stated with reference to the Collinson (1990) book on women in Nicaragua, "good-versus-evil" depictions are not useful analytical concepts for understanding the complexities of the present political climate in Nicaragua. There is a need to move away from simplistic analyses of the situation in Nicaragua and to consider the intersections between revolution, counter-revolution, neoliberalism and disaster in an attempt to understand the realities of women's lives and to capture and explore the multiplicity of roles and identities held by women who happen to be mothers.

### **Theoretical approach and thesis structure**

Over the last two decades cultural geography and cultural studies have been widely influenced by post-structuralist thought. The works of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida among others have challenged historicist metanarratives and have led to an understanding of the self not as stable and unitary but as multiple and decentered. While post-structuralism has been influential in geography as a discipline, geography is also central to post-structuralism, in the sense that deconstruction is a spatial enterprise where questions of specificity, particularity and positionality are fundamental (McDowell 1999). Shurmer-Smith and Hannan (1994) argue in favour of a post-structuralist approach

to cultural geography as the most effective way to acknowledge that the structures and boundaries which govern social life are not rigid, but are contingent, negotiable and incomplete. Foucauldian perspectives on power and discourse are useful in comprehending the complex and heterogeneous dynamic of identity formation and the ways in which dominant norms and values are internalised or contested, while Derridean notions of deconstruction have enabled us to destabilise the meanings which are attached to cultural categories (Sarup 1993). These perspectives have the power to deconstruct constraining notions such as those surrounding gender which were previously considered to be stable and were taken for granted. As such, post-structuralism is particularly valuable to feminist practice (Weedon 1987). As Weedon argues, liberal, radical and socialist feminism have all provided critiques of institutions such as the family. However, none of them has been able to account for its ongoing appeal and endurance. Post-structuralism, with its focus on the relationship between subjectivity and meaning and on the mechanisms of power in society, can better enable us to understand not only possibilities for change but also why women sometimes do things which appear to disadvantage them (Weedon 1987).

While a number of geographers are engaging with theories emerging from cultural studies on gender as a performance and the subversive possibilities of culturally constructed identities (Butler 1990, de Lauretis 1993), these analyses have barely found their way into the Gender and Development literature, much of which, as Waylen (1996) has noted, tends to be dominated by a liberal or socialist framework. Many authors have rejected post-modernist or post-structuralist approaches as irrelevant in situations of material deprivation or poverty. However, I agree with Simon (1998) who believes that adoption of such approaches enables us to appreciate the complex ways in which communities in the South engage with processes of globalisation, such as neoliberalism, and that they have the potential to overcome the 'development impasse' which currently exists as a result of increasing global inequalities.

Radcliffe (1993a) has critiqued the emphasis on simple dichotomies of public and private which have been used in analyses of women in Latin America. This approach tends to assume that the emergence of women in the public sphere as political subjects brings



about resistance. As Radcliffe argues, not only do these analyses conflate the spatial and metaphorical aspects of the 'public' and 'private', they also obscure the relationships between them. With reference to the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, she points out the continuities which existed between the Argentine military's concept of the family and the Madres' activism, which both rejected feminism and retained Catholicism. Pile (1994) uses Radcliffe's (1993a) work as a useful example of the creation of an alternative geography, a third space which "intertwines not only place, politics and hybrid identities, but also the real, the imaginary and the symbolic" (Pile 1994: 272). This thesis attempts to engage with these approaches to move away from what Pile calls "dualistic epistemologies" and "reliance on hierarchical forms of knowledge" in geography. In terms of looking at the engagement with Nicaragua's revolutionary past, such an approach enables a more detailed understanding of the way in which the past influences the present, and better acknowledges the leakages and interrelationships which occur because identities are both fractured and shifting.

In a similar vein, Laurie et al. (1999) have argued that we should move our concerns beyond dichotomous understandings of gender and space which merely examine how women occupy male space or reproduce female space. Duncan (1996b) has argued that a focus on the spatial practices of marginalised groups such as abused women or sexual minorities, engaged in processes of destabilisation and renegotiation of the way spaces are used, can also be fruitful in undermining the public/private distinction. While it could be argued that discursively women in Nicaragua, as in other Latin American countries, have been closely associated with the private or domestic sphere, it is questionable whether this association has ever entailed spatial confinement. Furthermore, the public sphere cannot merely be reduced to state politics, the market place and the economy, given that it also includes the sites of oppositional social movements, sites which can be both discursive and material (Duncan 1996b).

By the time of the revolution, political and economic conditions had forced women to take on new roles, either in the labour market or in the political struggle against Somoza. Just as motherhood and marriage have been uncoupled, the spatial association of mothering practices with domestic space is also highly problematic. By focusing on

spatial shifts and continuities, I hope to usefully move the analysis of women in Nicaragua beyond dualistic conceptions of public and private and gender and space. Furthermore, an examination of maternal and political subjectivities might also enable a deconstruction of Nicaragua's characterisation as a politically polarised country which has been the basis of past and present violent conflicts. This approach can also hopefully take us beyond discursive dualisms such as Sandinista/Somocista, traditional/progressive, *compa/contra* and revolutionary/neoliberal in order to acknowledge the fluidity of socio-spatial processes.

By focusing on discourses and the power relations which are embedded within them, we can gain a greater understanding of the extent to which individual women conform to, subvert or transgress these discourses, why they adopt certain practices and of the contradictory processes which construct gender identities. While this study focuses on discourse and discursive practices, it is equally concerned with questions of material deprivation, given that political and economic conditions and positioning within local and global processes determine the degrees of complicity with and resistance to hegemonic discourses. As McDowell (1999) has said, these two aspects of gender – as a set of material social relations and as symbolic meaning – cannot be separated.

Nicaraguan women who mother in a context of poverty, uneven development or structural adjustment are multiply positioned in relation to the global-local nexus. They are relating to shifting processes of globalisation, neoliberalism, social movement formation, traditionalism and nationalism in complex and contradictory ways. It follows therefore that their gender identities constructed within and across these processes are likely to be multifaceted and heterogeneous. These processes can be expressed in terms of what Grewal and Caplan (1994) call “scattered hegemonies”, processes which need to be articulated in terms of their relationship with gender. These hegemonies, which represent the power relations at play, are however ambiguous and cannot be seen as merely imposing power on passive and acquiescent subjects. All individuals, given that they participate in a number of discursive practices simultaneously, possess some degree of cultural or political power (Sarup 1993).

The meanings of motherhood in Nicaragua have been expanded in a relatively short historical period by dictatorship, insurrection, revolution, Contra war and structural adjustment. At the present time, discourses of motherhood are being intensely contested as the government attempts to reconstruct as an orthodoxy something which was previously seen as natural. The pace of political and economic change in Nicaragua means that continuities and ruptures in discourses and practices of motherhood will exist alongside each other ruptures and the juxtaposition of the two will impact on women's subjectivities and gender identities in a multiplicity of ways.

The methodological approaches adopted by this thesis are closely informed by its theoretical orientation. Ethnographic and qualitative research methods, made up principally of in-depth interviews and participant observation techniques, were the most effective ways to identify and explore the discourses and practices in Nicaragua which make the structures which govern motherhood, family, womanhood, femininity and sexuality both contingent and negotiable.

This thesis explores the intersecting performative identities of mothers during the revolution and under structural adjustment. It is a study about women who mother in a context of structural adjustment with the weight of the historical memory of the revolution behind them. It examines how dominant discourses of motherhood and economic and political conditions, which are often at odds with one another, are working to create specific geographies of mothering in Nicaragua. It is original in the sense that it is the first study to focus on single motherhood in Nicaragua, the first to consider not only revolutionary mothers, but also counter-revolutionary mothers and the first to explore motherhood in Nicaragua from a distinctly geographic perspective. It attempts to address the need for a geographical study which critically combines feminist post-structuralist theory, which focuses on the deconstruction of reified categories, with Gender and Development analyses. Such an approach can provide a more sophisticated interpretation of how women engage with existing discourses and the impact of this engagement for identity renegotiation.

The methodological aspects of this study are addressed in the following chapter. Chapter 3 explores the expressions of masculinity in Nicaragua to explain some of the causes and consequences of single motherhood. Chapter 4 focuses on the legacy of the Nicaraguan revolution and looks at how women today negotiate the sacrifices made during the 1980s. Chapter 5 studies the women who were opposed to the revolution and fought or collaborated with the Contra. Chapter 6 deploys motherhood as a lens to examine the paid and unpaid work carried out by women. Chapter 7 examines the implications for the renegotiation of gender identity in relation to disaster and focuses on the way mothers responded to Hurricane Mitch. Chapter 8 provides a detailed theoretical overview of the subject positions adopted by single mothers in relation to dominant discourses and the tensions which exist between contradictory discursive practices. Concluding remarks to the thesis are found in the final chapter.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Discourse, according to Foucault, is about the production of knowledge through language and practices. Meaning is constructed through discourse and the same discourse can appear across a range of texts. Discourse determines how a topic can be meaningfully talked about (Hall 1997), while discursive practices make the world intelligible to oneself and others (Gregory 1994).

<sup>2</sup> While most Nicaraguans describe themselves as Catholics, Nicaragua also has a growing and not insignificant number of evangelicals. Catholicism too has had a contradictory recent history in Nicaragua and should not be seen as a monolithic entity. In the 1980s the Catholic Church was bitterly divided between the traditional Catholic hierarchy headed by Cardinal Obando y Bravo and the liberation theologians who preached the notion of a preferential option for the poor. This approach received much support from Christian Base Communities (CEBs), small Bible study groups who became politicised through alternative readings of the Bible. The Nicaraguan revolution was also an experiment in the compatibility of religion and revolution, with three priests holding government ministries.

<sup>3</sup> Per capita GNP for Latin America as a whole is \$3,830. Per capita GNP for Sub-Saharan Africa is \$530 (UNDP 2000).

<sup>4</sup> The HDI measures average achievements in basic human development in a composite index and produces a ranking of countries. In 1990 Nicaragua occupied position 85 (UNDP 1991).

<sup>5</sup> These were organisations made up of women who had lost revolutionary sons and daughters in the struggle against Somoza or during the Contra war.

<sup>6</sup> The GAD (Gender and Development) approach to development theory and practice emerged as a result of critiques of the prevailing WID (Women in Development) paradigm. The WID approach was largely about adding women into processes of modernisation and making them visible in the development process. It took women's issues into account but underestimated the structural inequalities between women and men which were a hindrance to development. GAD analyses insist that the power relations between women and men need to be properly considered in the development process. They have increasingly become part of the development policies of national governments and NGOs (See Rathgeber 1990).

## Fieldwork in Nicaragua as an embodied researcher: Questions of methodologies, historical involvement, positionality and power

### **Introduction**

This chapter outlines the methodological and philosophical approaches to my research topic and the methods used in my research. It examines the ways in which critical theories have both complicated and enriched the process of doing politically committed research in third world areas, particularly by first world academics. In the light of these critiques, it describes the methods used and both the practical and ethical dilemmas I encountered and the extent to which they were resolved or incorporated. I assess the ways in which I felt the research was potentially exploitative and the ways in which it seemed to be therapeutic or empowering for the participants.

To add further depth to these explorations, I also consider questions of reflexivity, positionality and power and, in the spirit of producing work which reflexively acknowledges its socially located context, I provide some autobiographical information about myself and assess how my shifting positionality impacted on the research process. While positionality and reflexivity are well covered in the feminist geographic literature, I also explore aspects of the construction of self in fieldwork which are either not discussed or tend to be obscured in the literature, such as the question of children in the field, the role played by emotions in fieldwork and the matter of erotic subjectivity.

This chapter self-consciously interweaves engagement with existing theoretical perspectives and a degree of more personal narrative exploration. There are two main reasons for adopting this approach. Firstly, I do so because I experienced the death of a close friend while in the field and could not explain the research process without referring to the emotional aspects of this traumatic event. Secondly, my past and present involvements with Nicaragua go beyond my academic interest in Nicaragua as a field of enquiry, but are nonetheless relevant to the research. The themes covered are overlapping

and to some extent writing reflexively about the shifting positionalities of the researcher, as well as the difficulties and ethical compromises of the research, does not lend itself to a neat and structured encapsulation in paragraphs. This difficulty in feminist research has similarly been articulated by Gibson-Graham (1994:221) who perceive that the retrospective analysis of a research process amounts to an attempt to create “a narrative of coherence out of a very random and haphazard set of experiences”. In addition, space considerations preclude a highly detailed examination of what are complex and multifaceted experiences all with theoretical implications. Questions of reflexivity, positionality and power are still very much part of an evolving debate within geography. I recognise that engaging with these questions is necessary but simultaneously problematises any analysis of my research process.

### **Philosophical approaches to methodology**

#### *Incorporating reflexive methodologies into geographic research*

Since the 1970s feminist academics have debated the multiple complexities of doing feminist research and many reached a consensus that feminist research methods are more interactive and egalitarian than traditional methods. A number of authors (Roberts 1981, Oakley 1981, Duelli-Klein 1983, Cook and Fonow 1990, Westkott 1990, Reinharz 1992, Dyck 1993, Stanley and Wise 1993) have stressed the positive effects which are brought about when one abandons traditional, masculinist notions that research should be objective and value-free and acknowledges that the social positioning and subjectivities of the researcher always influence the research process and outcome.

According to Reinharz (1992), feminist or non-positivist methods involve the researcher's immersion in the social context of the research and aim for intersubjective and collaborative understanding between researchers and participants. These methods are therefore more effective in enabling women to be actively involved in the production of knowledge about their lives, permitting access to the expression of lived experiences from their own point of view. A defining feature of feminist research is that it is concerned with social transformation and emancipation and undermining the masculinist bias of conventional epistemologies. These debates have been influenced by the post-

modern turn in geography which calls for not only historically and geographically specific research, but also research which explicitly and reflexively acknowledges the conditions of its production. Haraway's (1991) notion of 'situated knowledges' has been of particular value in this respect. Feminist geographers have seen the potential of reflexivity, in terms of being explicit about the embodied nature of knowledge (McDowell 1992) and in order to address the social relations of the research (Madge et al. 1997) as well as recognising its value as a means to personal transformation (England 1994, Maxey 1999). Post-modernism has undermined the dominance of positivism within geography and its assumption that there is a single universally agreed method and a single truth to be revealed. Post-modern feminist geographers have exposed the way in which positivist research claims to be universal but produces partial knowledge and also involves masculinist relations of power (Bondi and Domosh 1992).

The feminist literature has put to rest pretensions of neutrality and this has led to more interactive and dialogic research. However, some authors have expressed reservations about the ethical aspects of this approach and suggest it can be as exploitative and manipulative as more conventional methods and that researchers run the risk of betraying their informants (Stacey 1988, Stanley 1990, Opie 1992, McDowell 1992, England 1994, Gilbert 1994, Madge 1994, Wolf 1996, Rose 1997). Given the transformative agenda of feminism, feminist academics tend to focus their research on women whom they perceive to be disadvantaged or oppressed. This automatically creates an unequal power relation between the (usually) middle class privileged academic and the oppressed, poor, working class subject. The author selects the topic, has power of interpretation and will gain personally and professionally by the publication of the research. Although the researcher may set out with the intention of giving voice to a silenced or marginalised group of people, the interpretation is that of the researcher who does not necessarily share lived experiences with the research subjects. As Gibson-Graham (1994) have stated, post-modernism, with its scepticism towards metanarratives, has eliminated many of the certainties surrounding feminist research practices. These approaches have also been fuelled by post-structuralist theories, which have revealed the instability of meanings and categories such as gender and have produced a critique of the essentialised, unified

subject. While the hegemony of positivism has been successfully challenged (England 1994), it is more difficult to overcome the power inequalities which are an inherent aspect of much geographic research (Pile 1991).

These ethical dilemmas are magnified when first world feminist academics conduct research on third world women. The concerns about the dangers of misrepresentation and the persistence of colonial discourses in this kind of research have emerged from post-colonial critiques of western universalism and of the myth of global sisterhood. Mohanty (1991) in her much discussed essay *Under western eyes*, accuses first world women of constructing third world women as a homogeneous category and of repeatedly representing women as victims. The 'third world woman' becomes a monolithic subject who is typically ignorant, poor, uneducated, sexually constrained and traditional. This process of Othering implies that first world women, in contrast, are educated, modern and in control of their bodies and sexuality. Because of the power relations which exist between privileged first world academics and their research subjects, first world feminists can often be seen as appropriating and colonising the third world woman (Edwards 1990, Haggis 1990, Mohanty 1991, Patai 1991, Parpart 1993, Radcliffe 1994, Chowdry 1995, Hirschmann 1995, Marchand 1995, Staeheli and Lawson 1995), or of perpetuating stereotypes which reproduce the social forces that lie at the heart of gender inequality, as Zabaleta (1986) has argued with reference to research on Latin American women. Westwood and Radcliffe (1993) have also discussed the complexity of opening up spaces for the voices of Latin American women to be heard. They state that politics is not an "external reality upon which we comment" but is part of our work itself (p.4). According to Hirschmann (1995), western feminism's portrayal of third world women is a contemporary form of colonial discourse, while Radcliffe (1994) believes that first world writers have not really engaged with critiques from third world women on how they are represented. Consequently, even well-intentioned researchers who ideologically oppose the dominant structures of power can end up reproducing or perpetuating them (Katrak 1995, Hubbard 1999). This is because it is privilege which creates the ability to speak on behalf of others (Madge 1993, Chater 1994).



Sidaway (1992) believes that cross-cultural research, while complex, does nonetheless pose a challenge to universalistic and ethnocentric views because it blurs the difference between researchers and researched. In response, Madge (1993:297) questions this assumption, stating that research in the third world by first world academics inevitably involves “dynamic, subtle but on-going Western imperialism”. Real transformations would involve therefore the deconstruction of the ideologies that reproduce that privilege. This thinking is in line with critiques of development models, which because of their universalistic assumptions, overlook important complexities and contradictions (Escobar 1995). Escobar believes that the deployment of colonial discourse means that people in the third world acquire subjectivities which make them see themselves as underdeveloped and this in turn limits the potential for change. First world researchers, therefore, contrary to intentions, end up being part of the problem rather than part of the solution. This process is intensified by the indifference which tends to be displayed in the first world towards knowledge produced in the third world (Said 1993, Slater 1995).

Dismantling colonial discourses is extremely difficult. Not only does it involve engaging meaningfully with questions of difference and ceasing to represent third world women as victims, it also involves examining much of the terminology we use which is rooted in western traditions. It is probably impossible to avoid ethnocentric biases in our writing. Spivak (1995) concludes that the subaltern cannot speak, because all forms of knowledge and analysis are produced by the west. Spivak’s work in general is critical of post-structuralist writers whom she accuses of a chronic lack of reflexivity. Her view is clearly an extreme one and denies the agency, activism and resistance of post-colonial peoples to western universalism. However, it does underline the power of language and the difficulties which exist when one attempts to deconstruct language. However, what we can do, as Bondi (1997) has argued, is work to expose universalism and thereby weaken the universalistic pretensions present in our writing. Otherwise, post-colonialist and post-modernist calls for cultural sensitivity can have a paralysing effect on the research process and could potentially deter people from undertaking research. Kapadia (1995), for example, believes that these critiques of western feminism are turning development studies into an area “where angels fear to tread”.

### *Dealing with difference*

These epistemological and methodological concerns have been the driving force behind the adoption of more reflexive methodologies and the elaboration of strategies which both situate knowledges and attempt to minimise cultural appropriation. While cultural appropriation is enormously difficult to avoid, a number of strategies have been suggested. These strategies include participatory methods which aim to break down traditional divisions between researchers and subjects (Rathgeber 1992, Kindon 1995) such as the use of oral testimonies and collections of life stories (Phillips 1990, Marchand 1995, Townsend 1995), participatory appraisal activities (Gujit and Shah 1998), or engaging more fully with internally produced knowledges or the ways in which other knowledges are produced (Slater 1995). This can potentially be achieved by alliances between researchers and informants (Pile 1991) or by coalition building between first and third world academics (Radcliffe 1994).

Parpart and Marchand (1995) believe that a scepticism towards universalism can enable us to better understand the multiple realities of women's lives. This scepticism has therefore led to calls for research which not only considers the way in which gender interacts with other multiple identities such as class, ethnicity, age, marital status, religion, region and life cycle (Mohanty 1991), but is also geographically and historically specific. In addition, there has been a growing emphasis on the need to do research in socially located ways. Feminist writers within geography and other disciplines are now more explicit about their own positionality. However, this is frequently reduced to the adoption of the "as a" style, where writers acknowledge they are, for example, writing as "a white heterosexual middle class woman" (See, for example, Chater 1994 and Robinson 1995). This approach, while explicit about some of the biases which might determine the research process and outcome, is nevertheless complicated by which identities one decides to privilege and which ones are deemed irrelevant by the researcher. It also makes the essentialist and therefore problematic assumption that characteristics of gender, age, ethnicity and so on have stable and self-evident meanings which would be understood by all people at all times (Herod 1999).

More recently, an increasing number of authors have attempted to further develop Bhabha's notion of third space, an in-between hybrid space engendered by cross-cultural relationships (Bhabha 1990, 1994). Many have been advocating the notion of "betweenness" as a reflexive strategy for overcoming the dilemmas posed by the power of interpretation (See, for example, England 1994, Katz 1994, Nast 1994, Bondi 1997, Rose 1997, Tooke 2000). These works, while of theoretical interest, are vague on how betweenness can actually be achieved or how it is negotiated. It is difficult for researchers to know when they are inhabiting a negotiated space as opposed to an imposed space.

The difficulties of reflexivity in research are therefore multifaceted. Reflexive methodologies which attempt to acknowledge positionality are fraught with difficulties. Rose (1997) has argued that while it is important to reflexively acknowledge one's location, the importance of positions taken up or assigned is not self-evident and no-one can ever really know their own situatedness. Gibson-Graham (1994:206) have also expressed their "resistance to the implicit assumption that I am a centred and knowing subject who is present to myself and can be spoken for". In ethnographic fieldwork, the identification of positionality is even less straightforward, as the research process forces us to recreate ourselves in relation to our research subjects (Blackwood 1995).

I have adopted a post-structuralist approach to this thesis, not only because I believe it enables more detailed understandings of the constitution of identity and the fluidity of boundaries, but because it also better acknowledges the existence of multiple knowledges. After positioning myself more explicitly in the research, I then discuss the methods used in the research and the extent to which ethical dilemmas were able to be resolved.

## **Positioning my 'self'**

### *Historical involvement, motherhood and politics*

As I indicated in my preface, my connections to Nicaragua are academic, political and personal. My activism in the solidarity movement, the timing and context of my own motherhood, my previous visits to Nicaragua and my friendship with Sadie Rivas have all influenced both the focus of the research and where and how it was conducted. In the interests of contextualising the research process more fully, it is therefore essential to position myself more explicitly in the research.

Despite this, to some extent, I feel uneasy about focusing on myself. While I acknowledge the importance of being reflexive, I am also aware of the dangers of narcissistic or solipsistic indulgence which could result from an overly reflexive approach. Widdowfield (2000:202) feels that some researchers are deterred from reflexivity because it means “indulging in a level of self-absorption which privileges the voice of the researcher(s) over the research”. However, I do so in the spirit of engaging reflexively with my research, to explicitly recognise the power relations in which I am implicated and of acknowledging the “validity of autobiography as part of the contextualisation of the research process” (Twyman et al. 1999:315). Kobayashi (1994) believes that our legitimacy as researchers does not result so much from our personal attributes but from our history of involvement. Therefore I feel it is important to be explicit about my history of involvement with Nicaragua. Not to do so, as Madge et al. (1997:106-7) have indicated, would be “to revert to masculinist and positivist assumptions about the distance and objectivity of the researcher”. I decided therefore that it would be appropriate to include autobiographical information both as context and as a way of focusing on issues that might be of both theoretical and practical value to others contemplating this kind of research.

Many of the accusations levelled at first world academics who do third world research suggest implicitly or explicitly that the outsider status of the academic in the culture being studied is both culturally insensitive and limits understanding. However, the boundaries which construct researchers as insiders or outsiders are more fluid than these

accusations seem to imply. In many ways, I was of course an outsider in Nicaragua. My only claim to insider status would be the fact that I am also a mother and conducted my fieldwork accompanied by my two children. However, I would reject from the outset essentialist and universalistic notions of motherhood and indeed this thesis attempts to make explicit both the cultural constructedness and the cultural specificity of motherhood. This means that using my own experience and understanding of motherhood as a pretension to insiderness is politically highly tenuous. I acknowledge therefore that producing knowledge about “other” women who also happen to be mothers in culturally distinctive ways is problematic. However, Nast (1994) believes that we are never insiders or outsiders in any absolute sense, while Gilbert (1994) sees all researchers as outsiders regardless of their ethnicity or gender. Similarly, Karim (1993) and Herod (1999) have acknowledged this instability and warn against the presumption that an “insider” will produce better research than an “outsider”. Positionality shifts, however, so we are not necessarily always insiders or outsiders, and can sometimes be seen as both or neither (Wolf 1996, Mullings 1999).

I acknowledge the multitude of ways in which I am different from my participants. I know that I have different understandings of nationalism and national identity, that I have not experienced revolution, war, disaster and the IMF, that I am differently positioned in global North-South relations and that I am able to leave ‘the field’. Although gaining access to women and fieldsites was on the whole straightforward, I am aware that my presence as a foreign woman in areas of socio-economic deprivation is complex (Abbott 1995). However, my own experience of both politics and motherhood cannot be separated from experiences in and feelings and views of Nicaragua. While these aspects of self might seem irrelevant to this study, they have undoubtedly formed part of the process in which I came to be in Nicaragua in the way that I did. However, I feel it is of little use to talk about these connections and involvements in terms of the insider/outsider debate. Their value lies not only in contextualising my research and declaring aspects of my positionality which might or might not be relevant, but also in embracing a broader theoretical perspective of ‘the field’ and when we are in it.

As stated, I first became interested in Nicaragua through the UK solidarity movement. I was also in Nicaragua when, as a result of my own imminent motherhood, I first became interested in babies and children and began to observe parenting. For me the question of motherhood, Nicaragua and solidarity with the revolution have become inextricably linked. Moreover, when my daughter, Natasha, was born, I could describe myself as a mother who had been interpellated by primitivist discourses of mothering (before I knew what a discourse was) and was particularly influenced by a work on childrearing in the Amazonian jungle which I read shortly after her birth (Liedloff 1989). While I have since recognised and rejected the primitivist basis of this approach, it did nonetheless foment my interest not only in parenting and child behaviour, but also in the cultural specificity of constructions of motherhood and childhood. The cultural meanings of motherhood in Latin America became the focus of my MA thesis completed in 1997 in the Department of Geography at Newcastle University (Cupples 1997).

When I began my PhD fieldwork in Nicaragua, I did so as someone with prior knowledge of my field site, with a high level of Spanish language facility and a history of political activism within the solidarity movement. Maxey (1999), who has considered the role of prior activism in a researched community, refers to the complexities of this positioning. He points out how activism is a discursively produced concept, which cannot be taken for granted. It can therefore be used in conflicting ways and has the potential to both challenge and perpetuate social exclusion. In many ways, an academic as well as a political interest in Nicaragua impacts on this positioning. It is possible that I have even subconsciously wanted to distance myself from the large numbers of European travellers in Central America in the 1980s whose visits could be seen as aestheticising the conflict and suffering that took place there (Mowforth and Munt 1998). However, it was unlikely that Nicaraguans, with the complexity of historical memory behind them, would position me in that way. Despite the exclusions generated by the solidarity movement, many Nicaraguans continue to value international solidarity and the role it played during a more progressive phase of Nicaraguan politics.

My role in the solidarity movement both facilitated and to a lesser extent complicated the research. My involvement in British solidarity with Nicaragua did give me credibility as

someone that shared a political vision and was committed to certain political principles. In many ways, pro-revolution Nicaraguans expressed support and respect for my research aims and did not level any kind of accusations of appropriating their struggles in a culturally insensitive or inappropriate way. However, this support came mainly from progressive organisations like the Communal Movement or the Women's Collective who facilitated interviews or access to participants. With my participants, I did not refer to my previous political support for Nicaragua unless I was specifically asked about how I came to be interested in Nicaragua or whether I had visited Nicaragua before. Inevitably, the response to my prior political involvement depended on the political sympathies of the participant. My meetings with the Contra, for example, forced me not only to adopt a different position and do something that I would have considered unthinkable just a few years before, but also enabled me to reassess how I had previously positioned myself with respect to the revolution.

#### *Ethnography and the construction of the field*

My ongoing involvement with Nicaragua and the way in which political events there have impacted on my life blurs the boundaries between the field and my everyday life. It demonstrates how 'the field' does not have identifiable borders (Caplan 1993, Schrijvers 1993, Killick 1995) and the connections between 'the field' and our everyday lives mean that we are always in the field (Katz 1994). The field is therefore a constructed entity, Staeheli and Lawson (1994: 98) state that "there is no reified field separate from our construction of it". Furthermore, prior involvements with researched communities eliminate the possibility of a period 'in the field' which has discrete and clear boundaries (Maxey 1999). My prior and post-fieldwork involvements with Nicaragua mean that I perceive the field as a blurred entity, constructed through discourse (Katz 1994, Staeheli and Lawson 1994). I embarked on fieldwork, not as neophyte anthropologists sometimes do, but as someone who already had a number of friends, contacts, experiences, perceptions, prejudices and a history of sympathising with the Sandinista revolution. Inevitably, the boundaries between the discursively constructed field and my everyday life continued to be blurred while I was carrying out my fieldwork. By considering the

impact of my own positionality on the research process, I attempted to respond reflexively to the ethical dilemmas which arose in the course of the fieldwork.

### **Methods deployed, methodological approaches and dilemmas**

#### *Data collection*

This thesis is based on qualitative and ethnographic research conducted in the department of Matagalpa in the northern mountainous part of Nicaragua. Most of the data were gathered during the second half of 1999 (July-December) with a shorter follow-up visit to Nicaragua in May 2001. I returned to Nicaragua again in October 2001 to work as an international observer in the general elections and was able to make another visit to Matagalpa.

I saw Matagalpa as an ideal site for this study for several reasons. It is an area with a strong history of political activism and pro-revolutionary sympathies. It has an active agricultural labour movement, an active Communal Movement and a strong women's movement. These characteristics meant it was a particularly suitable site to study the connections between motherhood and political activism. My previous visits to the region and my friendship with Sadie Rivas and connections to the Communal Movement meant that I had a wealth of contacts before embarking on my fieldwork which proved invaluable in terms of selecting participants.

The main source of information for this research comes from in-depth interviews with Nicaraguan mothers. I also conducted interviews with the Nicaraguan Minister of the Family, Max Padilla, the National Feminist Committee, Daniel Ortega's stepdaughter, Zoilamérica Narváez, and the leaders of various civil society organisations such as the Movement of Single and Unemployed Mothers and the Committee of Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs led by Esperanza Cabrera. Interview data have been complemented by both ethnographic immersion in Nicaraguan life and participant observation. In addition to interviews, my participants invited me to a number of important events and rituals in their lives including theatre productions, political rallies and assemblies, inauguration ceremonies, credit group meetings and parties. During my fieldwork period, I also closely



followed the media, reading both of Nicaragua's main dailies, *La Prensa* and *El Nuevo Diario*, and watching the Channel 2 news most evenings, to keep myself informed of the economic and political context of the research. I also had many conversations with Nicaraguans who were not formal participants, but who talked about gender, sexuality and the socio-economic and political situation in Nicaragua. I met many women who were single mothers who also provided perspectives.

In total, interviews were conducted with 26 Nicaraguan mothers within the department of Matagalpa. Most of these women lived in or close to the city of Matagalpa, some lived in nearby communities or shanty towns such as Apantillo Siales, El Tambor or El Mirador. Five participants lived in the rural communities of El Hatillo and El Molino in the municipality of Sébaco and one participant lived in San Ramón. In addition, I also interviewed seven women in Waslala, which is just outside Matagalpa's departmental boundary, in the RAAN (Autonomous Region of the North Atlantic). I had a number of Sandinista women in my study but in Waslala talked to women who had collaborated with the Contra. (See Figure 2.1 for location of fieldsites). Each participant was interviewed in Spanish between one and four times. The number of times each woman was interviewed depended on several factors; the point in my period of fieldwork at which they became involved in my study, issues of time and availability, willingness to participate and their geographical location.

As stated in Chapter 1, this is not a study of female heads of households. This is because I believe that family life in Nicaragua is too fluid for the term to have any real meaning. I did however select participants who were or had been single mothers. By single mothers, I am referring to women who were bringing up children without the financial or emotional support of the children's father. In addition, most of the participants were income earners in the households, doing formal or informal work or both, and were or had been politically active in some way.

The rationale for selecting participants on this basis was that single mothers are numerous in Nicaragua but are marginalised in dominant discourses and public policy. Apart from these common features, they were a diverse group of women in terms of life style, age,

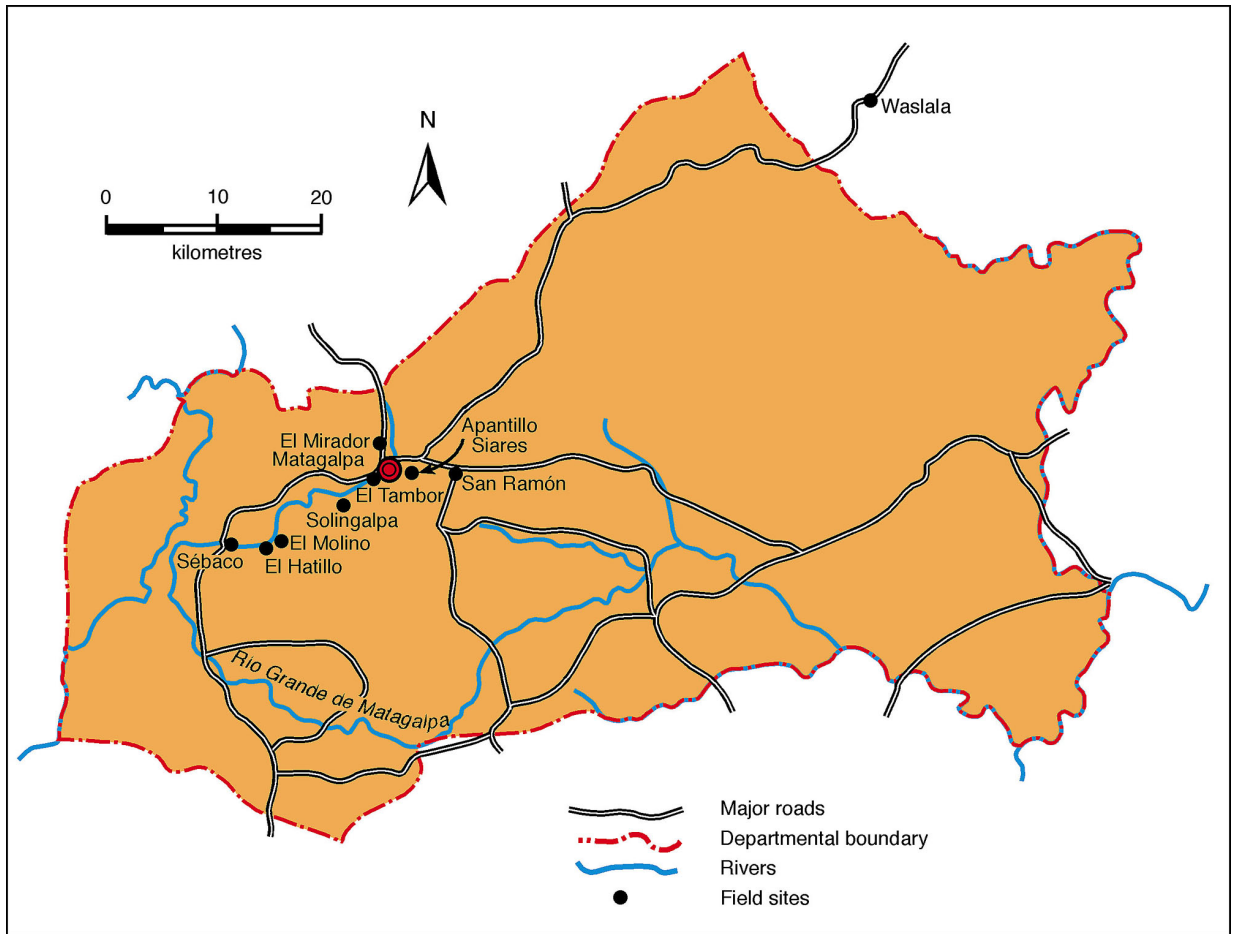


Figure 2.1  
 Fieldsites  
 Source: Marney Brosnan

family structures, sexual orientation and educational, occupational and political background. The study included both rural and urban women, some of whom had regular employment, aged between 14 and 65 years of age and with varying numbers of children. While the minimum number of children per woman was one and the maximum 14, most women in the study had three, four or five children. Some women could be considered illiterate, having never learned to read or write, others had varying levels of primary and secondary education completed. Some had completed or were trying to complete primary or secondary education as adults. A minority had completed or was currently engaged in tertiary education and one was in the process of completing a Master's degree.

Participants were selected through various sources. My main source was provided through the Communal Movement. I interviewed women who worked for the Communal Movement in either a voluntary or paid capacity and through the co-ordinator, Sergio Sáenz, I was introduced to a number of women who were part of Communal Movement projects and who were potential participants. Many of these were also women who had been made homeless during Hurricane Mitch. I was also introduced to a number of participants by Sadie Rivas. These were friends or contacts whom she believed would be suitable candidates. The other main sources of participants came through two women's organisations in Matagalpa, the Colectivo de Mujeres de Matagalpa (the Women's Collective of Matagalpa) and Grupo Venancia. These approaches, which led to direct selection of participants also led to a degree of snowball sampling, where other names were suggested. Through Venancia, I was also able to make contact with the Movement of Single and Unemployed Mothers, which had formed after Hurricane Mitch and was being provided with some support from Venancia. I conducted in-depth interviews with the two leaders of the Movement and with two affiliated members in two different communities.

Access to the fieldsite and to potential participants was relatively straightforward and most communities did not appear to object to my presence or my desire to record interviews. This can partially be attributed to the fact that many of the participants occupied community leadership roles and because of the firmly established nature in Matagalpa of organisations led by women, such as Venancia and the Collective, or of organisations such as the UCA (Union of Agricultural Co-operatives) or the Communal Movement, which put an emphasis on a gender focus in their work. Access to participants was undoubtedly helped by my association with Sadie. Her political prominence in Matagalpa and her reputation as someone committed to working with the most marginalised sectors of the population possibly meant that I was viewed as a supportive person and someone who could be trusted.

Interviews were occasionally cancelled because of other commitments, but in the majority of cases could be rescheduled. Many interviews had to be restricted to one hour, especially when women were interviewed at work. Interviews in the rural communities in

Sébaco were the most difficult to arrange, owing to their relative geographical isolation. While the town of Sébaco was easily reached by bus from Matagalpa, there was no regular public transport from there to El Hatillo or El Molino, and since the road to El Hatillo was destroyed during Mitch, it could only be reached with a four-wheel drive vehicle. All my transport to these communities was provided by the Communal Movement. Heavy flooding in October also made visiting these communities impossible for a time. The absence of telephone communication in El Hatillo and El Molino also meant I was unable to arrange interviews in advance and consequently could not guarantee that all the participants would be there when I arrived.

Accessing Apantillo Siales was also a little difficult but more for reasons of safety. The road from Matagalpa was destroyed during the hurricane, which had made it inaccessible to taxis and the village could only be reached by foot. Many people felt I would not be safe alone on the outskirts of Matagalpa because there were often gangs operating in that area. Just a few days before my visit the son of my participant, Patricia Cedeño, had been mugged on that road on his way to school in Matagalpa. For my safety, I walked to Apantillo Siales accompanied by members of Patricia's family.

Interviews were held in a number of locations. Most women were interviewed either at home or at work. Others chose to be interviewed at other people's homes, at my home or at the premises of organisations such as the Communal Movement and Venancia. Elwood and Martin (2000) have acknowledged the importance of the interview site and the ways in which the location has an impact on the knowledges produced. They perceive the site itself as producing "micro-geographies of spatial relations and meaning" (p.649), the dynamics of which can provide useful research material. Furthermore, they believe that participants who are given a choice in where they are interviewed are more likely to feel empowered in their interactions with the researcher.

I always allowed participants to select the interview sites themselves. This led to a selection of a variety of locations and meant that in some cases I was able to see where participants lived and meet their children but in other cases I could not. Geographical dispersion and varying commitments mean it would not have been possible to standardise

the interview sites in this way and it was more important to select a location with which the participants felt comfortable and where we could conduct the interview with minimal interruptions. One participant, for example, whom I always interviewed in the Communal Movement premises, talked to me at length about the contradictory relationship she had with her mother. She lived with her mother and told me how she was both a source of crucial practical support as she cared for her children while she was working but was also a source of considerable emotional blackmail, which affected her ability to make independent decisions about her life. These were issues that she could not have brought up had I interviewed her at home with her mother present.

Interviews were tape-recorded and lasted between 30 minutes and two hours, mainly using an unstructured, open-ended interview schedule. I asked questions or raised issues only when the interviewee did not speak freely of her own accord or to seek clarification or elaboration on issues raised in previous interviews. Some women were comfortable with the interview process and were able to talk at length about their lives. Others were unsure about the kind of information that would be of interest to me and needed more direct questioning. Scheyvens and Leslie (2000) following Keesing (1985) have written how the information provided can often depend on the participant's self-esteem and that in some cultural contexts a sense of inadequacy can lead women to believe that their lives are not worth talking about. This was particularly the case with the two teenage mothers I interviewed. Possibly because of their age and general shyness, it was more difficult to develop rapport with them than it was with women my own age or older than me. Another woman was unsure of what she should talk about and consequently chose to be interviewed with her family who were also encouraged by her to contribute. Another talked openly, but often interspersed the interviews with questions to make sure this was what I wanted to know. However, the majority of the participants, especially those who had considerable political experience either in the revolution or subsequently, displayed a high degree of self-esteem and a belief that their lives were very much worth talking about and documenting.

At times I deviated from the unstructured approach to interviewing that I had planned to use and raised issues myself. In retrospect, I feel that I did this because I believed that

there were certain things that I just had to know and therefore if this information was not offered, then I needed to ask for it directly. However, in hindsight, it was only when I began to listen back to interviews and analyse my transcripts that I became aware that at times this was unnecessary. For example, before I embarked on my fieldwork, I was very interested in the question of infant feeding and was keen to find out whether my participants had breast or bottle-fed their babies. While all my participants were able to answer this question, and it seemed that most women had actually done a bit of both, it was not something they talked about at any length. I have since realised that this is because the breast/bottle debate is not something around which Nicaraguan mothers discursively position themselves, unlike mothers in Britain and to a lesser extent in New Zealand. I now believe that I should have ‘trusted’ my participants more to talk about the issues they thought were important, and had the breast/bottle debate been important to them, they would have brought it up themselves. Listening back to some of my interview tapes, I also wonder where the interview might have gone instead, had I not ‘interrupted’ it by introducing a new direction. To some extent, it was inevitable that I would shape the interview in this way and it did make me more aware of the cultural specificity of mothering discourses and how issues which are of crucial importance in one place, are much less important in another.

#### *Data analysis and presentation*

Interviews were later transcribed. In some interview locations, we had to contend with the noise of traffic, dogs, fans, roosters and babies, all of which found their way onto the tapes. A small number of tapes were subsequently difficult to transcribe because of considerable background noise. In these cases, I have also relied on extensive fieldnotes made after interviews. Participants were given copies of their transcripts once these were completed. Not all of my participants expressed an interest in receiving copies of their transcripts. As Patai (1991 in Staeheli and Lawson 1994) has stated, asking for feedback from participants can be an imposition. Some participants were clearly keener than others to read and comment on their transcripts and to know what was to become of the information they gave me. While I firmly believe that all participants should have a right to determine how their statements are interpreted, I must also acknowledge that many had

no desire to be involved in this way. Others only offered feedback out of the hope that it could bring some kind of material benefit. Despite the careful way in which I explained my position as a student, a small number of participants had already discursively positioned me as a development worker who could therefore potentially bring aid of some kind, which no amount of explaining seemed to prevent. I shall return to this point later.

The analysis of data was largely inductive, where analytical and conceptual frameworks were developed during a process of close reading and open coding. Coding of interview data involves the identification of themes and determination of meanings within the text (Dunn 2000). Coded sections were transferred into separate documents and material would often be recoded through this process for use elsewhere. Crang (1997) has referred to this process of moving from the material to ideas and back to the material as analytic induction. It is a process which continues during writing, given that writing and researching are mutually constitutive processes and writing shapes what and how we know (Berg and Mansvelt 2000). I have therefore attempted to critically insert my own subjectivity throughout the writing of the research and acknowledge issues of power and the impact of my own partial locatedness.

All names have been changed to protect the identity of informants. Some women were initially keen for me to use their real names, but changed their minds when I pointed out that I was also hoping to publish some of this material in Nicaragua. However, Matagalpa is a small place and the prominence of some of the participants in political life and the need to talk about specific places means that I cannot guarantee that someone with prior knowledge of Matagalpa would be incapable of identification. Ideally this thesis aims to display the connections between the multiple realities and multiple identities of participants and the intersections which exist between motherhood, employment and political activism. Therefore, I would prefer readers to also make these connections between the multiple realities of my participants' lives. However, because I believe that I hold a responsibility to avoid the research having unintended negative consequences on the informants, at times I have omitted the name or the pseudonym.

To give a voice to the women in this study and to demonstrate more fully the extent to which alternative discourses of motherhood and femininity are circulating, I have used extensive transcript material throughout the thesis. Analysis of the transcripts has been done from the original and translations have only been made when excerpts have been selected for use in the thesis. Smith (1996) has written about the politics of translation and its problematic nature because of the way that nuances are often lost in translation and because of the multiple meanings and associations that a language has in a cultural context. Transcribing and translating can be seen as acts of displacement. A transcription in effect turns living conversations into written texts and a translation further displaces and transforms the originally intended meanings. It also erases the non-verbal cues, silences and facial expressions which are also an important part of the living conversation. While the written text eases analysis, Kvale (1996:167) indicates how transcriptions become ““decontextualised conversations” which take on a solidity not intended in the original interview”. She argues that conversations do not easily become written texts because they often include incomplete sentences or digressions which only make coherent sense when spoken. When this has been the case, I have sometimes chosen to paraphrase rather than to directly quote.

While translation of the quoted excerpts into English is necessary, I have also chosen to retain the original in Spanish alongside the English. This was done out of respect for the original words of my participants and in order not to further distance and decontextualise the words that they chose to represent their lives. This approach is of benefit to people who are familiar with Spanish and Spanish as it is spoken in Nicaragua. Most qualitative studies on Latin America by English speakers tend to contain only English translations which has often led me to wonder what was said in the original or why authors chose to translate things in a certain way. For the sake of consistency, when quoting from publications in Spanish, I have also retained the Spanish as well as providing a translation. All the translations in the text are mine and I take full responsibility for them. In addition, I recognise that the displacement of meaning does not end with the transcription and translation process and that, as Madge et al. (1997) have stated, I have no control over how my work will be read or interpreted by the audience. As Rose



(1997:317) has stated, the academic text which has already been subject to the author's editorial control of the information, then becomes further displaced by the readers who "engage with it, revise, transform and reuse it".

### *Ethical considerations*

Before embarking on my fieldwork, and largely as a result of the intensive training I had received in qualitative methodology as a graduate student at Newcastle University in the UK, I had considered many of the ethical dimensions which are a crucial part of doing this kind of research. In addition, all research conducted on people or animals by students and staff at the University of Canterbury has to be approved by the Human Ethics Committee (HEC) and I was therefore required to complete a submission to this body. The committee comprises an interdisciplinary panel of five academics, one layperson, a representative of the Student's Association and two representatives of the Maori community. The panel's role is to evaluate the value of the research and any legal or ethical considerations on the basis of a written application form submitted by researchers. The HEC places a considerable degree of emphasis on informed consent, preferring that research subjects give written consent to participation in interviews. The HEC also states that participation must be not sought through "inducement beyond reasonable compensation" (Human Ethics Committee 1998: 2). I had planned to obtain both written consent from my participants and provide them with a small quantity of basic goods to compensate for time spent in interviews and not in other tasks. While it is important to provide participants with adequate information on the research project to minimise potential harm, such an exercise cannot allow for the complexities of fieldwork relations. Ethnographic research requires a high degree of flexibility and the need to make on-the-spot decisions about things which could not have been considered in advance. Informed consent is, as Irvine (1998) has described, problematic in the sense that it suggests that the researcher already knows what he or she is looking for, which is an impossibility in ethnographic research. Likewise, Maxey (1999) also sees informed consent as problematic. In his research, informed consent was irrelevant to the participants or was understood or interpreted in different ways. It is therefore impossible to know or predict the risks of the research (Rose 1997).

I was complimented by the HEC for the sensitive way in which my submission had been compiled. However, my experience in the field made it virtually impossible to implement the ethical considerations in the way I had led the HEC to believe I would. I took advice from non-participating Nicaraguans working in development on these issues before I began interviewing and views on which approach would be most appropriate were wide-ranging and contradictory. In the end, I had to use my professional judgement and do what seemed most appropriate in the circumstances. As Wolf (1996) says, sometimes the dilemmas we encounter in fieldwork cannot be reconciled.

I did not use the written consent forms but explained to each participant the aims of the research and stressed quite clearly that at any time they could withdraw from the research or withdraw information that they had given me. I sometimes provided people with food, gifts and occasionally money when it seemed ethical to do so. Some participants did perceive me as a source of income, but this is as much to do with global inequalities which position us in different ways as it a consequence of individual actions I took in the field. Fieldwork requires more flexibility than an HEC submission allows for and an acceptance that ethical compromises need to be made.

#### *Ambiguous positioning*

There is no doubt that at times I found myself in an ambiguous position and struggled to articulate my identity as a researcher. Despite careful explanations before interviewing that I was from a university in New Zealand and was engaged in a research project on single motherhood, I realised that it was difficult for many of my participants to perceive me in this way. Many of them, despite having received my explanation on why I was there and wished to talk to them, many would later ask which aid agency I worked for. I was concerned that this perception of me was generating expectations that could not be fulfilled. Moreover, it further demonstrates the variable and questionable nature of what constitutes informed consent. I encountered a somewhat awkward situation after interviewing Elsa Jirón in El Tambor. She had offered to show me around the settlement and introduce me to some of the women who had joined the Movement of Single and Unemployed Mothers. But the first person she introduced to me was her neighbour, a 16-

year-old boy who had lost both of his legs four years before when he had stepped on a land mine. She made him come out of his house to meet me, telling him to tell me what his needs were as I might be able to help him. My presence also led to other participants suggesting that once I got home I could do some fundraising for the group in which they were involved.

One participant talked at length in an interview about two Spanish doctors whose son had attended the CDI (Communal Movement crèche) where she worked. She told me how they had carried out extensive fundraising when they had returned to Spain which had kept the CDI afloat for a number of years. She said she was glad to have got to know me as it meant the CDI had “una amiga más” (another friend). This was also the situation when I interviewed the leaders of the Movement of Single and Unemployed Mothers who said they hoped that I could secure funding for a project. The members of Lydia Sánchez’s credit group expressed the same hope to me. Lydia invited me to attend the group but I had little control over how my presence was interpreted. It demonstrated the way in which, as participant observers, we are multiply positioned (or sometimes stereotyped) by those we observe, regardless of the explanations we give to account for our presence. In these situations, I did not deny the possibility of doing some sort of fundraising in the future (as I have many times in the past). However, I also clearly pointed out that my main activity at present was to conduct research.

Others, while not seeing me as a potential donor of large amounts of aid, did see me as a potential source of income or gifts. Occasionally I had a sense that information was being exchanged for goods. While I was both prepared and able to pay for small items that might have solved an immediate problem, it did nonetheless accentuate the power differentials between us. One participant in particular made me feel that the amount of information she gave me was directly related to the amount of goods or gifts I brought. It was a position that on the one hand was perfectly justifiable given our relative inequalities and her financial situation, but one which made me feel uncomfortable as a researcher and also, rightly or wrongly, made me doubt the validity of some of her data.

My presence also impacted on people who did not take part in the study but were living in the communities in which I was working. In El Mirador, I was viewed as someone who might have influence within the Communal Movement and could possibly provide houses for other family members. Sometimes I was called to other people's homes so that they could tell me about their predicaments in the hope that I could wield some influence.

As my fieldwork drew to a close, and both participants and other people knew I was leaving, the demands for personal clothes and toys that we would not be taking with us became overwhelming and I found myself dividing our belongings between a growing number of families. Having said this, these concerns applied to a small number of participants. The majority of participants talked openly and willingly about their lives and this willingness suggests that my presence had not generated expectations that I was unable to meet.

To some extent the ambiguity of my position was heightened by the fact that I had indeed brought aid with me to Nicaragua, although not many of my participants would necessarily have been aware of this. Before leaving to do my fieldwork, I held a salsa party in Christchurch to raise funds for the Communal Movement's post-Mitch reconstruction efforts, I held a stationery appeal at my daughter's primary school which generated large quantities of school supplies for children in Matagalpa and I also managed to collect a large quantity of medical supplies from both local pharmaceutical companies and Medical Aid Abroad.

This whole process has left me with a deep sense of responsibility to the people who gave me information and I will still be formulating ways to give something back to these communities long after my thesis is complete.

### *Empowerment and exploitation*

Inevitably creating expectations of gifts or aid that cannot be met can be seen as an exploitative aspect of this kind of research and one that is difficult to overcome. There were other instances too when I felt that the research was potentially exploitative. This was particularly in relation to exploring painful areas of participants' lives. Feelings of

uneasiness arose when women began to talk about traumatic and sad events in their lives. Carla Martínez warned me before we began interviewing that she was very sentimental. A number of times in interviews she would break down and cry at the overwhelmingly sad nature of her experiences. When this happened, I tried to comfort her and gave her the opportunity to end the interview. However, on each occasion, she would recompose herself and continue. This was also the case with the stories told to me by Milagros Herrera in El Hatillo. On one occasion she talked about her experience of infant mortality. Three of her children, all of the daughters to whom she had given birth, died when they were babies. One died of a parasite-related fever on the way to hospital and she had to make the long journey back from Matagalpa by bus with her dead child in her arms and pretend she was still alive. I was unbelievably shocked by the sadness of this story and now wonder, when she said to me “But in time you get used to it”, whether that was more for my benefit than hers.

The question of friendship between the researcher and the researched is also a complex one. An interactive research process means that friendship is more likely to result than with more detached conventional methods, but this does not mean that equality or lack of exploitation will result. Over the course of the fieldwork period, some of the participants became friends in the sense that we spent time together when we were not interviewing and had many unrecorded conversations. The problematic nature of friendship for the relationship between the researcher and the researched leads to the question of how one deals with ‘privileged’ information, as discussed, for example, by Madge (1994) with regard to her research in The Gambia. This problem is further developed in Madge et al. (1997) which discusses how informants may tell something to the ‘friend’ that they would prefer not to divulge to the ‘researcher’ (See also Stacey 1988).

After my first interview with Lucía Espinoza, we saw a lot of each other. We would often come into contact at the Communal Movement and had numerous conversations in which I became privy to more and more aspects of her life. We had a second interview scheduled, but Sadie died just a few days before and neither of us felt like doing a recorded interview. Instead we spent the afternoon together and talked about Sadie and many other things. Partly because of other commitments and partly perhaps because of

our growing friendship, it was some time before we rescheduled the interview, but I continued to see a lot of her over that time. She was in a difficult situation because her partner, whom she had financially supported since the late 1980s when he became disabled in the war, was becoming increasingly violent towards her. She was trying to work out how she might be able to get out of the relationship and retain some security for herself and her five children, given the fact that the house in which they lived was in his name. She came to visit shortly before I finished my fieldwork and we were planning to record an interview. Although I do not believe that emotional distance is necessary in a research relationship, a recorded interview now seemed inappropriate because she had already talked to me so much about herself and her life.

However, the boundary between exploitation and empowerment can be a narrow one. Empowerment is of course a contested concept which can have a range of meanings depending on how it is used and might only imply a desire or intention to bring about changes in the distribution of power (Rowlands 1997). It is difficult to say whether or not my participants were empowered by the interview process. However, there were occasions when the interview process did appear to be positive and therapeutic for the participants. Sometimes the fact that a researcher has chosen to travel so far and spend so long away from home to find out about their lives can be seen as a source of self-esteem for the researched (Scheyvens and Leslie 2000). Likewise, I felt that my presence was in itself an expression of the validity of these women's lives and experiences. Rather than feeling that I was being potentially exploitative, I felt respected for having chosen to focus on Nicaragua. This is particularly crucial in the sense that international attention on Nicaragua has been declining since 1990. One participant thanked me for being prepared to spend time away from my children to find out about their lives.

The construction of people's lives as an area worthy of research can then be augmented by the interview process itself. Finding a time and space to reflect on life experiences can also be cathartic (England 1994) and can be a positive way to deal with sad or traumatic events. In this respect, some researchers see that the value of the research process lies in the way in which it facilitates the creation of a discursive space for the research subjects (Bell 1993, Longhurst 1996, Hubbard 1999). To some extent, the interviews enabled

women to talk about issues which hitherto were unarticulated. My interest in alternative subject positionings which were counter to hegemonic notions of motherhood provided a space where women could analyse their own situations. Three participants told me how helpful it had been to talk to me. Silvia Montiel said she had been able to tell me things that she had never been able to tell anyone else, and that it would be difficult in the community to speak honestly about these issues. A similar comment was also made to me by Lucía Espinoza. I have wondered why they were unable to discuss these aspects of their lives with Nicaraguan friends. Similarly, Ana González also referred to the therapeutic nature of our conversations, and said it was like a weight had been lifted off her. Participants also talked openly to me about taboo subjects in Nicaraguan society. I am not sure whether my research topic implicitly positioned me as a feminist researcher or whether my foreignness suggested I would be more accepting of these issues, but topics brought up by my participants in interviews included lesbian relationships, illegal abortions as well as admitting they had neglected their children physically or emotionally or that they did not want to be a mother.

Many participants were delighted to receive transcribed copies of their interviews, which in some cases amounted to detailed written life histories. Some said how they had always wanted to write it all down but never found the time. Others said they were glad to have something to show to their children.

My feminist positioning was however of distorted concern to the ex-Contra who arranged for me to visit the Contra women in Waslala. We had had a long discussion at Sadie's wake about parenthood, families, gender and women's rights. I mentioned that I thought that the high rate of maternal mortality in Nicaragua as a result of illegal abortions was of grave concern. He told me he had fathered 11 children with nine different women, but insisted he provided for them all financially. He offered to organise the interviews in Waslala, but said he had one condition. Out of fear I would be spreading an anti-Christian message, he said that I must promise him that I would not get to Waslala and tell all the women to have abortions.

Apart from my positioning as a first world researcher in a third world country, in the next section I examine other aspects of my 'self' which also impacted on the research process. I do so in an attempt to achieve a broader understanding of my positionality than is often the case and to avoid reducing my positionality in the field to essentialising attributes of class, age, ethnicity and gender. I consider the ways in which my research was affected by being accompanied by my children, the emotions I felt while doing research and the issue of sexuality and erotic subjectivity. These are issues which not only have practical implications for the research process but if explored can produce informative insights for the research topic itself.

### **Broader understandings of positionality in 'the field'**

Despite considerable geographical emphasis on questions of reflexivity in fieldwork, more personal aspects of the research process, such as the question of emotions, sexuality or the ways in which the research process impacts on our close relationships are often omitted. This is sometimes because they are not seen as legitimate areas of academic enquiry or are viewed as topics which might compromise one's academic credibility (Wade 1993, Kulick 1995, Wilson 1995, Widdowfield 2000, Anderson and Smith 2001). This omission can also be attributed to the ongoing persistence of the myth of the researcher as detached and objective (Altork 1995).

A more reflexive consideration of the fieldwork experience and process would necessarily include a consideration of these dimensions. The ways in which we position ourselves in the field and are positioned by others depend largely on the forms of interactions which take place. Although at times we are constructed by our host community according to preconceived stereotypes (Wade 1993), our positionings are not based solely on stereotypical notions of who we are and will also depend on the form of interaction which takes place. Moreover, they are not static but can shift, in response to how our subjectivities shift during the course of fieldwork.

Acknowledging the impact of emotions, sexuality and close relationships on fieldwork is fraught with complexities. Ignoring these issues will not make them go away but will



impede our understandings of how they shape our positionality in a number of contradictory ways.

A recent edited anthropological collection by Kulick and Wilson (1995) criticises the way in which erotic subjectivity is obscured in accounts of fieldwork, despite its significance for the research process. Sexuality has recently become a legitimate focus of geographical research, particularly with the publication of two recent edited volumes exploring the relationships which exist between sexuality and space (Bell and Valentine 1995, Duncan 1996a). With the exception of a chapter by Sparke (1996), who examines the way in which masculinity shaped his research experience, attention to sexuality by geographers has focused largely on non-fieldwork settings. Similarly, emotions “have an important bearing on how and what we know” (Widdowfield 2000:199) and their omission from much geographical research amounts to an exclusion of “a key set of relations through which lives are lived and societies made” (Anderson and Smith 2001:7). The question of children in the field has not been covered by geographers, but has been addressed to some extent by anthropologists in a number of edited collections (Cassell 1987a, Butler and Turner 1987, Flinn et al. 1998). I briefly examine how being accompanied by my children, the emotions I experienced and my shifting sense of sexual subjectivity impacted on the research process and their potential for broadening understandings of positionality in the field.

### *Children in the field*

I travelled to Nicaragua in 1999 with my two children, Natasha and Ruben, who stayed with me for the duration of my fieldwork. At the time, Natasha was seven and Ruben four. My partner and their father accompanied us for some of that time but for most of the fieldwork period he was back in New Zealand.

In practical terms, taking my children to Nicaragua with me had both positive and negative impacts. Sometimes, the presence of my children was beneficial to the research process, at times it hindered it. As some ethnographers have asserted (Schrijvers 1993, Sinclair 1998, McGrath 1998) I found that having children in the field facilitated access to participants and enhanced rapport. Morrison (Twyman et al. 1999) believes that the

presence of her baby during fieldwork in Botswana meant she was perceived to have attained adult status, and her baby became a focus of discussions on gender, fertility and childcare. This also applied to my research in Nicaragua to some extent. Participants and others frequently showed great interest in my children.

Children can have a beneficial impact on the research process, particularly in terms of the endeavour to achieve more egalitarian relationships with our participants. This is partly because accompanied ethnographers are seen as less anomalous (Flinn 1998, McGrath 1998). Research relationships have the potential to be more egalitarian when we have our children in the field, largely because we are also observed interacting with members of our own culture (Dreher 1987, Cassell 1987b, McGrath 1998, Gilmore 1998). Gilmore (1998) uses Rosaldo's (1984) notion of the 'repositioned other' to describe what happens to us when we conduct fieldwork with children. She believes that our notions of ourselves as others are revealed in ways that would not happen if we were unaccompanied. Advice, questions or comments I received on my mothering often revealed to me the cultural specificity of mothering in Nicaragua.

Sometimes family responsibilities in the field can hinder fieldwork (Dreher 1987, Hugh Jones 1987). Whitehead and Price (1986) believe that the presence of children can prohibit the level of introspection necessary. Although my children were usually absorbed and fascinated by life in Nicaragua, at other times they were homesick and stropy, and resented the lack of space, the mosquitoes or having to wash in cold water. They often reminded me that it was my choice and not theirs to travel to Nicaragua.

To minimise the impact of my family responsibilities on my research, I made the ideologically difficult decision to pay for substantial domestic help. This was a unique experience for me but many Nicaraguans were surprised to hear that I did not have such an employee at home and that I did most of these jobs myself. In this respect, I clearly positioned myself as an employer, and aligned myself with middle class Nicaraguans who can afford domestic help. This outcome demonstrates how decisions taken to accommodate children in the field impact on our positionality. By employing a domestic,

I became embedded in local class relations in a way I would not have been had I travelled alone to Nicaragua.

Having employed someone to take control of much of the domestic work and childcare, my family and domestic responsibilities did not therefore hinder my fieldwork as I was in fact relieved of many of the tasks I have to do at home in New Zealand. Childcare in general was also much less problematic than in New Zealand and it was relatively easy to find someone, paid or unpaid, to mind my children. This meant I could make arrangements to go out in the evening without having to check if I could get a babysitter first as I have to do in New Zealand. Just as Schrijvers (1993) noted doing fieldwork in Sri Lanka, combining childcare and work is less problematic in Nicaragua than in New Zealand.

However, the relationship with my domestic was fraught with difficulties. Despite my best efforts not to treat her like her servant, she became less and less reliable as time went on and even put my children at risk through her irresponsible behaviour.

Being accompanied by my children in Nicaragua better enabled me to understand the culturally constructed nature of my own mothering practices. As Flinn (1998) has stated, whether we decide to take our children to the field or not depends on our own cultural expectations and understandings of the meanings of motherhood and family. I took my children with me to Nicaragua, partly because I could not have managed not to see them for so long, partly because of a lack of other alternatives back home in terms of childcare and partly because I thought it would be good for them. In contrast, when Sadie came to the UK for six months in 1991-92, she left her children in Nicaragua being cared for by a combination of extended family caregivers and paid domestic help. This difference is in itself a consequence of the cultural specificity of motherhood.

My decision to take my children with me, which was based on my own culturally constructed notions of good mothering, did not prevent a number of people in New Zealand suggesting that it was an irresponsible thing to do, that I might be putting them at risk. I considered that they were no more at risk than at home in New Zealand, given

New Zealand's high accidental child death rate as a result of road accidents and drownings. Besides, my children would be well fed, drink purified water and I could take them to the doctor if they became ill. They would not be exposed to the same risks as Nicaraguan children from low-income families, who are malnourished and cannot afford education or health care.

The main long-term benefit for us as a family was that my children became co-participant observers of life in Nicaragua. My professional life is not separate from my personal life, they understood what my PhD was about and because they met many of my participants, they too shared a sense of responsibility to them and were therefore less likely to resent the amount of time I spent working on it. I could talk to them about my work and they knew where and whom I was talking about. After a few months back in New Zealand, they stopped appreciating having their own rooms and hot running water to wash in and they have begun to forget how to speak Spanish. But I undoubtedly believe that their lives have been enriched by the experience and that it was a good education for them. As far as my research is concerned, I realise in retrospect that although having my children with me in the field was hard and frustrating at times, many of the practical difficulties posed by their presence were of theoretical interest to my study.

### *Research and emotions*

Emotions are difficult to write about because the fieldwork process creates a whole series of conflicting emotions and their relevance to the research is not always self-evident. It would also be impossible to document all the emotions felt during an extended period of fieldwork. My fieldwork was marked by joy, frustration, desire and grief, all of which had differing impacts on my research and my understandings of my topic.

Shortly after starting my fieldwork, I began to experience a heightened state of awareness and stimulation. As researchers we sometimes become attached to our fieldsites and enjoy the familiarity of difference. My state of awareness was reinforced by the pleasure I gained from the way this familiarity played on my senses; the salsa or bolero track blaring out of the bus, the smell of fresh *tortillas*, the taste of *enchiladas* bought at the *fritanga*, the deep purple colour of a glass of *fresco de pitahaya*, the use of

Nicaraguanisms in people's speech, the historical traces of revolution on the landscape. Existing in another language is also energising in this respect, it allows us to adopt another personality. When I function in Spanish I can do things that I would rarely do in English, from making small talk to taxi drivers to shouting for service in a busy bar. I felt happy to be back in Nicaragua again, to be speaking Spanish and to be getting on with my PhD.

Given that my fieldwork experience involved the death of my close friend, Sadie Rivas, my fieldwork experience was however also deeply marked by grief. Sadie's death impacted on me and my research in a multitude of ways. My initial response on hearing the news of her death was that I would be unable to continue with my research. However, during Sadie's wake, my feelings on this shifted. Although it was a comfort when mutual friends arrived at the wake, at first I was unable to talk to anyone as it was all too unbearable and it was impossible to know what to do. I almost wished that I shared a Catholic background with those present which would have at least enabled me to take part in the catechism and the prayers at the wake. But over the two days and nights of her wake, I talked to many Nicaraguans who had known Sadie. Some of these people I already knew, others I met for the first time. But I was forced to talk about my work. Many people asked me how it was going, how much progress I had made, if I needed any help with anything. Some gave me contact phone numbers or names of people who might be of use to me or offered their own perspectives on my topic. These conversations convinced me that there was no way that I could leave Nicaragua without finishing what I had come to do.

But it was hard. I felt huge responsibilities towards Sadie's children, her niece and nephew who lived with us, as well as to my own children who not only had to experience the death of someone close to them for the first time in their lives, but had also witnessed two children lose their mother, which inevitably exacerbated childhood anxieties for them. After a couple of weeks, however, we moved house. The living arrangements at Sadie's had changed considerably. Sadie's mother had returned from the United States and her brother and sister-in-law also moved into the house with their two children. The tension in the house, exacerbated by the pressure exerted by so many people on the

inadequate water supply, made me decide that it would be better if we went to live elsewhere and we rented a room from a family nearby.

The Nicaraguan friends who supported me through this difficult time did in many ways demonstrate a 'life goes on' approach. Nicaragua's violent recent history means that Nicaraguans have experienced death in a way unimaginable to most people. This approach helped me in many ways and enabled me to continue with my work. However, at times it became too much for me. During Sadie's wake, I had a conversation with a local environmental activist who presented a radio programme on environmental issues for Radio Matagalpa. Just a couple of days after Sadie had died, I found him persuading me to come and talk on the programme about the ozone hole in New Zealand. Just before the programme, I had to pull out, mainly because I did not feel up to it.

Although I had decided to continue with my work as planned, my interview schedule suffered considerably. A number of interviews were postponed as neither my participants nor I felt like doing recorded interviews. Consequently, I did fewer interviews than I had planned and was forced to abandon the intention to do all the transcribing while in the field. Sadie's daughter had been helping me with transcribing but after her mother's death, she no longer wished to.

But in many ways the sadness at Sadie's death brought me closer to my participants, many of whom had known Sadie well. They often spontaneously referred to Sadie in both interviews and conversations and I believe that our shared grief and sadness over her death engendered a more profound degree of rapport. The women at El Hatillo remembered Sadie as the first person to respond to their needs after Hurricane Mitch. Silvia Montiel tells me how she walked to Matagalpa with bare feet after the hurricane had taken all her belongings and Sadie took her home and gave her a pair of shoes.

When I returned to El Hatillo in 2001, I did so as Sadie's friend and was able to feel connected to her again through my participants in this community. They wanted to talk to me about their fond memories of Sadie and show me photos of her. I was filled with great sadness but also a tremendous closeness to these women when Rosa Laviana brought her

guitar one night and played a song she had composed herself on the anniversary of Sadie's death. "In Matagalpa, a beautiful flower was born, her name was Sadie Rivas ..."

Exploring some of the emotions we feel when we conduct fieldwork can be viewed as part of a feminist endeavour to conduct research which acknowledges the power relations implicated in its production and to seek ways to make the research process more egalitarian, participatory and interactive. The power relations between me and the women of El Hatillo were, albeit momentarily, erased as we shared our grief and sadness at the loss of a friend. Attention to emotions has the potential to bring about a clearer focus on the hybrid or inbetween spaces which emerge during the process of knowledge production. It is therefore a way to understand the multiple repositionings of self that take place during the course of fieldwork.

### *Sexuality and fieldwork*

Once I was back in Nicaragua in 1999, I simultaneously began to experience not only intellectual stimulation, but also renewed feelings of myself as a sexual being. The field itself can have a seductive quality and fieldwork can lead to the constitution of a sexualised relationship between the theoretical 'ethnographer' and the 'field' (Wilson 1995). Altork (1995) believes that allowing oneself to be seduced by the field, and this can mean acknowledging the erotic component of the research, can provide more powerful insights. A commitment to a political cause can take on a passionate quality and as stated my initial interest in Nicaragua was sparked by sympathy and support for the Sandinista revolution. The appeal of the revolutionary mystique can, in addition to a sense of political justice, take on quasi-religious or even sexualised dimensions. My sense of commitment to and involvement in the Sandinista Revolution was both cause and consequence of a short but passionate sexual relationship I had in 1990 with a Sandinista militant. I found myself at that time confirming my political commitment to the revolution through a passionate and romantic attachment. Both my political and my sensual-sexual commitment to Nicaragua preceded my academic commitment. Both Bolton (1995) and Morton (1995) describe their attraction to their fieldsites through previous romantic involvements.

It appeared that my feelings of intellectual stimulation and sexual desire were somehow connected. However, it was not a process over which I had total control. While I began to experience myself as a subject of sexual desire, I was simultaneously and unexpectedly positioned by others as an object of desire. This was a process which, in retrospect, had important implications for my understandings of motherhood, sexuality and femininity in Nicaragua.

It could perhaps have been anticipated that the presence of my children and the temporary presence of my partner would have emitted clear signals about my potential sexual availability. At least, if I had thought about it properly, I would have assumed that my sexuality would be differently constructed from how it was in 1990 when I visited Nicaragua both single and childless. Nevertheless, I was still a *chela*<sup>1</sup>, and so gendered and possibly racist assumptions were made about my sexual availability, assumptions which nonetheless impacted on the research process in significant ways. While my motherhood status in Nicaragua positioned me in certain ways and did to some extent facilitate rapport with participants, it did not position me as sexually unavailable. This in itself is interesting in terms of what it tells me about alternative discourses of motherhood and family in Nicaragua, but is nonetheless complicated by my foreignness. My positioning as a *chela* could have created sexual attraction to me based on attributes that I would feel uneasy about promoting. This could possibly include the way in which fair skin is seen as a sign of beauty and the notion that European women are more sexually liberated than Latin American women are.

I realised that offers of help with my research project from male Nicaraguans could not be seen as “innocent”, given that they were often sexually motivated. At times, men feigned interest in my research project in an attempt to spend time with me. I did however sometimes take advantage of such interest and used them to further my research and make connections with places and people. I was able to gain access to the Nicaraguan government through a man I met in Matagalpa who had a friend who worked for the PR department of the Presidency and was therefore in constant contact with the ministers. This introduction involved my travelling to Managua with him on a Sunday to meet her, so I took along both my children and my domestic as “protection”.



Over the course of my fieldwork, my sexual and gendered subjectivities shifted and I found myself renegotiating my femininity and performing it more self-consciously. Gender is performative (Butler 1990) and these shifts and renegotiations are particularly valuable in highlighting the performative nature of gender, which can have a destabilising impact on normative heterosexuality. My experience made me realise how the fieldwork process highlights how gender is performed differently in different contexts and how it can also be highly contradictory in terms of both subjectivity and the construction of self. Sometimes female field researchers try to make themselves appear genderless to defy stereotypes or ward off unwanted attention or harassment from men (See for example Conaway 1986, Caplan 1993, Vera-Sanso 1993). Sometimes I painted my nails with a couple of Nicaraguan women. I did this not because I particularly wanted to paint my nails, but because it provided a time and space to talk about other issues, a type of bonding experience. However, I did also find myself regretting not having brought many of the ‘tools’ that I had at home to perform my gender. As I began to experience my own sexuality more actively, I wished I had brought my perfume, more make-up, a pair of shoes with heels, items that had seemed inappropriate and unnecessary to my fieldwork while I was packing to leave for Nicaragua back in New Zealand. Sometimes my female friends commented on how little make up I wore in comparison to Nicaraguan women or how great I looked when I did put on more to go out dancing.

To some extent, there is a pressure among Latin American women to display outward symbols of conventional femininities, and not to do so could seem arrogant or as lacking in personal hygiene. To some extent, I wanted to comply with cultural norms to fit in, even when my feminist consciousness told me it was not necessary, but at the same time and in a somewhat contradictory fashion, I was enjoying being complimented and the flirtatious interaction with men that does not happen in New Zealand.

In retrospect, I feel that this subjective experience is something which cannot and should not be separated from the focus of my research. If, as Rose (1997) has stated, our sense of self depends on an otherness that we can never really know, I have wondered what the implications are of my experiencing or expressing desire for individuals who are not

research participants but who are nonetheless members of the researched community. If that desire is constituted by internalised neo-colonial desires of wanting to possess the other, what possible consequences could it have for research participants? It is a deeply complex issue. While it can be considered racist *not* to consider people from outside your own culture as potential sexual partners (Gearing 1995, Kulick 1995), I recognise that I am equally in danger not only of replicating stereotypes about “Latin” men and foreign women (*chelas*), but also of benefiting from the manifestations of romantic heterosexuality which I am aiming to deconstruct because of the visible harm it does to the lives of women. This is potentially the case whether sexual desire is consummated or not, for example, even when it involves flirtatious interaction because it is enjoyable or when it involves taking advantage of being fashioned as an object of desire in order to further a research project. This demonstrates the contradictions inherent in my own positioning, that I can criticise from a feminist perspective expressions of Nicaraguan masculinities, as I do in Chapter 3, but am simultaneously attracted to the revolutionary male (or exotic Other), an experience labelled by Altork (1995) as cognitive dissonance.

My experience also helped me to understand the connections Nicaraguan men and women make between sexuality, femininity and motherhood and how they differ from the cultural contexts at home. In Nicaragua, I was positioned as a sexually available working mother. This suggests that discourses which constrain are also liberating, in the sense that Nicaraguan women do not have to put their sexuality on hold when they become mothers. It also suggests that Nicaraguans are more accepting or enabling of more complex multiple subjectivities than is the case in New Zealand.

## **Conclusions**

This chapter constitutes an attempt to provide an honest and partial account of the research process and the methodological difficulties it entailed. If our methodology is guided by our epistemology (Wolf 1996), then my epistemology has been guided by own experience which is simultaneously personal, subjective, political and professional. I have tried to position myself clearly in my project and discuss these aspects of self which I feel are relevant to the project in a way which accounts for my social locatedness. In the

process I have tried not to explain this is in a fixed and unproblematic manner, but in a way which demonstrates its dynamic and contradictory nature.

The inevitable power relations which existed between me and my participants could never entirely be erased and at times my positioning as a researcher led to ambiguities of ethical concern. However, there is no doubt that many participants felt that taking part in my project had been a beneficial experience. Some of them became close friends and make me feel very welcome when I return to Matagalpa and none withdrew from the research. I also believe that rapport with my participants was facilitated by Sadie, both before and after her death. I feel a deep respect for my participants, their lives and their struggles and attempted to create research relationships which clearly expressed this.

There are crucial relationships at work between our subjectivities and our fieldwork experiences. It is not possible to fully know what the relationship is between my personal life and my research. We cannot always predict how we will be positioned by others, our positionality shifts during the course of fieldwork and we can recognise the need for cultural sensitivity without knowing the best way to achieve this. Exploring positionality is no guarantee that more conventional forms of knowledge production will not be reproduced and I am aware that I will benefit more than my participants from this study. The only solution to these dilemmas is to continue to problematise both 'the field' and 'fieldwork' and hope that in the process we achieve a deeper understanding of methodological complexities.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In Nicaragua, men and women of European descent are referred to as *cheles* and *chelas*. These terms are also used for fair-skinned Nicaraguans.

## Redundant men: Single motherhood, absent fathers and the expressions of masculinity

### Introduction

I argued in Chapter 1 that family life in Nicaragua is both fluid and unstable. The existence of large numbers of single mothers represents a challenge to hegemonic understandings of male authority and destabilises conventional understandings of femininity based on *marianismo*. While this paradigm is powerful in terms of its ability to inform and shape discourse, everyday practices in Nicaragua are at odds with it. The notion of the single mother or *madre soltera* clashes with the moral or *marianista* mother.

Discourses of *marianismo* and its male counterpart *machismo*, based on the cult of virility, have their origins in the colonial period and have led to specific forms of gender relations in Latin America. However, well-established and pervasive discourses shift as a result of economic, political and cultural change. While understandings of masculinity and femininity, what it means to be a man and a woman in Nicaragua, have built up over a long historical period, they can often take contradictory or paradoxical forms in particular historical moments. Tensions sometimes emerge as these understandings are adapted and renegotiated by men and women as they attempt to make sense of themselves and their lives in rapidly changing circumstances. Dictatorship, insurrection, revolution, war, structural adjustment and disaster create tensions between sometimes competing discourses of masculinity, femininity, motherhood and sexuality.

The reasons why women become single mothers are extremely diverse as there is no single reality or explanation that lies behind life choices or constraints. Mac an Ghail (1996) emphasises the multidimensional nature of gender relations and the need to move away from theories which suggest they are guided by a simplistic and overarching factor.

In the light of this, this chapter represents an introductory way to explore single motherhood in a particular historical context. In Latin America, because of the cultural

emphasis on the cult of virility (Stevens 1973) which encourages men to father many children along with widespread paternal irresponsibility, an assumption is made that not only are female-headed households worse off economically, but that women have been abandoned by irresponsible men. While there is no doubt that abandonment exists and it is very common for men to take on new or simultaneous partners (serial polygyny), my data suggest that more strategic decision making takes place by women than the stereotype allows for. Safa's (1995) study of the Caribbean discovered that, given the deterioration of men's ability to fulfil their roles as breadwinners, women were increasingly likely to bring non-satisfactory relationships to an end. Chant's work (1997a, 1997b) on women-headed households in Mexico, Costa Rica and the Philippines has suggested that these households are not necessarily worse off than households headed by men and that female household headship is sometimes a positive strategy for survival. Some of Lancaster's (1992) informants in Nicaragua were of the opinion that it was better to be an abandoned mother than to be trapped in a bad marriage. In Nicaragua, many women are simply deciding, often as a result of previous negative relationship experiences, that they are better off without a male partner. Women often quote a common saying "Mejor sola que mal acompañada" (Better to be alone than in a bad relationship, literally 'badly accompanied').

I interpret these negative experiences in terms of the way hegemonic masculinity manifests itself in this context. My participants told of their own experiences of the individual manifestation of hegemonic masculinity of the men in their lives. The data demonstrate the commonplace nature of paternal irresponsibility, domestic violence, sexual abuse, alcoholism, infidelity, unemployment and lack of contribution to the household and I wish to highlight these as the principal factors which lead to women deciding to go it alone. Chant (1997a) has described how, in a context of high and ongoing unemployment, it is common for Latin American men to take refuge in extra-familial practices of masculinity such as drinking, gambling and affairs to retain a sense of legitimacy.

This chapter examines some of the causes and consequences of single motherhood in Nicaragua through an exploration of the manifestations of masculinity. While much of

this chapter focuses on men and masculinity, it provides crucial contextual and historical information which adds to our understanding of single motherhood. Single motherhood as a phenomenon cannot be understood without reference to absent fathers and to the interplay between masculinity and femininity. After detailing the expressions of masculinity as they are displayed, I destabilise these notions and present some of the theoretical dilemmas which emerge from this type of research. Next I analyse some of the recent political and economic changes that have impacted on constructions of masculinity. The remainder of the chapter focuses on my participants' experiences in an attempt to reveal why they became single mothers and to understand how shifts in the meanings attached to motherhood come about through interactions with and experiences of expressions of masculinity.

### **Hegemonic masculinity in Nicaragua**

The notion of hegemonic masculinity as developed by Carrigan et al. (1985) and further refined by Connell (1995) is complex because it is extremely unlikely that any individual man would embody hegemonic masculinity in an absolute sense. Furthermore, hegemonic masculinity is not a "fixed character type", but rather a set of practices which in a given moment command a degree of social acceptance but are always open to contestation (Connell 1995:76).

Nicaraguan author Montoya Tellería (1998), following Connell, characterises hegemonic masculinity in Nicaragua as a series of attributes that society demands of men, and is careful to point out that the extent to which men as individuals subscribe to these attributes varies enormously and that each man will have his own perception and experience of what it means to be a man. Hegemonic masculinity in Nicaragua, according to Montoya Tellería, is characterised firstly by compulsory heterosexuality, exercised by dominating women and by having sexual relationships with many women and impregnating them. Men learn to internalise homophobia so that homosexuality becomes linked with the "feminine" which is inferior and so manifests itself as misogyny. The second attribute is the need for paid employment which both gives men legitimacy in the public sphere and enables them to be providers. In addition to these attributes, hegemonic

masculinity is associated with violence towards women and children, and also towards other men. Lancaster (1992) insists on the importance of viewing *machismo* in terms of relations between men as well as relations between men and women. He states that there is a discernible cultural pressure on men in Nicaragua to maintain a masculine image in front of other men. Similarly, Wade (1994), writing on Colombia, argues that many men are juggling two competing discourses of masculinity. He sees a conflict for many men between being a good provider and being a *parrandero*, a man who lives it up with his male friends, giving parties, drinking and dancing, the former affecting relations with women, the latter affecting relations with other men. Montoya Tellería (1998) also believes that Nicaraguan men are caught in the crossfire of conflicting messages. There are personal and social factors which foster non-violent behaviour but they co-exist with others which undermine this process and create pressure to behave in a violent or macho way.

This violence can be considered the main dimension of *machismo* in Nicaragua, not just physical violence, but also authoritarianism and aggression in dealings with women. Comments made by men who have taken part in masculinity workshops run by feminist NGO Puntos de Encuentro in Managua indicate that for many, violence constitutes an important part of being a man. However, as Montoya Tellería (1998) has stated, male violence against women in Nicaragua is not to be conceptualised as an irrational act but as an instrument of control. This violence is regularly fuelled by fears men have about their partners, particularly their perceived inability to control their sexuality. The main fears expressed by men are the fear of being dominated by their wife or partner; of having an independent wife or partner; that one's wife or partner will have sexual relations with another man and of not being able to perform sexually (Montoya Tellería 1998). However, no man embodies this kind of masculinity in an absolute way. It is essentially an ideal men try to attain which is actually impossible, particularly in the present situation in Nicaragua which has excessively high levels of unemployment.

The cultural pressure on men to display what are seen as masculine attributes and the circulation of competing discourses of masculinity means that they behave in ways which are seen as irresponsible by many women. In some circumstances, this irresponsibility

makes them increasingly redundant as partners and husbands. There is of course no fixed pattern to this process. Not all men subscribe to the models of masculinity available. For example, Gutman's (1996) study on masculinity in a low-income neighbourhood in Mexico City has documented the arbitrary nature of the way in which these attributes manifest themselves. Some alcoholic men are good providers; some men abstain from drinking but are violent towards their wives, and some women sometimes beat their children or indulge in infidelity or drinking. It is the existence of a range of masculine identities, the fact that non-conformity is always an option, which provides potential for change or for what Brittan (1989:24) calls "departure from male gender scripts". The image of the macho man, while familiar to many, is neither static nor unitary, and corresponds to only a small number of actual men, but what is important about hegemonic masculinities is that "large numbers of men are complicit in sustaining the hegemonic model" (Carrigan et al. 1985:92 quoted in Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994b:15).

### **Challenging traditional families and 'crises' in masculinity**

#### *Historical antecedents*

The predominance of single mothers and of fathers as absence is not specifically a feature of the post-revolutionary social landscape in Nicaragua. While family instability results from recent political and economic changes, there is also evidence that the fracturing of constructions of family has more historical origins. Spanish colonialism brought to Latin America the imposition of *patria potestad* or the law of the father as well as the notion of marriage as a cultural ideal. These cultural notions have been propagated by Eurocentric middle class elites to varying extents throughout Nicaragua's post-colonial history and have resurfaced during the governments of Violeta Chamorro and Arnoldo Alemán with their renewed emphasis on Catholic family values.

In many ways, the consolidation of this model has been weak and fragmented, not just because these ideals are impossible to implement in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century but also because of the historical contradictions which emerged from the colonial system itself. While the colonial system in Latin America promoted *patria potestad* and legal marriage as core



cultural values, colonisation also brought widespread miscegenation. From the beginning of the conquest, Spanish men were allowed to have extramarital sexual relations with indigenous or non-white women (Montenegro 2000). During the colonial period, indigenous women were not considered for formal marriage because of their lack of Christianity, so illicit unions (*amancebamiento*) and concubinage (*barraganía*) co-existed with marriage (Fuller 1995). The *mestizo* population in Nicaragua and elsewhere in Latin America was the result of these relationships between indigenous women and Spanish men. These relationships were not consolidated through marriage and produced offspring whose fathers were unknown, leading to the association in Latin America of fathers with absence (Montecino 1995). Marriage was therefore both classed and racialised<sup>1</sup>, applying largely to more well-off white families.

Dore's (1997) research on 19th century Latin America, which focuses specifically on Nicaragua, suggests that male-headed households were an important part of élite and legal discourse but were less prevalent in everyday social practices. She argues that while male-headed households were more numerous, female-headed households were common and the notion of the universal patriarchal family was an ideological construct rather than a historical reality. Patriarchalism was an institutionalised system in Nicaragua, enshrined in the law of *patria potestad*, and patriarchal politics were used, often unsuccessfully, as a means to preserve order. The colonial system of *patria potestad* was however applied more extensively to the middle and upper class sections of the population and less so to the rural and urban poor population. These historical understandings, according to Dore, represent a major challenge to conservative voices in Latin America and elsewhere that see the breakdown of the traditional family as contributing to social disorder.

In this historical process, the mother takes a central role in the family while the father figure is more peripheral and blurred (Montenegro 2000). However, despite the centrality of the mother figure, the violent nature of the conquest, which gave rise to the *mestizo* population, means that femininity is simultaneously constructed as betrayal (Montecino 1995). Malinche, the mistress of Cortés, who is referred to as “la chingada” or the raped one (Paz 1950), represents betrayal because she brought about the end of the Aztec empire (Montecino 1995). Malinche was redeemed only through her motherhood and her

commitment to her children. This notion of femininity as betrayal leads to an understanding of female sexuality as a disorder which in turns constructs violence against women as justifiable (Montecino 1995). Within the *marianismo-machismo* dichotomy, according to Fuller (1995), sex is understood as a force of disorder and disruption for both men and women. However, only women are required to control this disruptive force. Men are seen as incapable because of their relationship with public space and its associated ambivalence and incoherence. While Fuller herself believes these historical understandings can be criticised for their tendency to place too much weight on the trauma of the conquest, Montenegro (2000), writing on Nicaraguan sexual culture, believes that there is much continuity with the *mestizo* reproductive model. This continuity is reproduced in Nicaragua today through the indifference of the male towards his offspring and it leads to dominant understandings of sexuality in Nicaragua as procreative, monogamous, heterosexual and based on penetration.

### *Masculinity and violence*

Alongside populist concerns that societies are experiencing the disintegration of the family, there is also a theoretical and popular tendency to view the more negative expressions of masculinity as evidence of a crisis in masculinity. This notion of a crisis has, according to Brittan (1989), emerged from a perception of a loss of male power both in the public and private sphere, a perception that has inserted itself into popular and media culture and gives rise to books based on the idea of masculinity in crisis (See for example Clare 2000). From this perspective, an increase in domestic violence or alcoholism can be understood in terms of crisis.

It is possible that men's inability to be "real men" according to normative expectations because of high unemployment or the growing economic independence of women means that in response other expressions of masculinity, such as alcoholism or violence towards women, children or other men, gain cultural ascendancy and over time become hegemonic. Anzaldúa's (1991) work on Chichana and *mestiza* gender identity also views these expressions of masculinity in terms of a crisis, suggesting that today's macho drinks

heavily, is violent or abuses drugs in response to the doubts he has about his ability to provide for his family.

A promotor working on domestic violence with an NGO in a number of communities in the RAAS told a Nicaraguan newspaper that many men respond violently to the training and empowerment workshops being conducted with women (Chavarria 1999). This violence can be attributed to “potency, brute ignorance or a pathetic fragility, depending on the perspective” (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994b:5).

The theorisation of masculinity and in particular of violence towards women in terms of a crisis could be seen as making causal connections that are too simplistic to be useful and, as Brittan (1989) has said, is also based on the premise that male identity is very fragile. Connell (1995:84) has argued against talking about a ‘crisis of masculinity’, preferring to talk instead of ‘crisis tendencies’, because the idea of a crisis of masculinity “presupposes a coherent system of some kind” and fails to capture the shifting and contradictory nature of gender practices.

In challenging the notion of a crisis, I am not suggesting in its place any essentialist connection between men and masculinity in any form. I also accept that structural conditions such as unemployment can intensify tendencies towards violent behaviour. As both Brittan (1989) and Segal (1990) have indicated, unemployment or material deprivation do not cause violence, but they can amplify the tendencies towards violence which already exist. If men are violent towards women out of frustration, it is because they assume they have the right to control women (Segal 1990) or because violence is already considered legitimate in marriage (Brittan 1989). The fact that some individuals in circumstances of material deprivation will become violent or start drinking and others in similar circumstances will not, results from the different subject positions individuals adopt in relation to both dominant and conflicting discourses of masculinity and femininity. A woman’s economic independence may either foster a greater degree of equality in the relationship with male husbands or partners or it may threaten a man’s sense of identity as the economic provider. This threat may cause him to resort to violence to re-establish dominance or to spend his time and money engaged in other

pursuits outside of the household to bolster, albeit temporarily, his sense of masculine identity. Some of these pursuits may be negative for the family economy. When this is the case, women's efforts to boost income earning capacity are counterproductive (the more the woman earns, the less the man contributes to the family economy and the more he spends on himself), so the survival of the household and a woman's economic independence might depend on ending the relationship. But the way this process occurs cannot be seen simply as a crisis resulting from the loss of male power. As Wade (1994:134) has argued:

The concepts of masculinity and femininity are culturally specific elements in the constitution of gendered subjectivity. Violence does not emerge straightforwardly from some self-evident conflict between 'masculinity' and 'femininity' seen as univocal opposites in a relation characterised simply by 'male domination' or 'patriarchy'. It emerges rather from conflicts within and between different aspects of masculinities and femininities.

In this vein, Canaan's (1996: 114) work for example, does not dwell on fighting and alcoholism as expressions of masculinity in crisis, but rather as "key signifiers of masculinity which were shaped within social, economic and political contexts". Moore (1994b:154) sees violence not so much as a crisis of masculinity, but more as a crisis in representation, when she writes:

Violence is the consequence of a crisis in representation, both individual and social. The inability to maintain the fantasy of power triggers a crisis in the fantasy of identity, and violence is a means of resolving this crisis because it acts to reconfirm the nature of a masculinity otherwise denied.

A more detailed understanding of the manifestations of masculinity can be acquired by moving away from a notion of a crisis in masculinity in the way that some of the authors referred to here do in different ways. If there is a crisis in masculinity in Nicaragua, it is undoubtedly a long term one that does not fit neatly within any particular historical period.

### **Problematizing masculinities**

The representation of male irresponsibility through the perspectives of women is crucial in terms of understanding the gendered subjectivities of my research participants. However, it does pose a number of theoretical dilemmas.

While it is the intention of this thesis to examine motherhood as a shifting, contingent and negotiable reality which is constructed in and by discourse, it is crucial not to construct masculinity in opposition to that as a fixed and static structure of oppression but rather to acknowledge its fluid and dynamic nature. My focus on motherhood means I am exploring the ways in which changing circumstances expand the meanings of motherhood, and my research is based on information told from female perspectives, but I recognise that these socio-cultural processes will not leave masculinity unchanged. Hegemonic masculinity is always under threat, is always relational, in the sense that it only exists in relation to femininity (Brittan 1989), and it adapts itself to changing economic and social circumstances. In this respect hegemonic masculinity is unstable and multiple and at any given moment can be made up of a set of competing discourses and images. According to Cornwall and Lindisfarne (1994b:20) hegemonic masculinities are but “privileged forms of masculinity” which “masquerade as being unitary”.

Recent research on masculinities in Latin America is demonstrating the instability of masculine identities and the complex processes which surround the constitution of male gender identities. Gutman’s (1996) ethnographic work on masculinity in a low income neighbourhood in Mexico City has documented the changes that are taking place in male attitudes and behaviours. Studies by Lancaster (1992), Montoya Tellería (1998), Sternberg (2000) and Walsh (2001) have also focused on the difficulty of defining *machismo* in Nicaragua because of its shifting meanings.

Apart from an interest in masculinity from a Latin American perspective specifically, the Gender and Development literature is also beginning to take masculinity and male gender identities more seriously and the Sweetman collection (1997a) represents part of this attempt<sup>2</sup>. In addition there are various groups within Latin America who are attempting to use research and workshops to discuss the social construction of manhood and redefine

masculinity, such as CORIAC (Men's Collective for Equal Relations) in Mexico (Gómez 1997a) or the GHCV (Men against Violence Group) in Nicaragua. Cornwall and Lindisfarne (1994a:4) talk about the positive outcomes to be had when masculinity is explored in a manner which acknowledges its multiple facets because of its potential to "dislocate the hegemonic versions of masculinity which privilege some people over others". A focus on issues of masculinity in development is seen by White (1997) as an important corrective to mainstream development initiatives which take male gender identities as a given. However, Cornwall and Lindisfarne (1994a) also warn that examining masculinity is providing men with new forms of discursive control and therefore new forms of power. These sentiments are echoed in various ways in the development literature (Engle 1997, Gómez 1997a, Sternberg 2000) and elsewhere (Hearn 1996) and question whether looking at men through the lens of masculinity constitutes a valid area of enquiry. Gilmore's (1990) work has been critiqued for its positivist approach to masculinity (Connell 1995, Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994b), for assuming that masculinity and men are "real" and "out there" (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994b:27).

However, the principal theoretical dilemma that my approach presents is how to examine women's negative experiences of men and masculinity in a way that does not, as Cornwall (1997) says, smack of "old-style feminism" which constructs men as the problem. Cornwall (2000) is critical of the way in which GAD continues to reproduce the 'women as victim, men as problem' discourse. Both Sweetman (1997b) and White (1997) have questioned the way in which discussions of masculinity also tend to portray men as irresponsible in contrast to a stereotype of women as nurturing and more inclined to change. Wade (1994:115) has expressed the difficulty of explaining violence by men against women without falling into the "trap of constructing monolithic and universalistic concepts of masculinity". As the data which follow demonstrate, for many women, men are very much the problem.

This dilemma is magnified when conducting ethnographic research in a development context. Harvey and Gow (1994), for example, have discussed how problematic it is to explore the relationship between violence and sexuality from a feminist perspective. To

objectify, name or reveal the violence of particular social relations without colluding in or perpetuating such relations means you have to impose absolute values on these practices regardless of how these are understood by those involved. Such research runs the risk of adopting a neo-colonial position by projecting traditional masculinity onto less privileged or marginalised men and thereby implicitly suggesting that these issues do not apply in other cultural contexts. This point has been raised by White (1997: 16) who is concerned by the “overtones in this of colonial stereotypes about “lazy natives””. It is an issue which has arisen in research on masculinity conducted in the US on Mexican immigrant men. Hondagneu-Sotelo and Messner (1994) have indicated how these men are seen as macho and traditional in opposition to the white middle class new man or new father. Alonso (1995), working on domestic violence and the law in 19th century Mexico expresses a similar concern. She asks how she can write about gender, class and ethnic inequalities without reproducing racist stereotypes of “Hispanic men as nasty machos and women as stoic martyrs” (p.29).

It is therefore crucial not to implicitly suggest that men in developed country contexts have relinquished many forms of male power in favour of more pro-feminist ontologies. Hondagneu-Sotelo and Messner (1994) see apparent changes in primarily white middle class masculinity in the US as mere changes in gender displays. Men feel culturally able to cry in public or change a baby’s nappy but they still dominate women. They can be more expressive without any changes taking place in institutional gendered forms of power. Brittan (1989) believes that styles in masculinity are visibly changing but that male power is not. This idea is echoed by Segal (1990), who argues that the visible changes taking place in masculinity could be viewed as modernising trends where men can enjoy getting in touch with their more feminine attributes while still retaining power over women. Engle Merry’s (1995) research on domestic violence in a Hawai’ian community found that legal changes, which offered battered women “legally endowed selves”, had the potential to bring about changes in female gender identities. However, male batterers were able to resist the redefinition of their gender identities through this legal process.

These dilemmas are problematic for post-structuralist feminist researchers who want to acknowledge the shifting and contingent nature of masculinity as well as give voice to women who have experienced various forms of gender inequality and violence. I intend therefore to explore single motherhood in a context of specific masculinities but do so by sticking as closely as possible to my participants' experiences of gender inequality. There is no doubt that, despite the diversity of individual experience and the problematic nature of according absolute values to the issue, paternal irresponsibility and domestic violence are endemic social problems in Nicaragua and need to be addressed as such. It is to be expected that qualitative explorations of men in Nicaragua such as that of Montoya Tellería (1998) along with Gutman's (1996) study of men in Mexico City provide not only more nuanced readings of masculinity but also reveal a greater degree of male resistance to hegemonic masculinities that does not emerge from my data from women who by virtue of their status as single mothers have had to varying degrees negative experiences of men and masculinity. In this regard, it is also to be expected to some extent that the complexity of gendered processes will be masked in the data by discourses which depend on dichotomous and simplistic notions of masculinity and femininity and popular understandings in Nicaragua of the meanings of *machismo*. Men and women are influenced by the stereotypes and their insertion through discourse at the same time as their actual practices conflict with these discourses.

Before describing in detail women's experiences of masculinities in Nicaragua, I examine recent historical events in Nicaragua which have impacted on how masculinity is configured.

### **Men, military demobilisation and structural adjustment**

When the Sandinistas lost the general elections of 1990, Nicaragua had effectively been at war since the 1960s when Sandinista guerrillas initiated the struggle against Somoza, a struggle which lasted until the triumph of the revolution in an insurrection against the dictatorship in 1979. Shortly after that, US congress began to support the Contra to fight against the Sandinistas and so very rapidly the revolution found itself at war. After the triumph, the guerrilla movement was transformed into a patriotic and revolutionary army,



the EPS (Sandinista People's Army). As the Contra war began to escalate, the FSLN introduced compulsory military service (SMP).

The military draft applied only to men, which led to a storm of protest from some voices within the women's movement. Women had made an enormous contribution as guerrilla fighters in the struggle against Somoza and their exemption from SMP could have been constructed as a failure to recognise this contribution. After 1986, however, women were allowed to sign up as volunteers and were full and active participants in the popular militias. While it is misleading to assume that violence and war-making are inherent aspects of male behaviour (Large 1997), it is the case that men and women were implicated differently in armed conflict in Nicaragua and these differences have much to do with constructions of masculinity and femininity, as well as with more practical political imperatives. The exclusion of women from the draft did however have the effect of furthering the relationship which exists between the military and masculinism which, despite the presence of women, had developed during the years leading up to the insurrection.

The founding members of the FSLN in their attempts to create a revolutionary mystique fostered notions of discipline, modesty, self-sacrifice and willingness to suffer pain (Gilbert 1988). Gilbert (1988:55) quotes a party militant in Matagalpa who, echoing the earlier sentiments of Sandino, said the party could not have "men who are vacillating, timid – not men of glass but men of steel". The revolution worked hard to propagate a discourse based on Guevara's notion of the *hombre nuevo* or new man, and while the new man was to be more generous, responsible and hardworking (Lancaster 1992), it generated a gendered revolutionary discourse that ignored female participation in the struggle. Cabezas' (1985:106-7) account of his participation in the guerrilla struggle demonstrated the extent to which he was inspired by the notion that the new man would be born within the FSLN in the mountains:

un hombre, pareciera mentira, un tanto cándido, sin egoísmos, un hombre que ya no es mezquino, un hombre tierno que se sacrifica por los demás.

a man who would be somewhat innocent, without selfishness, a man who is no longer mean, a tender man who sacrifices himself for others.

Notions of the new man were however contradictory. Their military leader René Tejada described to them his vision of the new man as a man able to physically tolerate all kinds of endurance, a kind of superman who is beyond the *hombre normal*, normal man:

más allá del cansancio de las piernas ... El hombre nuevo está más allá del cansancio de los pulmones. El hombre nuevo está más allá del hambre, más allá de la lluvia, más allá de los zancudos, más allá de la soledad.

beyond tired legs ... The new man is beyond tired lungs. The new man is beyond hunger, beyond the rain, beyond the mosquitoes, beyond solitude.  
(Cabezas 1985:14)

Feminist perspectives on the Nicaraguan revolution have criticised the way in which the women's movement in Nicaragua failed, because of the revolutionary emphasis on national liberation, to articulate the demands of women in a coherent manner (Molyneux 1986, Murguialday 1990, Randall 1994). Revolutionary discourse in Nicaragua and its nationalist emphasis instilled a positive sense of masculine identity and purpose in those men who fought for or subordinated their interests to the revolutionary cause. The state's recruitment of men as fighters puts them in great danger (White 1997) but can also fuel a strong sense of masculine identity. This is not to suggest that many Nicaraguan women did not experience this revolutionary calling, as they clearly did. However, revolutionary mystique was masculinised and the military draft only applied to men. Therefore, hegemonic masculine values, which were part of the socialisation of Nicaraguan boys and men, found particular resonance within the revolution.

Nagel (1998:243) states that, despite the roles that women play in the making and unmaking of nations in different geographical and historical contexts, both the projects of nationalism and revolution (and Sandinismo encompassed both of these) are gendered projects, based on an intimate historical connection between manhood and nationhood and on scripts "written primarily by men, for men and about men". There is no doubt, as Lancaster (1992) has suggested, that expressions of violence in Nicaragua are based on gendered discourse.

In the 1990 election campaign, while opposition candidate Violeta Chamorro was promoting herself as the mother of the Nicaraguans in a reconciliatory fashion (Kampwirth 1996a), FSLN leader Daniel Ortega, clad in military fatigues, continued to depend on the masculinist symbology of war (Vilas 1990, Lancaster 1992). Unexpectedly, Violeta Chamorro's brand of politics, based on her image as a loyal wife, widow and mother, along with her electoral pledge to end the war and the military draft, triumphed over the more combative and revolutionary *machista* discourse of Daniel Ortega. The electoral defeat of the FSLN came as a huge shock to Nicaragua. For a few days the streets were empty and not even UNO supporters celebrated their victory.

The electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in 1990, which brought the definitive end to the Contra war, meant the demobilisation of large numbers of both Sandinista and Contra soldiers. The end of the war led to the emergence of the *desmovilizado* or demobilised soldier. When Chamorro came to power, over 70,000 soldiers were demobilised and the defence budget was cut by 80 per cent (Close 1999). During the war, men and masculine values were valued because of the way they were deployed to defend the revolution. But in 1990 many became *desmovilizados* – demobilised, an identity which still lingers ten years after the end of the war. Even in 1999, a group of men who called themselves the *desmovilizados* were organised politically to lobby NGOs such as CARE in Matagalpa for financial support and training (Sadie Rivas, personal communication) and on my first visit to Waslala, a group of *desmovilizados* was protesting on the main road. Close (1999) considers one of the Chamorro government's biggest failures to be its inability to reintegrate demobilised men into civilian life. But as he states, the demobilisation process was complicated by the fact that the EPS was no ordinary army but one that was “highly politicized and committed to the goals of the revolution” (p.47) and by the fact that the many of the demobbed Contras expected to displace the EPS and become the new Nicaraguan army. Despite some attempts at resettling ex-Contras in development poles (see Chapter 5), civilian reintegration was both patchy and severely under-resourced, leaving hundreds of ex-combatants without any form of socio-economic alternative. The redundant nature of many Nicaraguan men is symbolised in the figure of the *desmovilizado*.

Since 1990, many men have found it difficult to move away from the culture of violence associated with war. As Large (1997) points out, the end of hostilities in a given context does not necessarily mean that men and boys will not continue to recreate cycles of violence in other ways, violence that is often underpinned by structural constraints.

The early 1990s were marked by armed responses to political dissatisfaction with rearmed groups operating throughout the countryside. These confrontations involved land seizures and hostage taking. These rearmed groups became known as *recompas* (rearmed Sandinistas), *recontras* (rearmed Contras) or *revueltos* (mixed groups). Close (1999) cites UNDP figures which state that more than 1,300 people were killed in armed conflicts in Nicaragua between 1991 and 1994. Despite the demobilisation process, in 1996 the army estimated that between 10,000 and 15,000 military weapons were still in civilian hands. Today Nicaragua continues to experience high levels of both rural and urban violence, increasingly viewed as delinquency rather than as politically motivated.

The response to the electoral defeat and subsequent political and economic developments has been gendered. In a country where it is primarily women who are responsible for meeting children's needs, gender roles, which see women as responsible for nurturing families, can provide an impetus to act, despite the electoral defeat. Many men on the other hand seem to have lost the impetus which fuelled their desire to participate in the revolution. The condition of being *desmovilizado* together with the lack of socio-economic opportunities or alternatives means that the embodiments of masculinity have become fragmented. Although men in Nicaragua have traditionally benefited from gender inequality and continue to do so in a multitude of ways, it has been difficult for men to construct new masculine identities in the present political and economic climate. The disengagement of men from the revolutionary project through demobilisation has been compounded by other forms of state restructuring that have taken place since 1990. The implementation of neoliberal structural adjustment programmes has limited employment opportunities and has led to the increasing marginalisation of men in the economic and political sphere. As stated in Chapter 1, it is important to acknowledge that much research on structural adjustment policies has concluded that women suffer disproportionately under such policies as a result of their caregiving responsibilities. Women's

responsibilities for children often mean that, in spite of the crisis, they are more likely to find alternative sources of income or generate alternative productive schemes and are less likely to resort to alcohol or violence out of frustration. However, as I indicate in Chapter 4, the end of the war did bring important shifts in gender relations for some families. While men could possibly get away with not taking responsibility for children while the country was at war, it became more difficult to do so after the end of the war.

#### *Public revolutionaries and private reactionaries*

Expectations created by the revolution along with a discourse of the new man meant that hopes were high at the time of the revolution that Nicaraguan women might be emancipated from the crueller aspects of hegemonic masculinity by progressive male political leaders. But during the 1980s women began to realise that many men were good revolutionaries in public but reactionaries in private (Johnson 1985, Angel and Macintosh 1987, Lancaster 1992, Niehaus 1994, Randall 1994). For instance, one of my participants took a job in the 1980s as a receptionist in the regional office of the FSLN and was raped by a married Sandinista deputy. She became pregnant, and had a son.

It is the publicity surrounding allegations of sexual abuse against the former Sandinista president and leader of the FSLN Daniel Ortega that has created substantial national awareness of the extent of violence against women in Nicaragua. This awareness reveals the extreme gap that exists in reality between the revolutionary new man and the real men with whom women have to live and work. Despite the electoral rejection of Daniel Ortega in both 1990 and again in 1996<sup>3</sup>, a cult known as *Danielismo* developed around his personality and he is still able to draw thousands of supporters to his political rallies. In 1998 Daniel Ortega's stepdaughter, Zoilamérica Narváez, publicly accused her stepfather of sexually assaulting her since 1979, when she was 11. She stated that she felt she could not speak out before out of loyalty to the nation and to the revolution. She has been lobbying for Ortega to be stripped of his parliamentary immunity so he can stand trial. In October 1999, having exhausted all legal channels in Nicaragua, she took her case to the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights in Washington. Political support for Daniel Ortega from within the party appears not to have been too severely

eroded by the accusation. Zoilamérica believes her accusations were not heard because of the “complicity of political power with the masculine, *machista* and patriarchal power that is dominant in Nicaragua” (Narváez 1999). Nevertheless, despite the failure of the judicial system to take up Zoilamérica’s case, the allegation of incest at the heart of the revolution has become a national issue and was referred to by my participants. Support for Zoilamérica from within the women’s movement has however been patchy, given the Sandinista allegiances of many Nicaraguan feminists (Zoilamérica Narváez, personal communication).

### **Causes of single motherhood**

There is no doubt that individual manifestations of masculinity such as paternal irresponsibility, domestic violence and sexual abuse, infidelity and lack of productivity can be considered part of all societies but that they are embedded in a society in culturally and historically specific ways. For relationships to work over a long period, the positive must outweigh the negative. There is evidence in Nicaragua at the present time that the endemic nature of negative male behaviour and women’s personal experience of this is leading many of them to adopt full time single parenthood. Various forms of paternal irresponsibility such as being unemployed, lack of willingness to do domestic chores or childcare, engaging in extramarital affairs or some form of serial polygyny, drinking, and violence and abuse are some of the themes among others which have emerged from my data and are leading to women opting for single motherhood as a long term choice.

#### *Paternal irresponsibility, alcoholism and unemployment*

Many women talked to me of experiences of an irresponsible father when they were growing up and how it was their mothers who worked hard to support the family while fathers were often drunk and sometimes violent as well as unproductive.

[Mis padres] trabajaban en una hacienda, mi madre fue muy trabajadora. Mi padre ...un poco irresponsable, no, por la tradición de un hombre del campo, que trabaja entre semana y pasa el fin de semana bolo. La que trabajó muy duro fue mi mamá, ella hacía de todo para darnos de comer, y él era un irresponsable que no hacía nada en la casa.

[My parents] worked on a large estate, my mother was very hardworking, My father was a bit irresponsible really, because of the tradition of the rural man, that works during the week and passes the weekend drunk. The one that worked hard was my mum, she did everything to feed us, and he was an irresponsible man that didn't do anything around the house.

Claudia Moreno, 9 November 1999

Sí, tenía mi papa que vivía con mi mamá, pero realmente no era un padre responsable, o sea que mi mamá, aunque estuviera con él, ella siempre trabajaba para mantenernos a nosotros, aparte de que mi papa le daba mala vida a mi mamá, la golpeaba mucho, entonces llegó un tiempo en que se separaron, ves y nos dejó solos, entonces ya quedamos definitivamente al cargo de mi mamá. *¿Y era mas difícil cuando él se fue, o no?*<sup>4</sup> Pues no, porque como mi mamá nunca dependió de él, ella siempre trabajaba para nosotros, era como lo mismo, porque aunque él le daba dinero, él siempre se lo quitaba cuando andaba bolo, sí, nos quitaba el dinero y no nos daba nada.

Yes, my dad lived with my mum, but he wasn't really a responsible father, I mean, although my mum was with him, she always worked to maintain us, apart from the fact that my dad used to abuse my mum, he used to hit her a lot, so there came a time when they separated, you see and he left us alone, and we were left totally in my mum's care. *And was it harder when he left or not?*<sup>4</sup> Well no, because as my mum never depended on him, she always worked to maintain us, it was just the same, because although he used to give her money, he would take it off her when he was drunk, yes, he took our money off us and didn't give us anything.

Lydia Sánchez, 21 August 1999

Fathers in Nicaragua appear to be reluctant to widen the concept of fatherhood from what Engle (1997) calls biological fatherhood to social fatherhood, which encompasses not only a more nurturing relationship with children, but also taking steps to avoid "unpartnered fertility". This is not just a condition that has emerged in the context of revolution and structural adjustment but has deeper historical roots.

Because of alcoholism, Marta Navarro, who was 65 in 1999, had had three failed marriages and eight children by the time she was 23.

Me casé de 15 años, pero como el marido me salió un poco mal, nos separamos a los 18. Me quedaron tres niños. De ahí me volví a casar de nuevo. A los tres años de estar casada, mi marido murió. *¿De qué murió?* De haber tomado, es el papá de Carlos. Murió a los 23 años, y me quedé solita con cinco hijos. Yo estoy casada tres veces. Después volví a casarme, porque tan jovencita que quedé, verdad, y me casé otra vez, pero mi marido me salió mal. *¿Por qué mal?* Borracho

y ... todo. Me quedaron tres hijos de él, eran ocho. Me quedé con ocho hijos vivos que los tengo vivos todos y ya me quedé solita, no me volví a casar nunca. Nunca, nunca. Así que empecé a trabajar.

I got married when I was 15, but as my husband didn't turn out so well, we split up when I was 18. By then I had three children. Then I got married again, three years after getting married, my husband died. *What did he die from?* From drinking, he is Carlos' father. He died when he was 23, and I was left alone with five children. I have been married three times. After I married again, because I was still so young, but my husband turned out badly. *Why badly?* Drunk and ... everything. I had three kids with him, eight altogether. I ended up with eight surviving children, and they are all still alive, and I ended up on my own, I never got married again. Never, ever. This was how I started working.

Marta Navarro, 19 October 1999

Many Nicaraguan men are unemployed, but are still unwilling to help out with household jobs or childcare, even if their partner is doing paid work. Sweetman (1997b) points out the difficulty of “readjusting the sexual division of labour” in some contexts because while it is often culturally acceptable for women to do “men’s work”, men are often reluctant to take on what is seen as “women’s work”. While the female combatant has become a familiar and acceptable image in Nicaragua, it is rare to see a man washing clothes or fetching water. In many cases, many men take advantage of women’s increased incomes or labour market participation and as a consequence contribute less to household incomes themselves (Gómez 1997b, Chant 1997a).

Y de repente a mí se me pone la pantalla clarísima. Digo bueno, este cabrón, trabajo yo, soy yo la que lleva el dinero a la casa, soy la que cocina, cuido al niño y él duerme en la hamaca. Fue para mí como pla, pla, púchica no puede ser. ... éste ni trabaja, ni hace nada, y no hace nada en la casa, ¿qué estoy haciendo?

And suddenly I see things really clearly. I said, well, this bastard, I'm the one who works, I am the one who brings the money in, I'm the one who cooks, I look after our son and he sleeps in the hammock. For me it was so obvious I couldn't go on like this ...he doesn't go out to work or anything, he does nothing around the house, what am I doing?

Azucena Mejía, 8 September 1999

Men's roles cannot of course remain static at a time when there is both widespread unemployment and massive female penetration of the labour market, but these changes do not necessarily mean an end to forms of masculinity being expressed in ways that are



oppressive to women. While high male unemployment sometimes destabilises dominant forms of masculinity (Willott and Griffin 1996) or leads to shifts in power dynamics within the family (Fernández-Kelly 1990), the undermining of a sense of masculine identity encapsulated in wage earning and providing can drive men away from other paternal responsibilities (Engle 1997). Willott and Griffin (1996) studied a group of long term unemployed men in the UK and argued that a sense of emasculation certainly could be detected to some extent, but this occurred without dominant constructions of masculinity being challenged in any way. So poverty and unemployment, by bringing instability to the household, might also generate a greater degree of flexibility in response to socio-economic conditions (Fernández-Kelly 1990). This flexibility might lead to shifts in gender relations and configurations of masculinity. It is when these shifts do not take place in any discernable way to those involved that women might decide that male partners have become a liability to the household.

### *Domestic abuse*

Nicaraguan culture and society have been characterised historically by violence both on a national political level and at the level of the household. Rebellion and violence have been seen as legitimate responses to political, social and personal problems. It is only recently that domestic violence is being recognised by government and civil society as an endemic social problem. Many participants in this study talked of personal experiences of physical and sexual abuse from fathers or partners, which was often associated with drinking alcohol. For a long time, tolerance of domestic abuse was culturally reinforced because it was viewed by women as another “cross to bear” like menstruation or childbirth (Puntos de Encuentro 1997, Ellsburg et al. 1999, 2000) and because of its construction as a private rather than a public issue that fell outside of government responsibility. This attitude to domestic violence has been documented elsewhere in Latin America and does not appear to be specific to Nicaragua (See for example Harvey 1994 on Peru and McWhirter 1999 on Chile). In addition to this, Wade (1994) writing on Colombia says that many men have absorbed the notion that women are asking to be beaten. In Nicaragua these ideas are also prevalent in common phrases such as the following:

Si se te pone malcriada, dale su sopa de muñeca, al fin y al cabo ellas se lo buscan y a algunas hasta les gusta.

If she misbehaves, give her a knuckle sandwich, when all is said and done, women are after that and some of them even like it. (Puntos de Encuentro 1999:5)

Increasingly, though, domestic violence in Nicaragua is viewed as a social issue, a public health issue and a question of human rights. Emphasis on domestic violence within a human rights framework parallels trends in other parts of the world and has firmly inserted itself into development discourse with varying degrees of success and limitations (See for example Thomas and Beasley 1993, Heise et al. 1994, Mehrotra and Banerjee 1998, Sen 1998, Matear 1999). National awareness of the extent of domestic violence and sexual abuse in Nicaragua has increased enormously, partly as a result of the efforts of the women's movement and the campaigning of an umbrella organisation formed in 1992 *Red de Mujeres contra la Violencia* (Women's Network against Violence), the high profile Daniel Ortega-Zoilamérica Narváez case and various recent national surveys which have been conducted on the topic. An Interamerican Development Bank (IDB) survey in 1998 indicated that 52 per cent of women in Managua aged between 14 and 59 years have suffered physical, sexual or psychological abuse in the last 12 months (Morrison and Orlando 1998 in Montoya Tellería 1998). This followed a report by the same organisation in 1996 which estimated that 1.6 per cent of national GDP is lost as a result of a fall in income of women who are victims of violence, a figure which amounts to US\$29.5 million. It also concluded that low-income women, especially women who have no income of their own and could not leave violent partners, were more likely to be victims of violence (Quintero Casco 1999). A population based study conducted in León in 1995 found also that more than half of women surveyed had experienced intimate partner violence and a quarter of women had experienced domestic violence in the last year (Ellsburg et al. 1999). The government sponsored ENDESA survey from 1998 states that 29 per cent of Nicaraguan women have been abused and of those who reported abuse, 43 per cent stated that this had occurred in the last 12 months. In addition, the survey indicated that 57 per cent of abused women were beaten in front of their children and 36 per cent were beaten while pregnant. It also found that abuse was more prevalent in women with minimal formal education and who had a greater number of children

(INEC 1999). A 1999 study conducted by INIM, a government agency for women now controlled by the Ministry of the Family, found that 40 per cent of women who live as a couple with a man are abused by their partners (Navarro 1999).

The lobbying of the Network of Women Against Violence just before the general elections of 1996 resulted in the passage of a new law (Law 230) on domestic violence. Ellsburg et al. (1997) discuss the success of the network in promoting the issue of domestic violence in Nicaragua. Not only did the Network retain control of the process and the wording of the law, it was also able to bring opposing political sectors together in an extremely polarised country. Both women's groups in Matagalpa, Grupo Venancia and the Colectivo de Mujeres, have vigorous campaigns on Law 230. While Venancia provides education to promote effective use of the law, the Colectivo provides legal services for women who have been victims of abuse. In addition to campaigning around the law, the women's movement has conducted various campaigns through communities and the media aimed at challenging the acceptability of domestic violence towards women and children. The campaigns by Puntos de Encuentro on this issue have been extensive. An earlier campaign aimed at raising awareness of domestic violence was based on the slogan: *La próxima vez que te levanten la mano, que sea para saludarte* (The next time someone raises their hand to you, may it be to greet you). An even more extensive campaign, which included prime time television advertisements, was conducted in 1999 and aimed specifically at men. It drew links with Hurricane Mitch, suggesting that domestic violence had the characteristics of a national disaster and was based on the slogan: *Violencia contra las mujeres: un desastre que los hombres sí podemos evitar* (Violence against women: a disaster that we men *are* able to prevent) (Puntos de Encuentro 1999).

In 1993, in a collaborative venture between INIM, the government and the National Police, the first *Comisaría de la Mujer y la Niñez* (Women's and Children's Police Station) was opened to make legal channels for women and children who wished to report abuse more accessible. Today Nicaragua has 16 *Comisarias* around the country. According to Nicaraguan lawyer, José Nicaragua, this initiative, which increases the visibility of women in the legal system and helps to change public discourse on domestic

violence, suffers from the government's failure to put the necessary financial resources into solving the problem (Nicaragua 1999). The ENDESA survey also found that the majority of victims of domestic violence did not seek any form of help from a women's collective or from the state (INEC 1999). Two of my participants who are members of the *directiva* of the Movement of Single and Unemployed Mothers in Matagalpa also referred to the problem of the sexism of the male police officers working in the *Comisariás* and how a single mother who tries to put in a complaint of abuse will often find the (male) police officer making a pass at her. Despite slow progress in many areas, the Ministry of Health declared domestic violence to be a public health issue in 1996 and the whole process has increased the numbers of women who now report abuse and is challenging the idea that violence from men is something normal to be tolerated. Acceptance of domestic violence is decreasing as the legal frameworks to deal with it are being strengthened.

The participants talked openly about their own experiences of violence and abuse. Carla Martínez talked at length about a father who drank heavily and then engaged in violent behaviour. They lived on a farm when she was a child and there were always dogs around the house and certain dogs would become her favourites. Her father would sometimes return from a binge and shoot her favourite dogs. From an early age, she remembered her father forcing himself sexually onto her mother. She would often get into bed with her parents to protect her mother from her father's unwanted sexual advances. One day in a fit of anger, he actually fired shots at her. He missed but Carla said he had tried to kill her for trying to defend her mother and trying to persuade him not to drink so much.

Ramona Dávila is the participant who suffered the most prolonged period of domestic abuse from a partner. She lived with the father of her four children for 16 years. She adopted a fifth child shortly before they separated. He was a heavy drinker and became so violent when he had been drinking that it was not safe for them to sleep in the house. Ramona was the main income earner in the household, although she only ever worked in the informal sector. Her main source of income was selling lottery tickets on the street. None of her five children had ever been able to attend school. She tried sending her eldest daughter to school once and left her partner to look after the younger ones. But he would

either physically abuse them or leave them alone in the house to go out drinking, so she pulled her daughter out of school to care for the younger children while Ramona was working.

El tomaba guaro y cuando yo así vendía, así a venta, él llegaba y me decía que le diera reales, si no, me pegaba. Siempre me decía que le diera reales para comprar guaro. Y después todas mis amigas me aconsejaban que no fuera tonta, que lo tratara de dejar, pero me buscaba, me seguía y me decía que si lo intentara dejar, me iba a matar. Me tenía encerrada y me daba palo. Mi mamá no podía meterse porque estaba enojadísimo, ni quiera Dios. Tenía un genio. Y así aguanté 16 años. Yo lo dejaba en la casa para que me cuidara los niños, pero era mentira. A la vuelta, él salía a tomar guaro. Compraba la producción así para la semana y entonces llegaba bien bolo, y comenzaba el pleito. Me decía “dame reales, si no voy a agarrar esto para vender” y no sé qué. Yo le compraba la ropa y los zapatos a él. Y el me tenía que cuidar los niños pero sólo tomaba guaro. Y veía las cosas que yo tenía aquí en la casa, y las agarraba y las iba a vender. Y iba a beber guaro.... Y hacía bastantes zanganadas. Yo tenía un chanchito de barro, y me lo hizo pedacitos. Un chanchito para recoger monedas, de barro, lo halló y lo quebró y salieron las monedas. Y se fue para gastarlo. Yo lo aguanté bastante tiempo.

He used to drink liquor and when I was out selling, he used to come and ask me for money and if I didn't give it to him, he would hit me. He was always asking me for money to buy liquor. All my friends used to tell me not to be so stupid, that I should try and leave him, but he would always look for me and tell me that if I tried to leave him, he would kill me. He used to lock me in the house and beat me. My mum couldn't get help out because he used to get so angry, you can't imagine. He had such a bad temper. And I put up with him for 16 years. I used to leave him at home to look after the kids but he never did. As soon as I left, he used to go out drinking. I used to buy the food in for the week and then he would arrive really drunk and the arguments would start. He used to say “give me money, if you don't I'm going to sell this” and things like that. I used to buy his clothes and shoes for him. He was supposed to look after the kids for me but he just used to drink. And he looked for things in the house, and he grabbed them and went out to sell them. And he went off to drink.... He did so many stupid things. I had a little piggy bank, and he smashed it to pieces. A little piggy bank to save coins in, made of pottery, once he found it and he broke it and the coins fell out. And off he went to spend them. I put up with him a long time.

Ramona Dávila, 1 September 1999

This relationship ended when Hurricane Mitch swept their house away and left the family homeless and without any belongings. Ramona's partner left at this point and did not return.

### *Infidelity*

The cult of virility is an important aspect of *machismo* in Nicaragua and consequently, extramarital or multiple affairs are common among men. Informal polygamy for men has long been socially tolerated in Nicaragua and, according to Dore (1997) was officially sanctioned in the civil code in the early 20th century. Rosa Laviana told me how at one time her husband was having sexual relations with three other women as well as her and this was in a small rural community. In the 1980s, Carla Martínez was working in a government office that sought maintenance payments from men who had abandoned their families when she met a woman whose husband was the father of her unborn child.

Yo trabajaba en una oficina que se demandaba a los padres que no le daban pensión alimenticia a sus hijos. Bueno, estando un día en la oficina llegó una mujer que la conocía con su nombre, una mujer que también había sido guerrillera, la conocía con su nombre de guerra, no. Y entonces ella llegó y me hablaba ... o sea, ella estaba casada con una persona, había tenido dos hijos pero yo no sabía que el hombre de quien yo estaba embarazada era él que se había casado con ella.

I used to work in an office that made claims from fathers who didn't make maintenance payments to their children. One day, when I was in the office, a woman arrived, I didn't know her name, a woman who had also been a guerrilla fighter, and I only knew her code name. Well she turned up and she told me she was married to someone and had had two children but I didn't know that the man I was pregnant by was the same one that had got married to her.

Carla Martínez, 23 October 1999

These affairs often lead to simultaneous pregnancies. Nicaraguan men often have more than one woman pregnant to them at the same time. Azucena Mejía's first pregnancy involved this experience.

Mi compañero también tenía otra relación por otro lado, entonces cuando yo andaba embarazada, la otra compañera andaba embarazada, yo no me daba cuenta. Cuando yo estaba en cama, que acababa de parir a mi hijo, tenía como tres semanas, porque me fue supermal del parto, pero él todavía estaba en el hospital, atendiendo a la otra compañera. Cuando me doy cuenta, claro para mí eso fue fatal.

My partner also had a relationship with someone else, and when I was pregnant, the other woman was also pregnant and I didn't realise. When I was in bed, after giving birth to my son, who was about three weeks old, because I'd had a really

bad labour, [my partner] was still in the hospital looking after the other woman. When I realised, it was terrible for me.  
Azucena Mejía, 16 August 1999

*New partners and child sexual abuse*

Nicaraguan mothers who have separated from the father of their children are often reluctant to take on new partners out of the fear that they will sexually abuse their children. Elsa Jirón's first husband was killed in the war and then she took on a new partner who raped her daughter.

Sí, y entonces yo he sido una señora maltratada, trabajadora. [...] Maltratada por mi marido no, gracias a Dios, no, pero maltratada de ... de ahí vine, metí la pata con otro hombre nuevo, y ahí bueno soy maltratada, sí es cierto. Porque con él, con mi marido nuevo ... quedé viuda yo con mis chavalos pues, este, él cometió errores conmigo, y éste me violó una hija. Entonces, yo a él lo eché preso, y ya salió. Tuvo siete años y medio preso, ya salió.

I have been an abused woman, hardworking. [...] Not abused by my husband, thank God, but abused by ... After he died, I made a mistake and got together with a new man, and he was the one who abused me. Because my new husband ... I was left a widow with my kids, and this man behaved badly, and he raped one of my daughters. I had him imprisoned, but he's out now. He was in prison for seven and a half years, but he's out now.  
Elsa Jirón, 8 November 1999

Participants referred to fears that their children will be sexually abused if they take on new partners. These fears are also intermingled with the idea that a new man will just take advantage of their homes and the things they have worked hard to buy without contributing anything. Several participants were reluctant to start new relationships because of these fears. Verona Mora deliberately had a relationship with a married man so that she could have a child without a man by her side. In answer to the question whether she would like to get together with a man again, she said she would not because of these concerns.

Me han salido muchos partidos, pero me van a decir ¿para qué necesito una casa? Me meto con vos en tu casa. Así no. Mejor estoy bien así. ¿Sabés por qué? Porque la vida en Nicaragua es muy, vulgarmente lo voy a decir, muy jodida. Y en la actualidad los hombres ahorita ...no .. si miran que una mujer trabaja, si miran que una mujer está sola, buscan la comodidad, no porque realmente quieren a una

mujer. Y entonces, no. Y ¿sabés por qué también? He visto tantas cosas, pienso en mi hijo, y he visto que los padastros ... últimamente se han visto tantas violaciones hacia niños como hacia niñas, y no voy a permitir eso, que yo me meto con un hombre y va a estar en mi casa, y va a hacer algo a mi hijo, no, no, no, yo lo mato. Mejor estoy bien así y no tengo problemas. Si yo me meto en esta circunstancia, mi hijo va a sufrir, porque yo hago cualquier cosa y voy a parar a la cárcel.

I've had lots of men interested in me, but they're going to say to me "What do I need a house for, I can live with you in your house". That's no good. I'm better off the way I am. And do you know why? Because life in Nicaragua is totally, excuse my language, totally screwed up. At the moment if men see that a woman is working and she is on her own, they're just looking for an easy life, not because they love the woman. So no I wouldn't. And do you know why too? I have seen so many things, and I think about my son, and I've seen how stepfathers ... lately there have been so many kids raped, boys as well as girls, and I'm not having that, I'm not getting together with a man who comes to my house and then he does something to my son, no way, I would kill him. I'm better off like this and then I don't have any problems. If I get myself into that situation, my son will suffer, because I'm capable of doing anything and then I'll end up in jail.

Verona Mora, 17 September 1999

Lydia Sánchez told me she would like a partner again, to have someone to chat with in the evenings and share things with but felt that to protect her children, she should wait until they are older. Ana González also expressed similar sentiments. Ana lived with her two daughters and her mother. She was the sole income earner in the household and her mother undertook most of the childcare.

La otra de las cosas es que no he podido hacer mi vida con alguien, por temor a que ... a que ... a lo mejor ... tengo dos hijas mujeres, y viendo tantas cosas que se están viendo ahora, de violaciones del padastro a ..., entonces no he hecho la vida así, real, matrimonio, una vida de pareja, por temor a esas cosas, cosas que están sucediendo. [...] Bueno, mi mamá me dice que si un hombre se mete a vivir con vos, a hacer una vida, va feliz, porque todo lo tiene, la verdad que sí. Porque gracias a Dios, lo poco que tengo, tengo como para llegarme a sentar, a dormir, o a ver televisión o algo en mi casa. Y un hombre no se va a preocupar que tiene que llevar todo eso a la casa.

One of the reasons why I haven't been able to share my life with someone, is out of fear that ... maybe ... I have got two daughters, and seeing all the things you see now, of stepfathers raping ... so I haven't got together with anyone, marriage or as a couple because I am afraid of these things, things that are happening. [...] And my mum says that if a man comes to live with you, to share your life, he'll be so happy because he'll have everything. Because thank God, the few things that



I've got, I've got something to sit on, somewhere to sleep and a television in my house. So a man wouldn't have to worry that he would have to provide these things in the house.

Ana González, 25 August 1999

### *Restrictions on spatial mobility*

Husbands and male partners are seen to restrict a woman's spatial mobility considerably. Many married women talk about needing *permiso* (permission) to go out, attend a meeting or take a job. In fact, husbands are seen as restricting spatial mobility far more than children do. Lydia Sánchez ran a weekly microcredit group meeting and one of the members attended fairly infrequently using her baby twins as a reason for non-attendance. Lydia assumed that it is much more likely that her husband did not give her permission to attend.

Sí, [los niños] son pequeños, pero a lo mejor también el marido no le da permiso, no sé, hasta qué punto. Porque hay mujeres que les cuesta entrar en confianza, les cuesta hablar. Será miedo, será vergüenza, a veces es más vergüenza que miedo. ...ella puede pensar de que sólo ella es maltratada, que tal vez las otras no sufren maltrato, de alguna u otra forma todas hemos recibido maltrato. Que nos trata mal el hombre que nos dice ... tal vez no nos golpea, pero psicológicamente es maltrato ... y a ella le da vergüenza porque piensa que sólo es ella de que el marido la mangonea para todos los lados. Y por eso, tal vez no dice nada, y pone excusa a los niños.

[Her children] are little, but it's probably because her husband doesn't give her permission, I don't know to what extent. Because there are women who have trouble confiding, have trouble talking about things. It could be fear, it could be shame, sometimes it is more to do with shame than fear, she might think she's the only one who is treated badly, that perhaps the others don't suffer abuse, but in one way or another we have all been abused. It's abuse when a man says to us ... maybe he doesn't hit us, but psychologically it is abuse ... and she is ashamed because she thinks she's the only one whose husband pushes her around. And so that's why she perhaps doesn't say anything and uses the children as an excuse.

Lydia Sánchez, 18 September 1999

Another woman in this same credit group told me she had joined the group to continue to have her own income without upsetting her husband. Previously she had held a formal job as a secretary from which to placate her husband she had been forced to resign. Her participation in the credit group enabled her to work from home, which he found more acceptable.

Claudia Moreno left home at age 11 because of the conditions of poverty in which her family was living. These conditions would have meant an end to her schooling had she stayed. She left home, found a job, supported herself and paid for her own studies for nearly four years. When she got married at 15, it meant she no longer was able to continue with her education.

Después ya me casé muy jovencita, a los 15 años. Ya con mi marido era más difícil estudiar. Y tuve que dejar de estudiar, porque él no me permitía, porque mi marido era demasiado celoso, entonces ya no pude seguir estudiando.

I was really young when I got married, I was 15. And with my husband it was harder to study. And I had to stop studying because he wouldn't let me because he was too jealous, so I couldn't carry on studying.

Claudia Moreno, 24 August 1999

She had already completed her primary education and her idea was that they would study at secondary school together. It did not work out as:

No le gustaba que yo relacionara con otros muchachos, compañeros de clase, el no lo aceptaba.

He didn't like me making friends with other guys, classmates, he couldn't accept it.

Claudia Moreno, 24 August 1999

### **Consequences of male redundancy**

The consequences of these types of experience mean that single motherhood is a long term situation for many Nicaraguan women. Among my participants was also evidence of single motherhood across generations. Paula Montecino, Ramona's 14-year-old daughter, became pregnant, but Ramona did not put any pressure on her to stay with or marry the father of her baby because of his disability (a mine blew off both his legs) and because his income earning potential was minimal. The irresponsibility of men is to some extent compensated by the strength of kinship networks and levels of support amongst women. Many women have female relatives living in the same house to share childcare or domestic chores and it is relatively easy in comparison with the situation in New Zealand to get someone to look after children. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, I experienced this even as an outsider. Children restrict spatial mobility much less in Nicaragua than they do

in New Zealand, and might be less restrictive to a woman's mobility than a husband or male partner. However, I did also witness several cases of small children at home alone while their mother was out working, so access to childcare is highly variable. In addition, in many cases, like that of Ramona and her daughter, domestic chores and childcare are often passed onto daughters who might miss out on schooling because they are needed at home to look after younger siblings. Interestingly, some of the women in my study however also insisted on their sons or brothers doing household chores. For example, Carla Martínez's first baby was cared for by Carla's younger brother once she returned to work not long after the birth. The question of domestic work and childcare is explored more fully in Chapter 6.

Clearly, making a strategic decision not to have a male partner has implications for the subject positions women adopt in relation to dominant discourses of masculinity and femininity. My data reveal two trends which defy the stereotype of single mothers as victims of irresponsible men. Firstly, there were several women in my study who never wanted or expected to stay with the fathers of their children once they were pregnant and secondly, some women tended to adopt masculine subject positions in relation to dominant discourses. For some women, maternity was seen as a choice they made themselves and it would be difficult to construct them as victims who were abandoned by irresponsible men. Not only were their pregnancies planned but so was their single motherhood.

#### *Planned single motherhood*

Carla Martínez told me how she felt she wanted to have a child because her mother was dying and her brothers and sisters were all away. In her militia unit, she looked for a man who could father a child for her, someone who would be easy to seduce but would just be a temporary relationship so she could get pregnant. Over the course of the 1980s, Carla had five children by the same man, but brought them all up alone. He was in the army and he never saw her pregnant and was never there when the babies were born.

Entonces a mí se me dio ... se me metió entre caja y ceja aquí que yo quería tener algo mío, mi mami se me iba a morir, mis hermanos no estaban conmigo, y yo...

se me ocurrió que yo debería de tener un hijo. Pero el problema era ... y yo analizaba el asunto que generalmente significaba hacer referente a lo que iba a decir la gente, pues no pensaba que mi hijo iba a tener papá. Esto significaría tener muchos problemas con mi familia, con mucha gente, no y eso ... pero yo también pensaba en quién iba a ser el padre de mi hijo. ... De todos los hombres, muchachos que conocía, estuve buscando a alguien que reuniera algunas características que a lo mejor al pasar el tiempo iba a ser una persona a que no le iba a importar mi embarazo, que iba a ser algo pasajero, y que no iba a tener ningún problema en relación con mi hijo, no. Bueno, fue así que estando yo en la unidad ... o sea, estaba organizada en este asunto de las milicias, y verdaderamente yo siempre andaba buscando a alguien con algunas características, así un poco infantiles, un poco así, que no fuera una persona seria para conquistarlo y bueno, imagínate. Pues entonces se me presentó la oportunidad y había un hombre, un muchacho que era una persona, yo lo miraba bastante ... lo poco que platicué con él, miré que era bastante inmaduro, una persona que hablaba demasiado y era como muy jocosos, no, le gustaba andar dando bromas a las muchachas y bueno, fue ... En ese entonces, se utilizaba todavía los nombres de guerra, muy poco se conocían los nombres propios de uno, sino que siempre teníamos sobrenombres. En el caso de él fue interesante, fue divertido, porque yo lo conocí por el nombre que le decían de guerrillero y mi idea era nunca conocer su nombre, verdad, cómo se llamaba realmente. ... Y entonces fue divertido porque yo le propuse que saliéramos juntos y bueno pasó lo que tenía que pasar verdad. [...] Y yo la verdad es que también al nivel interno, nunca tuve intención de continuar, de hacer la vida normal con él, en principio porque él tomaba bastante y eso me hacía recordar a mi papá, y también porque no quería depender ... o sea miraba pues el interés de él de mandarme, de hacer lo que él quisiera y yo pues opinaba de que yo hacía lo que yo quería y no ... o sea, esta situación de vivir en pareja y dejar como mi libertad así un poco dudosa, entonces para mí no tenía ... hasta la fecha nunca pensé vivir en pareja con el padre de mis hijos.

Well I got it into my head that I wanted something of my own, my mum was dying, my brothers and sisters weren't with me, and it occurred to me that I should have a child. But the problem was .. I was wondering what people were going to say, but I never intended for my child to have a father. This meant having problems with my family, with lots of people ... but I was also thinking about who could be the father of my child. From all the men, all the guys that I knew, I was looking for someone who had certain characteristics, that in time wasn't going to be someone that was bothered about my pregnancy, that he wasn't going .. I mean, it was going to be a temporary thing and wasn't going to have any problems in relation with my child. When I was in the unit, I was organised in the militias, and I was really looking for someone with certain characteristics, someone a bit childish, that wouldn't be too hard to seduce, and so well, just imagine. There was a man, a guy who was a bit .. when I talked to him I could see he was quite immature, he talked too much and was a bit of a joker, he liked playing jokes on girls and so ... At that time, we used our war pseudonyms, we

hardly ever knew each other's real names, but we had other names. And in his case, it was interesting, it was funny, because I knew him by his guerrilla name and my idea was to never find out his real name, you know, what he was really called. And it was funny because I asked him out and what had to happen happened. [...] And I never intended on an internal level to go on seeing him, or to have a normal life with him, in principle because he was a heavy drinker and that reminded me of my father, and also I didn't want to depend ... I mean, I could see how he wanted to tell me what to do, to do what he wanted and I thought I should do what I wanted and not .. I mean this idea of living as a couple and leaving my freedom somehow in doubt, this for me did not ... I mean I never intended to live as a couple with the father of my kids.

Carla Martínez, 23 October 1999

Verona Mora had a relationship with a married man so that she could have child but bring him up without a man around. Her pregnancy and her single motherhood were planned.

Después para el 92, decidí tener un hijo, un hijo, no tener un marido digamos a mi lado.

In 1992 I decided to have a child, a child, but not a man at my side so to speak.

Verona Mora, 17 September 1999

She had been working as a military officer since the 1980s and for the previous few years had been based in the penal system working with female prisoners. With the little she earned, she looked after her son, maintained a domestic to care for him when she was working and also maintained her mother until her recent death. Before she died, her mother also encouraged her to have a child.

Yo me puse a pensar, con la edad que tengo, y mi mamá me decía “¿hijita, no querés tener un hijo? Yo me muero y te vas a quedar sola”. Entonces está bien, pero no quería tener un hombre a mi lado. Ya me siento bien, mi hijo está estudiando, está en segundo grado, y ahí va adelante. [El papá] no lo reconoce. Dijo que era casado, y yo le dije “no hay problema, mi hijo va a nacer y va a salir adelante”. Y si su hijo no lleva su apellido, no va a morir de hambre.

I got thinking, as I was getting older, and my mum used to say to me “my love, don't you want to have a child? I'm going to die and you'll be alone”. So that was fine, but I didn't want to have a man by my side. I feel fine, my son is at school, he's in second grade, and he's making good progress. [His dad] doesn't acknowledge him as his own. He told me he was married, so I said to him “no

problem, my child is going to be born and he is going to do all right". And if his son doesn't have his surname, he is not going to die of hunger.  
Verona Mora, 17 September 1999

Women with partners are also extremely aware of both the fluidity and fragility of family life. I met women in Nicaragua who had partners but were planning for the day they would no longer be together. After Sadie's death, we moved in with a more "conventional" or "nuclear" family, consisting of two legally married parents and three children along with a live-in niece. Erica's husband, Orlando, became a taxi driver after being demobilised from the EPS in 1990. He worked most of the week and got drunk and passed out in the rocking chair every Sunday. Erica did not have formal employment but had several informal income-generating schemes. She sold milk, curd (*cuajada*) and popsicles (*posicles*) from the house, provided lunch for local people working in shops (as well as renting a room to us) and frequently volunteered for jury service for which she got paid. She was also attending university part-time on Saturdays to obtain a law degree, which would take several years. But she told me, she needed a profession so she could leave her husband and bring up her children on her own, because Orlando had a bad character and was very *machista*. Her plans to become a single mother were involved and long-term.

In Apantillo Siales, a small rural community an hour's walk from Matagalpa, I met a 17-year-old woman who had recently joined the Movement of Single and Unemployed Mothers. I discovered that she was living with the father of her child and together they were sharecropping a plot of land belonging to a local landowner. I asked her why she had joined the Movement if she had a live-in partner and was not therefore strictly speaking a single mother, to which she replied that she knew that the relationship was not likely to last and that he could leave at any moment. She was hoping the Movement could help her to secure her financial position should that happen.

#### *Adoption of masculine subject positions*

Another consequence that emerged from my data is that women, who are solely responsible for providing household income, appeared to adopt masculine subject positions in relation to dominant discourses, in the sense they adopted a position of

breadwinner and out of pride would not seek maintenance payments from the fathers of their children. This pride can be seen to some extent in the previous extract from Verona Mora. The idea that absent fathers should be economically responsible for their children has been enshrined in law since the 1982 Ley de Alimentos (Nurturing Law). However, some women saw asking for maintenance as humiliating as it questioned their capacity to provide economically for their children<sup>5</sup>.

He hecho una vida con mis propios recursos, he sido muy independiente. ... El me culpa a mí, él dice que por mi orgullo, que yo ... porque efectivamente cuando el niño nació, me mandó a ofrecerme una pensión, entonces le dije que mi hijo no necesita limosnas. Es cierto que era una actitud de ... aunque yo defendía los derechos de la mujer, yo hablaba de los derechos de la mujer, de la ley, a cualquier otra mujer le digo: "llame al INSSBI." Pero yo no, yo soy incapaz, yo no quiero nada. Sentía ese orgullo de que yo estoy formando a mi hijo. Entonces después le decía que mi hijo no necesita dinero, yo se lo puedo dar.

I have lived my life with my own resources, I have been very independent. ... He blames me, he says it is because of my pride that ...when the child was born, he offered to pay maintenance, so I told him that my son doesn't need charity. I know it was an attitude that ... I defended women's rights, I used to talk about women's rights, the law, to any other woman I would say, call social welfare. But not me, I'm not capable [of taking maintenance], I don't want anything. I felt this pride that I am bringing up my son. So then I told him that my son doesn't need money, I can give him that.

Margarita Muñoz, 30 October 1999

According to Moore (1994b), competing gender discourses, which both produce and are reproduced by social practices, provide a variety of possible femininities and masculinities. This subject positioning as breadwinners can be theorised in terms of the multiple possible gender identities available. According to Holloway (1984 in Moore 1994b), people are motivated to take up a certain subject position by their degree of 'investment' in it. Holloway sees 'investment' as something between an emotional commitment and a vested interest. I asked another participant why she had never sought maintenance from the father of her five children and she told me:

O sea, eso se ve un poco ... no sé, no me gusta andar ...este ... humillándome (risas). No me gusta andar humillándome, por eso no ...nunca le he querido llamar ni nada. Porque a mí me han dicho que lo llame, pero por eso no lo he hecho.

Well, it just seems a bit ...I don't want to ...humiliate myself (laughter). I don't like humiliating myself, that is why I ... have never wanted to call him or anything. People have told me to call him, but I haven't done it because of that.  
Marcia Picado, 4 November 1999

Despite the above statement, in many ways Marcia adopted a much more stereotypical position. She talked nostalgically about her life in the 1980s when her husband earned enough to support the family and she was a homemaker. Her husband left her for another woman after a ten-year relationship when she had just given birth to their fifth child. She tended to blame the woman for taking her husband from her and did not try to get him to pay maintenance despite the desperation of her economic situation and the fact that they had lost their home and most of their belongings in Hurricane Mitch. On the other hand, she clearly viewed me as a potential source of income and in many ways my relationship with this participant was fraught with difficulties. Although our children often played together and sometimes we would meet in town for a drink or an ice cream, I felt under constant pressure to provide something in return for interviews, which I frequently did. But I do not know whether this was less humiliating to her than seeking financial help from her ex-partner.

While some fathers contributed on an ad hoc basis to the maintenance of their children, none of my participants received a regular income from ex-partners regulated through Social Welfare for the support of their children. This positioning could be seen as mere pride or 'saving face' which damages children's welfare by depriving them of resources to which they are entitled. But seen in terms of 'investment', seeking economic independence and not being either financially dependent or emotionally bound to ex-partners, is more understandable. While they might lose out financially in the short-term, it might in the long-term actually better enable mothers to care for their children as well as negotiate their own gender interests.

### **Uneasiness about single motherhood**

Strategic decisions to bring up children without male partners are not however straightforward. Interwoven into women's stories of how hard it is for their relationships with men to work is a sense of uneasiness about the lack of a husband or father.



Sometimes this uneasiness has come from elsewhere in the family and the degree to which my participants were affected by that varied. This uneasiness took various forms and to some extent appeared to be a generational issue. In some cases, mothers encouraged daughters to stay with or get back together with the fathers of their children even if they were violent. Ramona's mother would encourage her to put up with a violent man rather than leave because he was the father of her children. Adriana Silva managed to end a violent relationship after leaving and going back many times. For her, it was a long process that only came about because of intervention from her neighbours who saw what her life was like and reproached the Women's Collective where she worked for not doing more to help her. She had one child from that relationship and her mother still tried to encourage her to get back together with her former husband.

Claro, que ella siempre está que vuelva con mi ex-compañero, que lo perdone, que él es buen hombre, pero estas cosas pasan porque nadie sabe el mal de la olla, como decimos aquí en Nicaragua, sólo la cuchara. Yo estoy clara de lo que pasó. Pero claro que ella no lo entiende. Ya estamos en esa lucha, que le voy dando mis platicaditas al respeto.

Of course she is always telling me I should get back together with my ex-partner, that I should forgive him, that he's a good man, but these things happen because nobody really knows what goes on behind closed doors. I am clear about what happened. But she of course doesn't understand that. So that is the battle we're having, and I have been telling her little by little what I think about it.  
Adriana Silva, 8 September 1999

### *Substitute fathers*

In other families this sense of uneasiness has meant decisions have been taken to appoint another male relative, an uncle or a grandfather as a substitute father figure. One teenage mother who lived with her parents told me that her son called his grandfather dad "al abuelito le dice papá". Another participant, whose brother had been named as the "father" of the child as a result of family pressure, realised she was in a situation which was probably not sustainable over time.

[Mi hermano] tomó ese papel. Al inicio no me parecía ... que fuera su papa. Pero la insistencia de mi mama, de todos, no, no, no, tenés que nombrar a uno de nosotros como la figura paterna. Y mi hermano pues hasta cierta forma ha asumido ese papel y adora a mi hijo y ves. Pero yo sé que un día va a preguntar, y

yo soy consciente de que le tengo que declarar como es la situación. ...A veces le digo “no es tu papa, es tu tío”, y dice “no, él es mi papa” y le digo “Yo soy tu mama y tu papa (risas). Ahora él va contando que “abuela, ella es mi mama y mi papa. Y no es mi papa, es mi tío”. “No le andés diciéndolo ahorita” “Pero tiene que irlo sabiendo”. “Pero ahorita no” dicen “ahorita no, esperate”. ...Ellos se lo toman muy mal.

[My brother] has taken on that role. At first it didn't seem a good idea to say he was his dad. But the insistence from my mum, from all of them, no, you have to name one of us as the father figure. And my brother to some extent has taken on this role and he adores my son, you see. But I know that one day he is going to ask me, and I'm aware that I will have to explain the situation to him. ... Sometimes I say to him “he's not your dad, he's your uncle” and he says “no, he's my dad” and I say “I'm your mum and your dad” (laughter). So now he goes around saying “grandma, she's my mum and my dad. And he's not my dad, he's my uncle”. [My mother says] “Don't go telling him such stuff now”. “But he has to know” “But not yet” they say “not yet, wait” They take it very badly.  
Olga Jarquín, 11 November 1999

The sense that the absence of a child's father is potentially harmful did not only apply to participants' family members. Some participants also felt a degree of anxiety about the lack of a father in their children's lives. Azucena Mejía, for example, adopted a strongly pro-feminist stance in many of our conversations. She articulately criticised government policies, analysed her own situation from a social rather than an individual perspective and came out as a lesbian to her family. Through her work as an actor in the theatre group of the Women's Collective in Matagalpa, she wrote and performed in plays to promote women's rights in various low-income urban and rural communities in and around Matagalpa. Nevertheless, she believed her son was negatively affected by his father's absence.

El papá no hace absolutamente nada y que en el fondo eso también, yo siento que actualmente le está perjudicando a mi hijo, porque por ejemplo desde inicios de Abril, que fue la última vez que él vino a verlo y no lo ha visto más, entonces está muy agresivo, está rebelde conmigo, está malcriado, me contesta mal, hace lo que quiera, tira las cosas y hablando, hablando, un día me dijo “¿cuánto tiene mi papa que no viene?” y ahí yo misma hice las conclusiones, toda esta malacrianza y rebeldía es una incomodidad que él tiene por su papa, está molesto, pero él no lo sabe, entonces él lo saca de otras maneras.

His dad does absolutely nothing and deep down I feel that at present he is actually doing harm to my son, because for example since the beginning of April which

was the last time he came to see him and hasn't seen him since, he's been very aggressive, he's rebellious with me, he's rude, he answers back, he does what he wants and throws things around and talking, talking one day he said to me "How long has it been since my dad came to see me? And then I realised that all this bad behaviour and rebellion is because of the bad way he feels about his dad, he's cross, but he doesn't know it so he lets it out in other ways.  
Azucena Mejía, 16 August 1999.

This extract suggests that Azucena had clearly absorbed official discourses on the importance of a father figure. These discourses are to a significant extent aligned with the pro-family, pro-marriage rhetoric of the present Nicaraguan government, rhetoric which can be seen, in the words of Segal (1990:54), as part of a "moral backlash against non-familial sex and relationships". In Nicaragua, the moral backlash does not seem to apply to men for whom non-familial sex and relationships are culturally sanctioned.

Margarita Muñoz also believed that her son was negatively affected by his father's absence. Margarita had two children, a daughter and a son, by different fathers. She had always been financially independent and fairly emotionally secure in her single mother status. While she seemed to be happy with the way her daughter, who was studying at university, had turned out, she was struggling with her son and paid for therapy sessions for him with a psychologist. She had trouble coping with his negative attitude to school and family life, which she attributed in part to the absence of his father.

Pero yo, claro que sí me afectó, fue terrible, mi embarazo sola y asumir mis riesgos yo sola, fue terrible, y terrible para mi hijo, porque le afectó por no tener un cariño paterno, pero yo me siento totalmente libre, feliz, de que yo pude hacer la vida yo sola. Y formar a mis hijos, yo sé que hay secuelas. Casi a mi hija no porque su papá murió y no es lo mismo decir que mi papá murió que mi papá no me reconoció, ni quiso y lo encuentro por la calle.

But of course it affected me, it was terrible, my pregnancy on my own, having to take on those risks on my own, it was terrible and terrible for my son, because it has affected him not having paternal affection, but I feel totally free, happy, that I could live my life on my own. And bring up my kids, but I know there are negative consequences. Not really for my daughter because her dad died and it's not the same to say my dad died as it is to say my dad didn't acknowledge me as his, he never wanted to and I see him in the street.  
Margarita Muñoz, 30 October 1999

### *Resilience of romantic heterosexuality*

In addition to concerns about the lack of fathers, it is also possible to detect the resilience of romantic heterosexuality, through expressions about the need to have someone around, despite women's negative experiences. However, these feelings are often tempered with a dose of realism. The resilience of romantic heterosexuality could also be interpreted in terms of the uneasiness felt about single motherhood. One participant told me:

A veces siento como la necesidad de sentirme enamorada, de sentir que alguien me quiera, y esas cosas. Pero ese amor del adolescente yo sé que no existe. Por lo menos cuando una está joven, se ilusiona tanto, cree que es un amor para toda la vida, y todo eso no es cierto, no. Creo más en el amor racional, pero yo sí creo que todas las personas necesitamos tener cariño y de dar cariño, y a veces cuando no lo tenemos, es como que sentimos un vacío, una necesidad de tener a alguien a nuestro lado, aunque sea sólo para pasar un rato.

Sometimes I feel the need to feel like I am in love, to feel that someone loves me and things like that. But I know that adolescent love doesn't exist. At least when you're young, you get so excited, you think it is a love that will last forever but none of that is true. I believe in a more rational kind of love, but I do believe that we all need to give affection and receive affection, and when we don't have that, we feel a kind of emptiness, a need to have someone at our side, even if it's just for a while.

Clara Blandón, 26 October 1999

Lagarde (1992) believes that for many Nicaraguan women, because sexuality is restricted in so many ways, the notion of love takes on idealised qualities. Consequently, erotic experiences are conflated with experiences of love (*experiencias amorosas*) to overcome the negativity and prohibition which dominate discourses of sexuality. Furthermore, Lagarde also argues that even as women grow older and manage to take control of their lives, combining work and study with single motherhood, often by making enormous sacrifices and doing double or triple workdays, the fantasy that one day love will resolve their lot persists. The lived experience is not enough to counteract the discursive force of the romantic idealisation that girls and women in Nicaragua are exposed to culturally.

In the ways that a number of the women I talked to idealised partners or husbands lost in the war, the resilience of romantic heterosexuality also manifested itself. This resilience is also tied up with the fact that the men who fell in the war were constructed as heroes

and martyrs by the FSLN and within revolutionary discourse, and there is a belief they gave their lives for the good of the country, making them good men. The father of Silvia Montiel's first child was killed in the war while she was pregnant. She took on a new partner much later and had two more children. She compared the two men and told me how life with the present man is just not the same, "uno no vive igual". She complained about his selfishness, "todo lo que agarra es para él" (everything he gets he keeps for himself) and how he treated his biological children differently from the daughter she had with someone else. On the other hand, her first partner was described in more favourable terms, he was seen as a good man. To support her judgements, she told me how when they met he had his own house and had furnished it with a bed and a wardrobe, something which she considered very unusual for a single man. He was in the Sandinista army (EPS) and had predicted his own death, leaving her his bankbook so she could have access to his savings after his death.

Similar praise for a previous late husband also came from Elsa, whose second partner was imprisoned for the rape of her daughter. Her first husband on the other hand could, it seemed, do no wrong.

Me sentía feliz con el papá de mis hijos, él era obligado, el primer marido era obligado, en todo, la leche, la comida, la ropa, los zapatos, todo fue obligado. ...Mi marido nunca me pegó un pelo en la cabeza, era un gran hombre para mí. Todo pues mejor dicho. Yo era tranquila con él, y él también tranquilo conmigo.

I felt happy with the father of my kids, he had a sense of duty, my first husband had a sense of duty, in everything, the milk, the food, the clothes, the shoes, he provided everything. .... My husband never touched a hair on my head, he was a great man for me. He was great. I was relaxed with him and he was relaxed with me.

Elsa Jirón, 8 November 1999

Although I do not doubt that there are men in Nicaragua who do not conform to negative hegemonic masculinities, it is nonetheless interesting that it was primarily but not exclusively dead men who were talked of positively.

## Conclusions

An exploration of the failure of relationships between men and women demonstrates how gender identities, in the form of constructions of masculinity and femininity, are precarious and shifting, and depend on the circulation of competing and contradictory discourses for their constitution. Men's and women's understandings of the distribution of power within the household and society are influenced by the historical and colonial legacy of *patria potestad*, as they are by revolutionary discourses of the new man and human rights inspired discourses which emphasise the unacceptability of domestic violence and abuse. While the revolutionary framework might have been limited in terms of the space and opportunities it provided to address gender-specific needs and interests, it did at the very least provide a critique of *machismo*, a critique which has been refined over the last decade. Critiques of *machismo* and its more violent expressions provide women with the discursive tools to rid themselves of redundant men.

Hegemonic masculinity is built up over a period of time but it intersects and clashes with femininity in sometimes unexpected ways and this can cause its manifestations to shift. Certain attributes of masculinity might weaken or come to the fore depending on other discursive and non-discursive conditions. Associations of masculinity with men and femininity with women are also unstable and dynamic. I have indicated how women in Nicaragua sometimes adopt masculine subject positions in terms of military involvement or breadwinning. Similarly, although it is the case that most domestic violence in Nicaragua is perpetrated by men against women, as Segal (1990) indicates, violence cannot simply be equated with masculinity. It is not only men who display what could be considered masculine attributes. In Nicaragua, women have participated extensively in military structures and women, as well as men, are often violent towards their children. I witnessed several examples of mothers beating their children, sometimes with belts and sticks. Gutman (1996), Lancaster (1992) and Wade (1994), all writing on gender relations in Latin America, have also all reported significant physical abuse of children by women. While infidelity and extra-marital affairs are often seen as typical of the macho man, as Wade (1994) has indicated serial polygamy is common to both men and women and for

some women single motherhood might be a temporary situation. Many of my participants had several children by different fathers which is of course a form of serial polygamy<sup>6</sup>.

Wade's (1994:134) earlier quoted point on how violence emerges, not as a result of a straightforward conflict between masculinity and femininity but "from conflicts within and between different aspects of masculinities and femininities" is crucial to our understandings of why men and women fail in their attempts to build stable relationships. It also contributes to our understanding of why critiques of *machismo* and violence exist alongside uneasiness about single motherhood as a status and the ongoing belief in the possibility of romantic love. These patterns are therefore simultaneously interacting with well-established and pervasive discourses about masculinities and femininities and with new possibilities and constraints which result from shifting political, economic and cultural circumstances. Men and women can therefore draw on more than one discourse, which might lead to gendered subjectivities which appear contradictory, but in the process might also enable people, in this case single mothers, to make sense of their lives and not feel like they are deviating from a culturally idealised norm.

The reconciliation of theoretical abstractions on masculinity with women's lived experiences is a complex one. As Cornwall and Lindisfarne (1994b) argue, it is important to consider the ways in which relations of power inform social interaction. There is a close relationship between the constitution of multiple gendered identities and power. I extend this notion to my interpretation of my data and suggest that while I cannot definitively say what hegemonic masculinity is in the Nicaraguan context, we can at least acknowledge that there is a relationship between the individual manifestations of masculinity and single motherhood. I have attempted to reveal what my informants told me about the men in their lives and acknowledge the painful struggles women undergo to bring about shifts in gender relations. I have however tried to also acknowledge that this does not mean that masculinity in Nicaragua is not deconstructing and reconstructing itself in diverse, complex and contradictory ways.

The words of my participants reveal an awareness of the social nature of the experiences and problems endured with the men in their lives. This awareness entails a sense that for

relationships to work, there needs to be a greater change in the hearts and minds of many Nicaraguan men. Many women, despite considerable socio-economic barriers, are refusing to constitute themselves or be constituted as subservient, dependent, controlled or dominated. While this refusal along with the material conditions in which these women choose or are forced to live cannot be separated from the constructions of alternative discourses of motherhood, assuming the identity of single mother is far from straightforward and for some women involves a degree of uneasiness. This uneasiness is the result of the conflicts and tensions within which subjectivity is formed and of the multiple ways in which people experience themselves. In terms of cultural change, single motherhood is contradictory in the sense that it creates both limitations and opportunities or both increases and reduces spatial mobility. This is because there are a series of complex and contradictory processes in operation. Nicaragua continues to experience very high birth and fertility rates and high teenage pregnancy rates but the sophistication of the women's movement is creating a national climate in which domestic and sexual abuse are no longer culturally sanctioned to the same extent as previously. The difficulties of the economic climate and the growing empowerment of women will create frustrations in some men which might be expressed in terms of a more brute masculinity. A socio-cultural system that gives advantages to men over women is always under threat and vulnerable to changes which could undermine it. This ongoing threat might lead men to behave in irresponsible, cruel or stupid ways, as it has in the past and continues to do now. It is this masculinity-related behaviour in this context which leads women to leave violent or unproductive men and means that they see little to be gained from starting new relationships.

For women to adopt single motherhood as a long or medium term strategic choice entails a renegotiation of their femininity. Moore (1994a, 1994b) sees the constitution of gender identity as intersubjective, in the sense that people position themselves in relation to others or in relation to the behaviour of others. Masculinity and femininity, while malleable constructs, are also relational and are only constituted in relation to each other. How men redefine their notion of masculinity in relation to this renegotiation of femininity is of course highly complex and accounts for the production of competing



discourses of masculinity. While I am not condoning violent or irresponsible behaviour of any kind, it is perhaps not surprising that many men are failing to come to terms with the redefinition process.

Historically in Nicaragua, masculinity and femininity and their physical embodiments in men and women have been discursively constructed as opposite to each other but also as complementary. At the present time, it would appear that the constructions of masculinity and femininity in Nicaragua are undergoing a form of asynchronous development, that they are no longer so complementary, which is making partnerships between men and women impossible for so many people. What is clear is that men's behaviour and the individual manifestations of masculinity in many women's lives mean that single motherhood becomes a strategic choice, but one that is constantly being redefined as it comes into conflict with more resilient but dynamic discourses of masculinity.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In Andean culture, *mestizaje* is about 'whitening' the population and to be *mestizo* is therefore to insert oneself into nation-building discourse (Radcliffe 1999c) The emphasis on whitening is not as powerful in Nicaragua as in other parts of Latin America, although Nicaragua also operates racialised hierarchies. The *mestizo* identity was adopted in Nicaragua because indigenous women who had sex with Spaniards would often be rejected by their communities and to raise the child as Indian would result in heavy taxes (Montenegro 2000). Consequently, *mestizos* in Nicaragua became more hispanicised, rejecting their Indian origins and attempting to distinguish themselves from *mulatos* (of black, indigenous and Spanish descent).

<sup>2</sup> In addition, a number of development journals have recently produced special issues devoted to this theme. See for example, *IDS Bulletin* 31(2) (2000), *European Journal of Development Research* 12(2) (2000) and *Development* 44(3) (2001).

<sup>3</sup> In November 2001, Daniel Ortega suffered his third electoral defeat.

<sup>4</sup> Words in italics are mine.

<sup>5</sup> Chant (1997a, 1997b) also found a reluctance from some women in Guanacaste in Costa Rica to seek maintenance for other reasons. This was sometimes out of pride but also because maintenance is sometimes used by men to 'buy' access to sexual relations or because, out of fear, women do not want their ex-partners to know where they are.

<sup>6</sup> Some participants also had several children by the same man but had always been single mothers. Carla Martínez had five children by the same man but never lived with him as a couple. Rosario Peña had 14 children, all by the same father, who often came to visit (and deposit his sperm) but never ever stayed to bring them up.

## Manipulating motherhood: The gendered dynamics of state power, revolutionary legacies and the negotiation of sacrifice and femininity

### Introduction

On 19 July 1999 thousands of Sandinista militants and supporters gathered in Matagalpa to celebrate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Sandinista revolution (See Figure 4.1). As I moved among them, an inebriated friend of Sadie asked me: “What do you think of our 19 July? It’s happy, isn’t it? It’s our Christmas?” To which a woman who was with him added: “It’s our life”.

That same day I experienced a blend of emotions. To some extent, I was happy and excited to be part of that historical moment, to relive the revolutionary spirit which had attracted me to Nicaragua in the 1980s. Apart from a few drunken fights among male youths, there was a festive atmosphere. But I could not get quite as enthused as I did when I had attended the 11<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations in Managua in 1990. Sadie had refused to attend the rally out of concern that her presence would be interpreted by both the FSLN leaders and by local Sandinista militants as an endorsement of the political behaviour of the party leadership. She had already been marginalised by some of the FSLN leaders for her critical position and she was vigorously opposed to the negotiations between the FSLN and the PLC which led to the pact later that year. At the rally, both the local political secretary of the FSLN, Irma Dávila, and its leader, Daniel Ortega, gave what I felt were tired Cold War style speeches and the cries of *patria libre o morir* (free country or death) were answered with considerably less fervour than they would have been in the early 1980s.

This chapter explores shifting gender identities in Nicaragua as they intersect with processes of nationalism, neoliberalism and state-led gender regimes, focusing in particular on how women in the present engage with Nicaragua’s revolutionary past. It maps a number of spatial shifts which have taken place, not only in terms of how women

position themselves in relation to the state but also in terms of how they (re)position themselves with respect to the FSLN and the(ir) revolutionary past as a discursive entity. These positionings are mediated by the deployment of state-led or hegemonic discourses of motherhood, femininity and national identity, transnational processes such as neoliberalism and women's individual material realities. Consequently, shifting notions of maternal responsibility, sacrifice and political organisation have become implicated in the emergence of different political and maternal subjectivities. I argue that the processes which are taking place today are more complex than has been acknowledged in previous treatments of the subject. I suggest that Nicaraguan women are reworking the past in a way which enables them to challenge the ideological positions and policies of the state which are negative for women. In so doing, they place themselves in a critical position with respect to the FSLN, but in a way which reinforces revolutionary identities. Nicaragua's revolutionary past and Sandinismo more broadly are being severed from the FSLN leadership in creative, albeit sometimes contradictory, ways. This chapter focuses on how women in the present engage with the past and so largely resists a chronological approach. This hopefully will enable me to overcome dichotomous understandings of gender and space.

Many of the legacies of the Nicaraguan revolution are self-evident. They are inscribed in the landscape (See Figure 4.2), they are there in rituals and celebrations, they manifest themselves constantly through the language of political organisation. However, the ways in which women engage with Nicaragua's revolutionary past are not self-evident. Given that ideological shifts at the level of the nation-state can influence changing gender regimes (Laurie et al. 1999), this chapter explores the political manipulation of motherhood in Nicaragua and examines the impact of the dramatic shift from the revolutionary state of the 1980s to the neoliberal one of the 1990s on gender relationships and constructions of femininity. Political forces on the right and the left in Nicaragua have manipulated discourses of motherhood in the pursuit of nationalist goals.

For the purposes of this chapter, I wish to interpret the Nicaraguan revolution not only as a historical event but also as a discursive entity within which political, social, economic and cultural realities are mutually constituted and the boundaries of which are therefore



Figure 4.1  
20<sup>th</sup> anniversary rally, Matagalpa, 19 July 1999  
Source: Julie Cupples

permeable. While some aspects of this experience have passed into history, the legacies and both the collective and individual historical memory of the revolution continue to be part of an ongoing process. This process complicates and crosses in multiple ways the creation of a national identity and the making of the Nicaraguan state. In relation to this, I conceptualise the Nicaraguan state, both the revolutionary one of the 1980s and the neoliberal one of the 1990s, as a dynamic entity which is constituted by the practices in which it engages. As the FSLN leaders have become businessmen and made deals with the PLC to carve up quotas of state power, many Nicaraguans who put their studies, careers and family lives on hold to fight for the revolution now feel betrayed. I was interested to explore how, in this context, women in the 1990s made sense of the commitments and sacrifices they had made in the 1980s and the importance of the legacy of the revolution for the renegotiation of gender identity.

The subject positions available to Nicaraguan women today depend to some extent on the roles they played during the revolutionary period of the 1980s. The majority of women in this study were either childless or had young children at the time of the revolution and participated directly themselves, either in military activities (as guerrilla fighters, militia fighters or within the structures of the EPS) or in political capacities (as state employees in government ministries or institutions, or as activists in Sandinista mass movements such as the women's movement, the CDS or the co-operative movement) or more commonly in a combination of these areas. Many had been and some still were FSLN militants. A smaller number had adult children at the time of the revolution and therefore either became politicised through their children's participation or became "Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs". Others were too young to have participated directly in the revolution themselves and while the collective memory of Nicaragua's revolutionary past impacts on their subjectivities, their politicisation has evolved in the post-revolutionary period. Finally, there are a number of women who were opposed to the revolution and some of these joined the counter-revolutionary forces either as collaborators or combatants. The experiences and identities of counter-revolutionary women will be discussed in the next chapter.





Figure 4.2  
The Nicaraguan revolution inscribed on the landscape  
Source: Julie Cupples

After a review of the growing literature on gender and nationalism and a discussion of the theoretical limitations of existing scholarship on women in Nicaragua and the state transition, the chapter is divided into three main sections. First, it focuses on the contradictory logic of the Sandinista gender regime to provide some background information on my participants' revolutionary mobilisation as well as on the manipulation of motherhood by the FSLN. Second, it explores the gendered spatialities of state transitions to examine how the ideological shift which took place after the elections of 1990 led to a repositioning of gender identity and the creation of alternative political subjectivities. The final section looks at how the past is reworked by focusing on revolutionary legacies and the negotiation of sacrifice.

### **Gender regimes and shifting nationalisms**

According to Cravey (1998), a gender regime is the way in which deeply ingrained notions of masculinity and femininity are institutionalised at the level of the nation-state. The manipulation of female sexuality and motherhood by state or other political forces is linked to some extent to both nationalist and nation-building processes and to understandings of national identity<sup>1</sup>. A number of authors have engaged with the gendering of nationalisms and the intersections which exist between nationalism and sexuality (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989, Parker et al. 1992a, Katrak 1992, Yuval-Davis 1993, 1996, Sharp 1996, Nagel 1998), while feminist geographers and other social scientists have attempted to address the way that gender is often made invisible in the study of state formation and international relations (Enloe 1989, 2000, Grant and Newland 1991, Peterson 1992, Cravey 1998, Steans 1998). A number of these studies have made explicit the gendered nature of nationalist discourses and the way in which they tend to mobilise female sexuality and female bodies to pursue nationalist goals.

As Laurie et al. (1999) have argued, understandings of femininity in Latin America are configured in relation to discourses of nationhood. Nationalism tends to be fairly coherent as an ideology (Radcliffe and Westwood 1996), springing from “masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope” (Enloe 1989: 44). But the concept does not capture the differences which divide one nation from another or from itself. There may be “no normal way to partake of the categorical definitiveness of the

national” (Sedgwick 1992: 241). States play an important role in the mobilisation of gender discourses through nationalism, impacting on both gender relations and the constructions of masculinity and femininity, as Radcliffe’s (1993b, 1996) and Radcliffe and Westwood’s (1996) work on Peru and Ecuador has shown. While the masculinities and femininities which make up the nation are constantly being reworked, the state generates gender ideologies by “marking ideologies of national difference on women’s and men’s bodies and in their identities” (Radcliffe and Westwood 1996: 135).

When states go to war in the defence or pursuit of nationalism, when it is common for national identity to take precedence over other identities (Jordan and Weedon 1995), the ideological formulation of gender identities, as argued by Byrne and Baden (1995), may be subject to change. While wars sometimes create more liberated notions of women as fighters, they also often reproduce traditional<sup>2</sup> notions of women as the reproducers of fighters or the transmitters of culture (Byrne and Baden 1995). This is what Sinha (1995:31) has referred to as the interplay of nationalisms and sexualities which “have served to reconstitute and realign earlier social hierarchies with new social arrangements”. Women in Nicaragua have been constituted through the state’s gendered discourses of nationhood as heroic military commanders, as political leaders and as self-sacrificial mothers or biological reproducers of the nation. This last construction has tended to position women in Nicaragua and elsewhere in Latin America at the margins of nationhood, in which, as Radcliffe and Westwood (1996:142) indicate, “their sexed bodies (gendered through ideologies of *marianismo*) saturate the multiple other facets of their identifications with place and nation”.

When female sexuality is mobilised through nationalism to call on women to provide more children to replenish depletion through war or to provide more sons for the nationalist cause, women, as a result of their difference or inferiority, become a powerful metaphor (Alcoff 1996). This has been documented in many places around the world, including Palestine (Petee 1997), Serbia (Bracewell 1996, Large 1997) India (Sinha 1995) and Sri Lanka (de Alwis 1998). It has even led to a kind of demographic race between Israel and Palestine (Yuval-Davis 1996). These nationalisms involve processes of inclusion and exclusion (Yuval-Davis 1993) and rely on symbolic representation for



their maintenance (Jordan and Weedon 1995). Consequently, national identity formation comes about by projecting beyond the borders of the nation sexualised and gendered practices which are considered objectionable, while the idealisation of motherhood through nationalism tends to erase “all non-reproductively-oriented sexualities from the discourse of the nation” (Parker et al. 1992b:6). As Radcliffe and Westwood (1996) point out, while she is a universal icon, the Virgin Mary has come to represent nationalism. Nationalist discourses therefore often deprive women of the right to their sexuality, just as Catholicism deprived the Virgin Mary of hers. However, the way in which women relate to this idealisation varies. Just as the presence of women in the military does not necessarily transform gendered relations of power, being included and valued in the nation-building project as bearers of children can be both appealing and empowering to women (Enloe 1989), particularly in violent and divided societies (Walker 1995). Nationalisms as discursive processes do therefore play important roles in the creation of gendered geographies. This is particularly the case in Latin America where nationalism is linked with ideologies of *marianismo* to create a particular female subjectivity.

#### *National identity in Nicaragua*

National identity in Nicaragua was slow to consolidate in the 19th century because of the foreign domination of the country and political struggles between Liberals and Conservatives. These were essentially contests between elite families who had different notions of national identity and development (Field 1999). The independence movements in Latin America which preceded these struggles had been based not so much on *nacionalidad* but on Bolivarian notions of *americanidad* (Cuadra 1997). After the invasion of Nicaragua by US filibuster William Walker in 1856, nationalist sentiment grew in opposition to constant US intervention. By the 1920s, this opposition had turned to guerrilla warfare led by Augusto César Sandino in his drive to expel the US Marines. Sandino’s anti-imperialist nationalism was brought to an end by the Somoza dictatorship but nonetheless formed the inspirational basis of the subsequent revolutionary nationalism of the FSLN.

National identity has formed around *mestizo* identity and therefore has tended to exclude the indigenous and creole communities of the Atlantic coast who were colonised by Britain rather than by Spain and have been geographically isolated from the western part of Nicaragua by dense rainforest. Consequently, the Nicaraguan nation is imagined in fractured and sometimes polarised ways. When national identity has coalesced, it has tended to be around the drama of El Gueguence or the poetry of Rubén Darío<sup>3</sup>.

A more conservative form of nationalism is apparent in Nicaragua today<sup>4</sup>, which is clearly influenced by Catholicism and generates a specific form of gender politics which attempts through policy to reproduce essentialist notions of women's identity primarily as wives and mothers. Moreover, it is also a nationalism based on *revanchismo*, the revengeful desire to erase Nicaragua's Sandinista past from historical memory. Since 1990 *revanchismo* has entailed changing the revolutionary names given to *plazas*, streets, *barrios* and schools, painting over the murals painted by revolutionary artists in the 1980s and attempting to reappropriate Sandino from the FSLN. In 2001 at a ceremony in Chinandega to consecrate the Virgin Mary as the patron saint of Nicaragua, Nicaraguan president Arnoldo Alemán asked for the Virgin's help to defeat the infernal dragon, a clear reference to Daniel Ortega, in the coming elections (Solís 2001).

### *The state transition*

The state transition and its impact on women in Nicaragua have been examined from a political science perspective (Chavez Metoyer 1997, 2000, Kampwirth 1996a, 1996b, 1998a, 1998b) and in terms of how neoliberal economic policies have impacted on women and low-income groups (Babb 2001b). However, this chapter draws on recent geographical work on feminist conceptualisations of the state in Latin America (Westwood and Radcliffe 1993, Radcliffe and Westwood 1996, Cravey 1998) and on the intersections between state-led gender regimes and geographies of femininities (Laurie et al. 1999). This approach provides a more detailed and spatialised understanding of the ways in which state power is accommodated and resisted and the renegotiations of gender identities which these processes entail.

Most of the scholarship on women in Nicaragua has ignored the roles that political processes and spatialities play in the construction of gender identities. While some authors have acknowledged the intersection between motherhood and revolutionary mobilisation (Randall 1981, Schulz 1980), understandings of women in Nicaragua dominated by a socialist framework have concentrated on the heroism of female revolutionaries and have neglected other aspects of women's lives, in particular the way in which the gendered dynamics of state power are negotiated. While the presence of women in the military has the potential to undermine the link between the military and masculinism and constructions of men as defenders of women and children in war (Enloe 1990 in Yuval-Davis 1993), it does not automatically bring about empowerment or gender equality (D'Amico 1998, Molyneux 1998). Many of the participants in this study bore arms as guerrilla fighters against Somoza, joined the EPS or participated in the militias.

Westwood and Radcliffe (1993) have discussed the need to reject the binary opposition between women as self-sacrificing or as radical guerrillas. I wish to acknowledge the impact of revolutionary participation in terms of the renegotiation of gender identities without reproducing or reinforcing the image of the heroic female guerrilla fighter or warrior woman. This construction is present in Nicaraguan popular culture, immortalised through the now iconic image of the breastfeeding militia fighter with her AK-47 on her shoulder taken in Waswalito in Matagalpa in 1984 (See Figure 4.3). However, glorifying female soldiers in popular culture as well as in academic texts can have a number of unintended consequences. By suggesting that national memories are unproblematic rather than contested, it obscures the more complex ways in which female subjectivity is constructed. While this image is disruptive to constructions of masculinity and femininity, the *miliciana's* smile belies the emotional pain that leaving children to engage in military struggles would have involved and it denies the perpetuation of gender inequality which women continued to suffer both within military structures and within the household. There is a parallel here with the celebratory treatment accorded to women's survival strategies which ignore the stress which the performance of multiple



Figure 4.3  
Miliciana de Waswalito 1984  
Source: Orlando Valenzuela

roles creates (Moser 1993 in Laurie et al. 1999) As Chapter 3 demonstrated, many women still had to deal with violent or unequal gender relations on a daily basis.

More recent scholarship on women in Nicaragua has tended to focus on two main aspects. The first is the limitations of the women's movement during the revolution which has been attributed to sexism within the FSLN and AMNLAE's subordination to the party. The second is the proliferation and growing sophistication of the feminist movement since 1990, which has been attributed to the revolutionary past and the ways in which it mobilised women and gave them a voice (See for example Kampwirth 1998a, Babb 1997, 2001b, Chavez Metoyer 1997, 2000). While I accept the validity of these approaches and have acknowledged their importance in Chapter 1, this chapter provides a

geographical reading of these relationships. I map the spatial shifts which have taken place in terms of how women are reworking their past and the implications of this for gender identity renegotiation and constructions of motherhood and femininity. Therefore I focus more closely on the ways in which female sexuality and constructions of femininity and motherhood have been mobilised through the processes of revolution, nationalism and neoliberalism and examine to what extent my participants have accommodated, adapted and resisted these forms of political manipulation.

The situation of Nicaragua provides an interesting focus on how women engage with shifting nationalisms to produce alternative geographies, processes that can take place without necessarily ending gender inequality. If the existence of multiple and fractured identities produces a series of complex relationships to the nation (Radcliffe and Westwood 1996), in Nicaragua these relationships are furthered complicated by the dramatic ideological shifts which have taken place within and beyond the state and within the concomitant gender regime.

### **The contradictory logic of the Sandinista gender regime**

#### *Militarised women*

The insurrection against Somoza and the early years of the revolution, which involved the mobilisation of women on a massive scale, opened up spaces for women and allowed new models of femininity to be forged. The image of the warrior woman became so powerful in Nicaragua as it seemed to encapsulate the way in which traditional notions of femininity were being overturned. Sandinista ideology was a combination of Sandino's nationalism with Marxist-Leninist theories and the FSLN came to power broadly committed to socialist<sup>5</sup> principles including the emancipation of women. In their 1969 programme the FSLN stated that the abolition of sex discrimination was a fundamental aspect of the Sandinista struggle (FSLN 1969) and gender equality was later enshrined in the 1987 Constitution. After the triumph, the Sandinista discourse on women centred on the heroism of the female commanders, women such as Leticia Herrera, Nora Astorga, Mónica Baltodano and Dora María Téllez<sup>6</sup> (Field 1999). As stated in Chapter 1, the

FSLN introduced (without necessarily fully implementing) an impressive range of legislation which had the potential to vastly improve women's lives.

However, the fact that women took on new roles including military positions was no guarantee to gender inequality. Militarised participants were ambivalent about the military's potential to generate gender equality. Graciela Blanco who was mobilised in the EPS talked about how her experience of military life as a woman oscillated between frustration with the sexual division of labour which operated in the army and the positive relationships she had with other male soldiers.

En el Ejército la mayoría de las mujeres... o nos ponían a ser comunicadoras en las oficinas donde estaban radios y todo eso [...] o a ser secretarias, o sea, gente que estuviera en oficinas, pero yo fui una de las que no quise. Cuando nos querían dejar, decían "todas las mujeres se quedan en la base militar" ocupando diferentes cargos, desde la cocina hasta la comunicación y hasta ser secretarias en el estado mayor, por ejemplo, del Ejército. Y yo decía que no, que yo quería ir a la frontera ... porque yo no me miraba metida ahí en una oficina. Me parecía que eso era un papel ridículo para una mujer, o sea, decía que por qué no podía ir al frente de guerra, o sea ¿qué es lo que tienen los otros que no tengo yo para ir al frente de guerra?

In the army most of the women ... either they made us work as communicators in the offices where there were radios and things like that [...] or they made us work as secretaries, or as office workers, but I was one of those who didn't want to. When they wanted to leave us, they used to say "All the women are to stay in the military base", doing different jobs, from working in the kitchen to communication or being secretaries for the army leaders. And I used to say no, that I wanted to go to the front, because I didn't see myself stuck in an office. It seemed a ridiculous role for a women, or rather I used to ask why I couldn't go to the war front. Why is it that others can go to the front and I can't?

Graciela Blanco, 26 November 1999

Fue muy positiva porque yo ahí en ningún momento me sentía abusada por nadie, me sentía respetada, y en los momentos en que no me sentía respetada, sabía defenderme, sabía parar todas las situaciones que habían. No sentí por ejemplo por parte de ninguno de mis compañeros, éramos 500,...más bien sentí una actitud como de respaldo, de cuidarme, de protegerme mucho, de mucha solidaridad, no. Habían algunos que se pasaban, o sea, siempre los hay, pero yo sentí que ellos me miraban a mí como una compañera, y que eso establecía límites bien claros en las relaciones.

It was very positive because when I was there I never felt abused by anyone, I felt respected, and at the times when I didn't feel respected, I knew how to defend

myself, I knew how to deal with all the situations which arose. I never felt for example from any of my *compañeros* ... there were 500 ... I actually felt that there was a supportive attitude, a desire to look after me, to protect me, lots of solidarity. There were some that stepped over the mark, there always are, but I felt that they saw me as a *compañera*, and that established clear boundaries in our relationships.

Graciela Blanco, 26 November 1999

Carla Martínez described the ease with which she used weapons as a result of a rural upbringing where guns were commonplace, as well as her capacity to be violent towards people, particularly drunken men. However, she felt she was not cut out for a military vocation and left the army after an experience where she failed to pull the trigger on a potential enemy and as a result put her sleeping *compas*' lives at risk. Nevertheless, she continued to be integrated both in the CDS and the popular militias.

Bueno ... más o menos yo a pesar de haberme retirado de lo que era la vida militar por decir así formal, yo siempre me quedé organizada en lo que eran las milicias populares. Las milicias populares tenían un objetivo claro de preparación militar, pero también de ... o sea, en aquellos tiempos era constante que de CIA, de Estados Unidos iba a venir a agredirnos, a una invasión. Entonces era necesario en ese entonces estar preparado también porque... se decía que la invasión iba a ser de patria de morir o de vivir pero eso dependía de la situación de como estaba uno preparado. Me gustó siempre prepararme militarmente, yo seguí haciendo ejercicios, seguí entrenándome con las milicias populares.

In spite of the fact that I had withdrawn from formal military life, I remained organised in the popular militias. The popular militias had a clear goal of military preparation ... in those times, it was felt that the CIA, the United States were going to come and attack us, in an invasion. So it was necessary at that time to be prepared ... people used to say that the invasion would be a matter of free country or death but it would all depend on how prepared we were. I have always liked to do military training, I continued to carry out manoeuvres, I continued to train with the popular militias.

Carla Martínez, 23 October 1999

### *Maternal and political subjectivities*

The revolutionary calling, described by many as its mystique, appealed to thousands of women who renegotiated their understandings of motherhood and appropriate gendered behaviour in order to participate. While the intersection of maternal and political subjectivities is never straightforward, motherhood is often a basis for political action.

Early testimonial literature collected on women's participation in the struggle against Somoza suggests that some women left their children and joined the struggle because they were mothers rather than in spite of it. Nora Astorga told Randall (1981) that while it was hard to leave her children, she did so with the idea of creating a better world for them. Likewise, guerrilla fighter Silvia Pérez told Schulz (1980) that her partner considered her to be a bad mother when she decided to leave her children, but she went because she felt she could never have been a good mother under the system.

While some middle class women might have had a greater degree of choice in terms of whether they left their children, for others the struggle against Somoza and the insurrection entailed a less voluntary letting go of biological motherhood. A friend of mine told me how the insurrection separated her from her children. In 1979, she was working as a nanny (*china*) for two small children, aged two and four, whose middle class mother was engaged in the military struggle against Somoza. Her "domestic" duties at this time often included delivering ammunition hidden under her apron to safehouses. In the final weeks before the triumph, Matagalpa was under aerial bombardment, many people were being killed by Somoza's guard, and so she, like many others, was forced to abandon the city in a hurry and bring the two girls to safety. She walked for several hours with the two children, a large container of milk and a bag of nappies until she reached the safety of La Cartuja, a convent on the road to Jinotega. She did not return with them to Matagalpa until after the triumph. She had left her own children with her mother and they were also forced to flee the situation. They had ended up heading towards Sébaco, sleeping in the mountains on the way. It was three months before she was reunited with her own children again. While she protected her employer's children, she had no idea what had become of her own children or if they were safe.

Consequently, many women put their maternal "instincts" on hold to fight for the revolution. Margarita Muñoz described how in 1977 as a 23-year-old Catholic nun she decided to abandon the service of the Church and join the revolution. In the convent in Matagalpa she had begun to question not only what she saw as the hypocritical sexual intrigue that went on within the Catholic Church, but also the situation of her family living in extreme rural poverty compared with her relative well-being in the convent.



Here she replicated hegemonic notions of appropriate feminine behaviour in terms of service to her family.

Se me empezó a formar un sentimiento de culpa, ya no para con Dios, como lo tenía antes de persecución con el diablo, sino un sentimiento de culpa de ingratitud. Soy la única que me lograron formar, la mayor de la generación nueva. Y mi familia estaba con problemas, yo podía estar trabajando para ayudarles. Había desarrollado ese espíritu también de servicio a la familia, porque me lo enseñaron desde chiquita. Yo debía trabajar para todos los demás varones, porque ésa es la mentalidad del campo. Yo tenía que servir a los demás varones, entonces, hay un espíritu de servicio, yo soy para servir a la familia.

I began to develop a guilty conscience, not with God any more, like I had before when I was being persecuted by the devil, but a guilty conscience of ingratitude. I was the only one in the family who had been able to study, the only one of the second generation. And my family had problems and I could be working to help them. I had also developed this sense of servitude to the family because this is how I was brought up. I had to work for all my brothers, because that was the mentality of the countryside. I had to serve all the boys, so there was this sense of servitude, I am here to serve my family.

Margarita Muñoz, 30 October 1999

However, her revolutionary consciousness was slow to develop in the closeted world of the convent in which she lived, as they were not permitted to read newspapers or listen to the radio. But she became increasingly determined to understand the social conflict that was taking place and why so many young people were being killed by the guard.

In an attempt to quell her growing dissatisfaction with convent life, she was sent to Costa Rica to work with drug addicts and troubled families, in the hope that exposure to the sexual depravity of the outside world would encourage her to continue as a nun. Once in Costa Rica she began to understand more clearly what was going on in her country. Subsequently she moved directly from a religious space into one of revolutionary struggle.

En Costa Rica a Nicaragua le decían la hacienda de Somoza. Ah, Nicaragua, la hacienda de Somoza, y empezaron a hablar con mucho despectivismo de Somoza. Entonces en las discusiones con la gente, fuera de la represión, había un ambiente más libre para mí. Me movía libremente, tenía un trabajo, podía oír la radio, podía ver televisión. ... Entonces entró más información en mí por diferentes vías que antes, entonces entendía el problema de Nicaragua, entendía ya lo que era el

Frente, y por qué luchaba el Frente, porque allá en Costa Rica, tenía mucho prestigio, una fuente de apoyo a la lucha sandinista en Costa Rica. Entonces allá fui sintiendo la simpatía por el Frente, de tal manera que cuando yo vine a finales del 77, yo vine a integrarme directamente a trabajar con el Frente.

In Costa Rica, they called Nicaragua Somoza's estate. Ah Nicaragua, Somoza's estate, and they would start talking really negatively about Somoza. In discussions with people, away from the repression, there was a freer atmosphere for me. I could move about freely, I had a job, I could listen to the radio and watch the television. So I absorbed more information from different sources and I began to understand Nicaragua's problems, I began to understand what the Frente was and what the Frente was fighting for, because in Costa Rica, they had a lot of prestige and there was support in Costa Rica for the Sandinista struggle. So it was there that my sympathies for the Frente began to grow to the extent that when I came back at the end of 1977, I became directly involved in working with the Frente.

Margarita Muñoz, 30 October 1999

Margarita's revolutionary trajectory as a guerrilla fighter before the triumph and as a Sandinista union leader and political leader within the Ministry of Education after the triumph meant she was included as one of the historic Sandinista militants of the second promotion. These were the first Sandinistas to be promoted as militants, as the first promotion refers to those who fell in the struggle and were never officially granted militancy while they were alive. She described how she comfortably substituted her devotion to God with devotion to the revolution but it was a process which entailed hegemonic understandings of femininity being undermined. While it was possible that Margarita had already renounced motherhood as an option when she joined the convent, through the revolution motherhood lost its centrality in many women's lives. Despite her Catholic background, with the help of Sandinista *compas*, Margarita had three clandestine abortions while integrated in military structures as a result of unwanted pregnancies. Later Margarita gave birth to two children, but she was so involved in the revolution that her children practically grew up alone with little continuity or stability of childcare.

Francamente mis niños crecieron solos. Trabajaba en el Ministerio de Educación como responsable de la formación de docentes y trabajaba en los todos los municipios de Matagalpa, desde Wiwilí a Río Blanco, organizando a los maestros, haciendo cursos de capacitación para ellos. Pasaba una semana en un municipio, otra semana en otro. De esta manera mis hijos crecieron solos. Fue muy inestable

... Me los cuidaba mi madre un tiempo, después los dejaba a mi hermana. Y así. O si no se quedaban solos aquí con una señora que me ayudaba.

To tell you the truth, my children grew up alone. I used to work in the Ministry of Education and I was in charge of teacher training and I used to work in all the municipalities of Matagalpa from Wiwilí to Río Blanco, organising the teachers, running training courses for them. I used to spend one week in one municipality, another week in another. And so my children grew up on their own. It was very unstable. ... My mother would look after them for a while, then I would leave them with my sister. Or they would stay here on their own with a childminder.

Margarita Muñoz, 26 August 1999

Graciela Blanco also became pregnant while fighting in the army and was forced to give up her military position when her pregnancy became more advanced. However, she did not then dedicate herself to intensive mothering but continued to participate in the revolution in other ways. She was separated from the father of her child, but nonetheless she left her baby daughter with her paternal grandmother in Chinandega to take a position as a teacher at a technical school in Muy Muy.

Some of the above extracts show how different the revolutionary and particularly the military experience was for women. Clearly, women were very differently affected by the babies that were conceived in the mountains compared with the fathers of those babies and it was women, not men, who were seen to have abandoned children, in order to be part of the revolutionary process. While commitment to the revolution took many mothers away from their children, not all women felt this separation was appropriate. Concern was expressed that children might turn against the revolution, as they would come to associate it with the loss of their parents (Belli 1993).

While the revolution expanded notions of maternal responsibility, these did not always shift in unproblematic ways. Lucía Espinoza remained in the army when her first child was born. She lived on a military base and childcare was never a problem as she could always find someone to look after her child when she was engaged in manoeuvres. However, the nature of her military involvement and her sense of maternal responsibility shifted after her second child was born and at this point she left the army.

Cuando andábamos por la noche la dejaba dormida. Y cuando hacíamos recorridos, siempre la dejaba con alguna familia. No había problema. Pero cuando salí embarazada de la otra niña, ya no quise. Ya me quedé en casa. No quería que sufriera la segunda lo que la primera había sufrido.

When we went out at night I left her sleeping. And when we did reconnaissance, I used to leave her with a family. There was no problem. But when I fell pregnant with my second child, I didn't want to anymore and I stayed at home. I didn't want the second one to go through what the first had been through.

Lucía Espinoza, 11 August 1999

While the willingness of women to abandon more familiar constructions of gendered behaviour had been crucial to the triumph of the revolution, it is also important to point out that strategic hegemonic femininities also had revolutionary outcomes. Nora Astorga achieved fame when she was involved in the FSLN execution of Pérez Vega, one of Somoza's most brutal generals. In 1978, while collaborating clandestinely with the FSLN, she was working as a lawyer in a construction company and through her work got to know Pérez Vega who engaged in an "all-out campaign to get me into bed" (Randall 1981:121). She devised a plan to enable him to be kidnapped by the FSLN. Feigning sexual interest in him, she invited him to her house. Once she had disarmed and undressed him, she gave the signal and the FSLN comrades came into the room. Although they had only intended to kidnap him, the general put up such resistance, they were forced to execute him (Randall 1981). As Daniel (1998) states, Nora had to use her sexuality and play a game of female seduction to trap the general. This can be compared with the way in which many working class women, such as my friend who hid ammunition in her apron, made use of gendered assumptions about women's roles and sexualities to fool Somoza's guard (Daniel 1998).

#### *Anxieties about appropriate femininities*

Despite the renegotiations of femininity and maternal subjectivity that the revolution entailed, as the Contra war intensified, the Sandinista gender regime began to manifest an increasingly contradictory logic. It appears that women's revolutionary mobilisation generated anxieties over the way in which Nicaraguan womanhood was being redefined and over how the meanings of motherhood had expanded to include combative motherhood. I argue that the insurrection and the early years of the revolution which had

provided new models of femininity subsequently led to moves to construct women within narrower discursive frameworks.

The Nicaraguan revolution was based on the pursuit of two main goals. Field (1999) sees the Sandinista revolution as an attempt to address the exploitation of Nicaraguans by Somocista capitalists as well as the country's domination by the global capitalist economy. It was within this situation that the socialist-inspired discourses which circulated about the emancipation of women came into conflict not only with nationalist discourses but also with more deeply embedded understandings of masculinity and femininity.

The exclusion of women from military conscription led to a storm of protest from AMNLAE. It was a contradictory decision, because women were already serving in the EPS or the militias and female commanders had successfully led military units, so their capacity to bear arms was not under question and continued to be endorsed. The draft was enormously unpopular even amongst some men and it might not have been politically sustainable to recruit women too. However, as a number of authors have pointed out with respect to other places, the exclusion of women from military conscription is more serious because it amounts to a denial of full citizenship (Yuval-Davis 1993, Steans 1998, Kwon 2001). As Yuval-Davis (1993) has indicated, citizenship rights and responsibilities tend to have a dualistic nature which means women are included in some areas and excluded in others, depending on dominant ideological constructions of gender. If Nicaraguan women were denied full citizenship by their exclusion from the draft, this denial was compounded by the subsequent discursive framing of women in terms of their reproductive roles, a move that was seen as politically justified by the immediacies brought about by the US-sponsored military aggression.

At this point, instead of acknowledging women's proven abilities as soldiers, the Sandinista discourse on women shifted to a pro-natalist position where women began to be valued as reproducers of more children for the revolutionary cause. Consequently, AMNLAE's work became increasingly focused on ideological work with the Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs, committees made up of women who had lost sons and daughters in

the struggle against Somoza or in the Contra war. They evolved out of the Mothers' Committees (*Comités de Madres*) which had formed during the Somoza dictatorship to protest at living conditions and to lobby for the release of political prisoners. Many of these women were politicised by their children's involvement in the revolution. In the 1980s the propaganda work with mothers was seen by the FSLN as important to prevent the draft turning mothers against the revolution (Bayard de Volo 1998, Chavez Metoyer 2000).

Former FSLN deputy leader, Sergio Ramírez, describes how mothers and motherhood were mobilised in defence of the revolution. Grief became both a public and a politicised issue.

Los únicos héroes eran los muertos, los caídos, a ellos se lo debíamos todo, ellos habían sido los mejores, y todo lo demás, referente a los vivos, debía ser reprimido como vanidad mundana. [...] La tumba era el altar. Las madres enlutadas ocupaban la primera fila en cualquier acto público, cargando en el regazo las fotos ampliadas de sus hijos sacrificados, las fotos de bachillerato o las de sus credenciales de trabajo, o las recortadas de un grupo en fiesta, en un paseo, todos jóvenes, muertos en la plenitud de su existencia para ser héroes que nunca van a envejecer.

The only heroes were the dead, the fallen, we owed everything to them, they had been the best, and all the rest, referring to the living, had to be repressed as mundane vanity. [...] The tomb was the altar. Mourning mothers occupied the first row in any public ceremony, carrying in their laps enlarged photos of their sacrificed children, their school graduation photos or their work credentials, or cut out from a group of people in a party or on a trip, all of them young, killed in the plenitude of their existence to be heroes that are never going to age.  
(Ramírez 1999: 47)

These ceremonies drew women into the nation at the same time as their rights as citizens and their non-reproductive sexualities were denied. This denial contradicted not only the earlier pledges to abolish sex discrimination but also the way in which women as well as men had been embodied in Sandinista narratives of the nation. As Sharp (1996) indicates, it is by laying down their lives in war that men come to embody the nation, while women become scripted into the national imagery in more symbolic ways. However, this attempt to construct women as symbolic mothers of the nation came after Nicaraguan women had fallen in combat and had also, like male martyrs, come to embody the nation through their immortalisation in the names of organisations, streets and *barrios*. Nevertheless, the

resilience of *marianista* discourses of maternal self-sacrifice and the appeal of being a life-giver in a time of war meant that these discursive efforts were partially successful.

While the promotion of the Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs by the FSLN can be interpreted as a reworking of established discourses of *marianismo*, it came as a political response to growing anxieties about the changes in Nicaraguan womanhood and the renegotiations of femininity that had taken place during the insurrection and the early years of the revolution. In many ways, the FSLN began to mobilise the maternal components within *marianismo* based on sacrifice and fertility that had been deployed under Somoza. Indeed, some women whose status had been transformed by the death of a son or daughter in combat (Mulinari 1998), compared their suffering to that of the Virgin (Solà and Trayner 1988). The symbolism of the self-sacrificing mother of the nation became vital to the maintenance of the revolution. However, it resulted in the exclusion of women's gender-specific interests from the national project. Before long, AMNLAE's work was almost exclusively focused on their ideological work with mothers of mobilised soldiers to the detriment of other areas (Collinson 1990), while the CDS increasingly focused efforts towards the draft recruitment drive and on informing families of the deaths of draftees (Enríquez 1997).

Constructions of Nicaraguan women as mothers of the nation came about within a regime broadly committed to socialist principles. This is somewhat at odds with what has happened outside of Latin America. For example, Bracewell (1996) describes how in Serbia, the manipulation of women as mothers of the nation is in stark contrast to the construction of patriotic womanhood in socialist Yugoslavia where women contributed to socialism through work. In Nicaragua, the self-sacrificial suffering mother existed alongside the heroic warrior woman.

As a result of the anxieties provoked by the revolutionary process about appropriate gendered behaviours, the FSLN, in spite of its socialist orientation, failed to address sexual politics and gender equality. The emphasis on women as mothers of the nation and the privileging of masculinity in the draft meant that women's reproductive and sexual rights became inappropriate political issues. Issues of crucial importance to women such

as abortion, domestic violence and gay and lesbian rights were not placed on the political agenda and moreover were deemed inappropriate in the circumstances of the Contra war. State power was mobilised in a drive to refeminise Nicaraguan women.

Unlike Cuba and the socialist states in Eastern Europe, Sandinista Nicaragua never legalised abortion. As Sharp's (1996) work on Eastern Europe has suggested, it is in debates over abortion that women's bodies become interwoven with the symbolic body of the nation. The FSLN tended to view abortion as something foreign, of European origin and irrelevant to Nicaragua's situation, seemingly overlooking the way in which other ideas of European extraction such as nationalism and Marxism adapted to Nicaragua's social reality were seen as wholly appropriate. At a public meeting in 1987, FSLN president Daniel Ortega stated that abortion and sterilisation had to be seen in the context of the genocide created by the Contra war and that promoting abortion and sterilisation would be a way of depleting Nicaragua's youth (Molyneux 1988). The exclusion of abortion and the question of female sexuality from the political agenda led a number of middle class Sandinista feminists such as Gioconda Belli, Sofia Montenegro and Milú Vargas, to create an organisation, the Party of the Erotic Left, in which these issues could be discussed.

### *Shifts in gender relations*

Although the draft excluded women, the mobilisation of men inevitably had an impact on gender relations at home. As in other wartime situations when men are recruited, women not only have sole responsibility for home and children, but also take on a number of other roles. After his demobilisation from the army in 1990, Carla Martínez attempted to make a go of living together with the man who had fathered all five of the children she gave birth to in the 1980s but with whom she had never lived as a couple. This attempt failed because she had already dealt with an array of difficult situations on her own.

El también dejó la vida militar ... y yo creo que fue la etapa más dura para mí, porque yo ahí me logré convencer de que no quería a nadie en la casa, no quería a un hombre en la casa, que estuviera ... ¿cómo decir? Siempre he sido, siempre fui la jefa de la casa yo porque nunca salí de mi casa, y yo siempre estuve administrando mi dinero, viviendo mi vida, arreglando todo lo de la casa sin él,



todo lo que tenía que asumir, valga que desde mis embarazos, el nacimiento de mis hijos, cuando murió mi hermano también, ...fue bastante feo, porque él fue reclutado en el servicio militar, él tenía apenas 16 años, y en ese entonces, era obligatorio el cumplimiento militar. [...] Murió mi hermano, no estaba aquí el padre de mis hijos, eso hizo también una situación muy incómoda con la familia, porque parte de la familia mía fue siempre opuesta al gobierno sandinista, y otra parte pues fuimos sandinistas, hemos sido sandinistas. Pero entonces cuando murió mi hermano, entonces fue muy feo con la familia. Después de eso yo puedo decir que ha habido toda una serie de situaciones muy duras, que he tenido que enfrentar sola, verdad. Nunca tuve el apoyo de él porque siempre estaba fuera, siempre tuve que asumir yo. Estuve enferma, los niños se me enfermaron, siempre estuve yo, nunca vio la necesidad de que él estuviera conmigo, y eso se vino a reafirmar en el 90, cuando él estuvo ahí sin trabajar, yo siempre trabajaba.

He also left military life ... and I think this was the most difficult time for me, because it was then when I became convinced that I didn't want anyone at home, I didn't want a man at home, who was ... How can I put this? I have always been the head of the household because I never left my [parents'] home, and I was always in charge of my money, living my life, sorting out everything at home without him, everything I had to go through, my pregnancies, the births of my children, when my brother died as well, my brother ... It was a horrible situation, because he was recruited to do military service, he was barely 16 and at that time military service was compulsory. [...] My brother died, the father of my children wasn't here, this created a very awkward situation with my family, because half of my family was always opposed to the Sandinista government and the rest of us were Sandinistas. So when my brother died, there was a really horrible situation with my family. And since then I have had a whole series of difficult situations that I have had to confront on my own. I never had any support from him because he was always away. I was sick, the kids were sick, I was always there, he never thought it important to be with me and this was confirmed in 1990, when he was unemployed and I was always working.

Carla Martínez, 23 October 1999

Anxieties about femininity in Nicaragua were not however confined to the question of military service. As with the draft, these anxieties were often spatialised, demonstrating how constructions of masculinity and femininity have a geography and lead to ideas about where men and women should and should not be. Graciela Blanco explained to me the contradictory nature of these gendered and spatialised assumptions. Many women were mobilised in the revolution as health or literacy *brigadistas*, activities which in many ways were seen as appropriate work for women, largely because they were voluntary and unpaid and involved caring and education work. However, the revolutionary form of health and literacy in Nicaragua also generated tensions because of

the need to travel, undermining the association of the feminine with being close to home. It seems that the Literacy Crusade, for example, had the potential to undermine conventional femininities as it reproduced them. While discursive practices enacted and embodied by the state which depend on traditional gender ideologies have a normalising effect, transformations in gender identities take place alongside or in spite of these practices.

Me vine a alfabetizar a Jinotega. Y me puse en una escuadra de mujeres, que era la escuadra que iba más largo a alfabetizar. Yo me quería ir donde nadie quería que fuera mujeres a esos sitios, porque decían que eran lugares que no eran adecuados para mujeres y todo eso. Bueno por esa pelea, o sea, no, queremos ir en esa escuadra, queremos ir largo, no queremos estar aquí. Y nos fuimos y éramos 30.

I went to do literacy work in Jinotega. I joined a squadron of women, which was the squadron that was going the farthest away to teach. I wanted to go to the places where nobody wanted women to go, because they said that these places weren't suitable for women and all that. Well, we fought to be in that squadron because we wanted to go far away, we didn't want to stay there. And we went, there were 30 of us.

Graciela Blanco, 13 October 1999

### *The articulation of gender and national identities*

Gender identities are constituted through the simultaneous inclusion in and exclusion from certain spatialities and these are processes which depend on constructions of masculinity and femininity and the interplay between them. The Contra war in Nicaragua attested clearly to the malleability of constructions of masculinity and femininity. Despite the draft's privileging of masculinity, and the fact that men who did not join the army were constructed as homosexuals, not all men felt their masculinity was at stake if they did not respond to the call for arms. Marcia Picado told me that while one of her brothers had willingly joined the EPS and died in combat, the others always hid when recruiters came looking for them and managed to avoid the draft. Likewise, I was told that in El Hatillo most of the young men in that area avoided recruitment by hiding. Just as not all men believed in the necessity of or desirability for military conscription, neither was women's capacity for self-sacrifice infinite. In the end it was exhausted by so much death, as Ramírez (1999:52) explains:

Y fueron aquellos alfabetizadores los que después se alistaron de primeros en la guerra que siguió al surgir los contras, como defensores de una causa que aún podía recibir energía del pasado heroico. Pero, paradójicamente, una filosofía que obtenía su energía de la muerte, empezó a perderla por exceso de muerte, y la posibilidad de defensa de la revolución se agotó, al final, cuando no había ya más jóvenes disponibles para la guerra ni para el sacrificio.

And it was those literacy workers that were the first to join up in the war that followed when the Contras appeared, as defenders of a cause that could still receive energy from its heroic past. But, paradoxically, a philosophy that obtained its energy from death, began to lose it because of the excess of death, and the possibility to defend the revolution exhausted itself, in the end, when there were no more young people available for war or sacrifice.

By the end of the decade, commitment to the nation-building project as envisaged by the FSLN was declining rapidly and was doing so largely because of the conflicts and contradictions generated by its gender regime. The revolutionary dynamic had paradoxically generated alternative constructions of femininity which it then tried to limit. By mobilising women on a massive scale, the revolution enabled them to renegotiate their gender identities, a process which occurred at the same time as women as icons or metaphors became implicated in the nationalist discourses of the state. Women do not however construct national identities in isolation from gender identities, and the FSLN's attempt to postpone gender interests overlooked the ways in which gender identities articulate with national and class-based identities. As Rowlands (1997) states, these processes are dynamic and intersect with one another, so that changes in one dimension can bring about changes in another. There are also gaps between identity as it is represented and identity as it is lived (Jordan and Weedon 1995), so while the construction of women as mothers of the nation is both powerful and appealing, and constitutes what Jordan and Weedon (1995) would call a symbolic marker, it might not shape identity in absolute ways. Tensions emerged from the conflicts which existed between different revolutionary goals, tensions which were gendered in their outcomes. The FSLN was losing its monopoly on the conceptualisation of death and sacrifice within a revolution in which Nicaraguan women fought, died, suffered and lost loved ones and in the process had been denied not only equal citizenship rights and responsibilities but also a space in which their gender-specific interests could be addressed.

### **The gendered spatialities of state transitions**

The Sandinista revolution produced alternative femininities at the same time as it reproduced hegemonic ones. However, the transition from a revolutionary state to a neoliberal one was bound to be dramatic in terms of its impact on social relations. Discursive sites such as the revolution, the nation, the women's movement and masculinity and femininity were all subject to ideological reformulation both at the national level and as a result of different international forms of governance through IMF negotiations and the implementation in Nicaragua of neoliberal structural adjustment policies. Field (1999:226) describes the post-Sandinista state as a "weak, vastly underfunded rerun of an old-style, agro-export driven state, obsessed with the machinations of elite factions and fashions, in which the poor majority are almost entirely left to fend for themselves".

State transitions to neoliberalism involve a reworking of social relations including those of gender (Cravey 1998), a process which has clear implications for women who as caregivers are often more negatively affected by the cutbacks in health, education and other social services. The repositioning of the nation-state within the global economy as a result of the implementation of neoliberalism tends to translate into the nation-state experiencing a loss of its power, as the state renegotiates its involvement in many areas.

However, state transitions should not be seen as "a one-way process of change from one hegemonic system to another" (Smith and Pickles 1998:2 quoted in Laurie et al. 1999: 21). While neoliberalism influences gender and has gendered impacts, neoliberal policies are also partly formulated with respect to constructions of gender (Laurie et al. 1999). State power is also compromised not only by global financial flows, but also by a country's insertion into global and globalising development discourses which often lead to governments ratifying international agreements such as those that emerged from UN Conferences in Cairo and Beijing. Despite the loss of state power which is assumed to accompany neoliberalism, both present state-led gender regimes, as well as the legacies of previous gender regimes, continue to influence society and to have an impact on constructions of masculinity and femininity (Laurie et al. 1999). While the political and economic changes brought about by the state transition affect gender relations and

identities in a multiplicity of ways, the past, in this case the revolutionary past, continues to structure the present but not necessarily in ways that could be anticipated.

*The 1990 elections and the subsequent manipulation of motherhood*

Both the 1990 elections themselves and the defeat of the Sandinistas meant the further manipulation of discourses of gender, but now with very different political goals. Both Daniel Ortega and Violeta Chamorro used gendered imagery to capture votes in 1990. While Ortega dressed in army fatigues and presented the image of a spurred fighting cock (*gallo en navejado*)<sup>7</sup>, Chamorro used images of motherhood and maternal suffering to win sympathy. Kampwirth (1996a) describes Violeta Chamorro as basing her campaign on three images of traditional Nicaraguan womanhood, presenting herself as a loyal wife and widow, as a reconciling mother of a divided family and as the Virgin Mary. Using her own personal situation as the suffering widow of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, the mother of two Sandinista and two anti-Sandinista children and as someone who lacked political experience, she was elected president on a platform of national reconciliation. To evoke the Virgin Mary, she was always photographed in white and manipulated her image as the widow of a martyred saviour (Kampwirth 1996a). Like Eva Perón in Argentina (Radcliffe and Westwood 1996) she emphasised her subordination to her late husband and told the press during the campaign: “I am not a feminist nor do I wish to be one. I am a woman dedicated to my home, as Pedro taught me” (Cuadra 1990 in Kampwirth 1996a: 69). Her most important and probably most successful electoral pledge was the promise to end the draft and maternal suffering, and as Chavez Metoyer (2000) points out women made up a large proportion of UNO voters. People were consoled by this maternal image and for women with recruited sons, a vote for Chamorro meant the possibility to bring sons back from the front (Randall 1999).

The UNO government, as well as the PLC government which followed it in 1996, have attempted to alter the course of gender relations in Nicaragua by generating moral discourses on the centrality of the family in Nicaraguan society. Much of this ideological work is part of a discursive strategy to (re)confine women to conjugal and maternal roles by privileging essentialised female identities. Shortly after the UNO victory, the Ministry of Education replaced the textbooks used in schools with ones which depicted

harmonious traditional gender relations and nuclear families. In 1992, the UNO introduced reforms to the penal code (Article 204) to criminalise homosexuality (González 1996). This process intensified after the elections in 1996 when the government of Arnoldo Alemán created a Ministry of the Family with the explicit goal of promoting marriage. This resulted in the construction of single mothers as Other in opposition to “normal” married or partnered women. Azucena Mejía talked about what she saw as negative shifts in the gender regime in post-Sandinista Nicaragua.

A nivel político siempre hemos tenido dificultades por los cambios de los gobiernos. Cuando Doña Violeta ganó, el lema era que las mujeres vuelvan a la casa. Entonces todo nuestro trabajo de que la mujer salga de su casa, que haga otras cosas, que tiene las posibilidades, las capacidades, como de repente las mujeres iban a ser señoras de hogar, amas de casa. Seguimos adelante con nuestro trabajo, con nuestras planificaciones, con talleres, capacitaciones, en centros, todo eso. Después con el cambio del gobierno de la Violeta a Alemán, también ha sido bien difícil porque es mucho más fuerte toda una política de la mujer conservadora, la mujer señorita, la mujer que vale es la señorita de su casa, un poco los valores conservadores arcaicos, que a través del gobierno vuelven a tener raíces. ... Entonces es como por un lado va limitando el trabajo, pero no el valor de hacerlo.

On a political level we have always had difficulties with the changes of government. When Violeta won, the slogan was that woman should go back to their homes. And so all our work to encourage women to get out of the house, to do other things, that they have opportunities, abilities, it was as if suddenly women were all going to become housewives. But we carried on with our work, with workshops, classes, in centres and all that. Afterwards with the change from Violeta to Alemán, it has also been really difficult, because politics have become much more based on the conservative woman, the woman who stays at home until she is married, archaic conservative values that through the government are taking root again.... On the one hand, it limits our work but not the value of doing it.  
Azucena Mejía, 8 September 1999

Despite massive opposition from the women’s movement, which viewed the ministry as incompatible with Nicaragua’s social situation and in violation of a number of international agreements signed by the Nicaraguan government (Cupples 1999), the Ministry came into being in 1998. Max Padilla, the Minister of the Family in 1999, explained to me how he perceived the functions of the new ministry.

El Ministerio de la Familia se crea por el deseo del Presidente Alemán de que ... o la creencia, verdad, la fuerte creencia de él de que a través de la familia, fortaleciendo a la familia se reducirían la mayoría de los problemas que existen en Nicaragua. [...] En Nicaragua puede haber parejas estables de hecho, pero esto crea muchos problemas legales, entonces tratamos de promover los matrimonios entre estas parejas estables. Nos toca también la defensa de la vida desde la concepción ... en el seno materno ... nos toca todo lo que tiene que ver con la ...preparar a los jóvenes para una maternidad y una paternidad responsable.

The Ministry of the Family was created by the desire of President Alemán that ... or the belief, you know, the strong belief of his that through the family, by strengthening the family most of Nicaragua's problems would be reduced. [...] In Nicaragua there might be stable de facto couples, but this creates a lot of legal problems, so we are trying to promote marriage amongst stable couples. We are also in charge of the defence of life from the moment of conception ... in the womb. We are also in charge of ... preparing young people for responsible motherhood and fatherhood.

Max Padilla, Minister of the Family, 30 November 1999

Max Padilla clearly positioned women in terms of what he saw as their natural feminine attributes and state gender policy has been guided by this perception. Using his own personal experience, he emphasised women's natural childrearing abilities, reproducing the *marianista* notion of mothers as special, particularly because of their greater spiritual propensities. These "natural" attributes "naturally" limit women's equal participation in society. To give weight to his argument, he masculinised his own job, in particular its long hours which he saw as incompatible with good mothering but not with good fathering.

Yo siempre he dicho pues de que yo ... la mujer es igual al hombre, si el día de mañana una mujer va a ocupar un puesto como éste, debe tener el mismo trato que tengo yo, el mismo sueldo que tengo yo, pero también debe de tener la misma obligación que tengo yo. Muchas veces llego a mi casa muy noche por cosas de trabajo, verdad. Sí creo que la mujer debe tener igualdad de trabajo pero por otro lado también creo que la influencia de la mujer en los hijos es muy grande. [...] No soy ningún experto en la materia, pero yo le puedo asegurar de que juego mucho con mis hijos, platico con mis hijos, pero cuando están enfermos, no quieren saber nada. ... Claro, su madre es su madre, igualmente yo, yo tengo mi papá, pero no sé, mi madre es mi madre, es algo especial, creo que las madres de uno, las madres... no he ocupado la palabra Dios en ningún momento en esta entrevista, pero yo creo que la madre es ...ayuda a la creación de Dios en nuestra vida, eso es algo único. Algo que un hombre no puede hacer. O sea, ¿cuál hombre puede dar a luz a un niño? ...En el caso mío con mi madre, yo soy el único hijo varón, mi padre siempre anduve con él, pero la unión con mi mamá es algo

especial. Yo lo veo con mis hijos, tengo cinco hijos...les doy la atención a cada uno de ellos, platico en cantidad con ellos, pero a la hora que están enfermos, papá no cuenta para nada. Es una cosa natural. ... Yo los cambié a ellos, les di pacha ...[pero] en el momento que se les da una calentura a uno de ellos, el papá no sirve para nada.

I have always said that women are equal to men. If in the future, a woman should occupy a position such as this one, she should get the same treatment as me, the same salary that I have, but she should also have the same obligations. I often get home very late because of work. I do think women should have equality at work but on the other hand I also think that a woman's influence on her children is very important. [...] I'm no expert on the topic, but I can tell you that I play a lot with my children, I talk to my children, but when they're ill, they don't want to know me ... Of course, their mother is their mother, it's the same with me, I have my Dad, but I don't know, my mother is my mother, she is something special. I think that one's mother ... mothers ... I haven't used the word God once in this interview, but I think that the mother ...helps with the creation of God in our lives, it is something unique. Something that a man can't do. What man can give birth to a child? ... In my own case with my mother, I am the only male child, I was always with my father, but the union with my mother is something special. I see it with my own children, I have five children ... I give attention to all of them, I talk to them lots, but the moment that they are ill, Dad doesn't count. It is something natural. ... I changed their nappies, I gave them their bottles, ...[but] the moment that one of them has a temperature, Dad is of no use.

Max Padilla, 30 November 1999

Given the polarisation of Nicaraguan society, family values rhetoric has become part of the *revanchismo* or tactical revenge politics against the Sandinistas and the revolution. Consequently the "destruction" of the Nicaraguan family is blamed on the Sandinistas. The minister believed that family values became lost in the 1980s, because of the legalisation of unilateral divorce, the confiscation of property and the way in which Sandinista leaders set bad moral examples through cohabitation and serial polygyny.

Cuando los mismos políticos cambian de mujer cada tres semanas o cada mes, entonces eso pues ... o que uno se mete a una propiedad que no es de uno, los valores se van desvalorizando ... ¿cómo es que se llama? estabilidad, valores. No sé si usted sabe pero en Nicaragua el sandinismo promovió los divorcios unilaterales, ¿usted sabe lo que es eso? [...] Se perdieron muchos principios, muchos valores. Aquí nadie se casaba, los mismos líderes de la revolución no se casaban. ¿Cómo se iban a casar? Veían al matrimonio como una cosa, como un animal raro.



When even the politicians start seeing a different woman every three weeks or every month, well that ... or when they move into someone else's property, values become devalued ... What do we call it? Stability, values. I don't know if you know this, but in Nicaragua the Sandinistas introduced unilateral divorce. Do you know what that is? [...] Many principles, many values were lost. Here nobody got married, even the leaders of the revolution didn't get married. Of course they didn't get married. They thought marriage was a strange creature.  
Max Padilla, 30 November 1999

### *Challenges to the post-revolutionary state*

The challenge to these state policies which has come from the women's movement has been facilitated by the state transition. My evidence shows that to some extent the post-revolutionary state is easier to oppose, now that women are no longer forced to put their gender-specific demands on hold in the interests of fighting the Contra war and now that civil society is no longer controlled by the FSLN. Clara Blandón told me that articulating women's gender interests is easier now than in the 1980s.

Yo creo que sí es más fácil en algunas medidas, porque no tenés que regirte por el partido, porque en ese tiempo, es verdad que las mujeres fuimos a luchar, sí éramos revolucionarias, pero no se miraba como una lucha de género, sino te miraban con cara rara, y hasta contra te podrían calificar, de contra, o de lesbiana. Ahora te lo califican, pero es como más abierto, es más fácil. ... Es más amplia en ese sentido. O sea, las mujeres ya no estamos regidas por un partido.

I think it is easier to some extent, because you don't have to be led by the party, because at that time, it is true that women went to fight, that we were revolutionaries, but it wasn't seen as a gender struggle, you would be considered strange and they would even accuse you of being a Contra or a lesbian. They still call you these things now but it's more open, easier .. It's broader in that respect. Or rather we are no longer controlled by a party.  
Clara Blandón, 26 October 1999

The resistance and the lobbying power of the women's movement mean that, despite the centrality of conservative family ideologies, both the Chamorro and the Alemán governments have presided over legal changes which would have been unthinkable during the 1980s. These legislative changes constitute both women and children as legal subjects and provide them with legal tools to overcome forms of physical and sexual abuse. Two important recent examples of this are the passing of Law 230 on domestic violence by the National Assembly in 1996 and the approval of the Child and Juvenile

Code (*Código de la Niñez y la Adolescencia*) in 1997. Just before the general elections of 1996, the lobbying of the Network of Women Against Violence (*Red de Mujeres Contra la Violencia*) resulted in the passage of a new law on domestic violence. Consequently, as I indicated in Chapter 3, domestic violence and child abuse in Nicaragua are increasingly viewed as a social issue, a public health issue and a question of human rights. In 1997, several years after Nicaragua signed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the National Assembly passed its own Child and Juvenile Code. The code places responsibility with both families and the state to protect children from exploitation and abuse and it is the first time in Nicaragua that minors have acquired a status as legal subjects. Here too, civil society, in particular women's organisations and Nicaraguan NGOs like the Communal Movement, have been active in explaining the code and promoting its use. The discursive notion that women and children should know their place and therefore occupy particular subject positions is clashing with a discourse which emerges from legislative changes which grant women and children rights as individuals and with the interpretation of these changes by civil society (Cupples 2001).

#### *Repositionings after the state transition*

The rollback of the state is sometimes considered to have a positive effect on the processes of democratisation because of the way in which it opens up new spaces for civil society (Molyneux 1998). In Nicaragua, revolutionary movements have largely been replaced by NGOs and other civil society organisations. Ewig (1999) believes that the women's movement in Nicaragua was able to adopt a more oppositional stance after 1990, when the division between state and civil society became more clearly delineated. Both international NGOs and internationally funded local NGOs work in areas from which the state has withdrawn and in many ways serve as a challenge to the state. The growth of civil society in Nicaragua means that conservative state hegemony is particularly fragile (Thayer 1997), especially as it negotiates its way between the IMF and the country's revolutionary past. However, the development of civil society is also supported by the IMF and the World Bank because of its neoconservative role in replacing the state and compensating for its absence (Ewig 1999).

Many Sandinista activist women have become involved in NGOs or civil society movements. A member of the National Feminist Committee told me that after 1990 many Nicaraguan women “se ONGizaron” (literally NGOised themselves) and as a result have distanced themselves from political parties (Guadalupe Salinas Valle, personal communication). In many ways the women’s movement parallels Field’s (1999) understanding of the indigenous movement in Nicaragua, whereby women are reimagining the nation, but by moving away from traditional structures of power such as political parties, are doing so without aspiring to state power. Likewise, disaffected Sandinista militants, rather than creating alternative political parties in the way the MRS was created, are channelling energies into creating broad civil society movements which have the power to challenge state power and epistemologies and contest meaning. For a minority of women, particularly middle class women, their revolutionary experience has led to a paid position within a development NGO. Many working class women are left to organise in their *barrios* to rectify the effects of structural adjustment and bring about community improvements.

In terms of renegotiating femininity, these local forms of politics might have limited potential. Neighbourhood politics tend to be coded as feminine and seen as an appropriate place for women (Laurie et al. 1999, F. Smith 1999). One of my participants, while extremely active within her local community, had to leave the *barrio* without her partner finding out because he did not like her to go to other parts of town. While not confined to the home, she was certainly confined to her neighbourhood. Women can be organised in neighbourhood committees, work long hours without pay, while the impact of their efforts is often minimal because the context of structural adjustment is so negative. As a result, changes in subjectivity or gender relations might not necessarily take place, although Juanita Granada and María Dolores Gallegos of the Movement for Single and Unemployed Mothers argued that through community leadership women gain a level of respect within society which they do not enjoy as single mothers.

It has become clear however that community progress will only come through political organisation and there is no doubt that the experience of political organisation gained during the 1980s has proved invaluable.

El requisito de la mayoría de los organismos, de los ONGs es que el barrio esté organizado. Que tenga una directiva, que esté bien organizado, que sepa cuáles son sus necesidades, que es lo que hay que hacer. Es lógico que hay que estar bien organizado y saber todo lo que se necesita y cuál es su prioridad.

The requirement from most organisations, from NGOs, is that the *barrio* is organised. That is has a committee, that it is well organised, that it knows what its needs are, and what needs to be done. It's logical that you have to be well organised and know what you need and what your priorities are.

Lydia Sánchez, 23 October 1999

The articulation of autonomy displayed by the women's movement with respect to the FSLN has also been encouraged by the sense of betrayal many Sandinista women feel towards the FSLN leadership. Consequently, women have not only repositioned themselves with respect to the state but also with respect to the FSLN. While confirming their identities as Sandinistas, many of my participants are now highly critical of Daniel Ortega and the FSLN leadership. They are particularly critical of the way in which they have abused state and party power, put business and entrepreneurial interests ahead of revolutionary ones, have failed to respond to the accusations of sexual assault made against Daniel Ortega by his stepdaughter Zoilamérica Narváez and have signed a pact with the Liberals which closes democratic spaces in Nicaragua. This critical position is encapsulated in the statement made to me by various participants: "Soy Sandinista pero no soy Danielista" I am a Sandinista but not a Danielista. I asked a number of my participants if they considered themselves to be Sandinistas and the confirmation was often qualified by the critical position they had adopted with respect to the FSLN leadership.

Sí, [soy Sandinista], a pesar de que hacen cagadas, creo que es la única opción que tenemos. Yo no podría pensar en otro partido. ... Sabemos que el proyecto del Frente Sandinista es una ideología, independientemente de quien está en el poder, pues el Frente es el único pues. Pero claro, que se debería de revisar la estructura, para poner a otra persona. Vamos a ver qué pasa ahora con las otras elecciones. Veo muy pocas las esperanzas. ... Aunque Daniel siempre arrasta muchísima gente, cuando fue el acto del 19 de julio, la plaza estaba llena. Parecíamos hormigas. No sé realmente. Es bien complicada la cosa. ... El proyecto del Frente como proyecto, creo que es válido pues, es por las grandes mayorías y no por las minorías.

Yes, [I am a Sandinista], in spite of the fact that they make serious mistakes, I think it is the only option that we have. I couldn't contemplate any other party ... We know that the project of the Sandinista Front is an ideology, independently of who is in power, because the Frente is unique. But of course, they should revise the party structure, and put someone else [in charge]. We'll see what happens in the elections, I don't have too much hope. ... Although Daniel always manages to attract lots of people, during the 19 July rally, the square was full. We looked like ants. I really don't know. It's very complicated. ... The Frente's project as a project, I think it's valid, it's aimed at the vast majority and not at the minority.  
Clara Blandón, 22 September 1999

Verona Mora, who was still a Sandinista militant, stated that she would never give up her party. When I asked her if she was in favour of the pact signed between Liberals and Sandinistas, she told me.

Uf, eso sí que no. Yo digo que no, porque luchamos por algo bonito, algo sano, no el pacto. Estoy en contra del pacto. Yo soy militante, volvería a votar por el Frente Sandinista, será por el Frente Sandinista y no por ... Soy Sandinista pero no soy Danielista.

No way. I say that I'm not, because we fought for something nice, something wholesome, not the pact. I am opposed to the pact. I am a militant, I would vote for the Sandinista Front again, but it would be for the Sandinista Front and not ... I'm a Sandinista but I'm not a Danielista.  
Verona Mora, 17 September 1999

Likewise, both Ana González and Graciela Blanco reinforced their Sandinista identities while being critical of the Frente leadership.

Muchas veces digo por los altos mandos estamos abajos. Pero yo me considero de que los sandinistas seguimos siendo sandinistas, donde sea. Y, pero ¿qué puede llegar al poder? No sé qué cambio tendría que hacer el Frente Sandinista para que vuelva a ganar la confianza de la gente. ... Para mí, toda la vida, a mi partido no lo cambiaría por nada del mundo. Porque yo fui una de las personas electas a irme a preparar fuera del país, pero por cuestiones políticas de mi padre nunca pude tener esa posibilidad.

Sometimes I think we are down because of the party leaders. But I think that we Sandinistas will always be Sandinistas, wherever. But whether they can return to power ... I don't know what changes the Sandinista Front would have to make to regain people's confidence. ... For me all my life I wouldn't change my party for anything in the world. I was one of the people chosen to go and study overseas, but for my father's political reasons, I wasn't able to go.  
Ana González, 25 August 1999

Mirá, yo creo que soy sandinista de principio, porque para mí el sandinismo siempre fue un referente muy claro a nivel político. Estoy hablando del sandinismo en que yo creo, que es un sandinismo que está en contra de cualquier injusticia, que siempre será oposición en el país, aquí en este país. No creo que hable del Frente actual, porque para mí ha perdido muchas cosas. ...[Ha perdido] varias cosas que para mí son básicas, fundamentales. Por ejemplo, a quien defendemos, por qué luchamos. ... Porque en los tiempos en los que yo estuve militando dentro del partido, se tenía bien claro contra quién se luchaba, y por qué. Pero ahora yo siento que hay una mezcla de intereses. Y la mayoría son intereses económicos. Y los intereses ideológicos, los intereses políticos, los intereses de clase, los intereses de un mundo diferente.

Look, I think I'm a Sandinista in principle, because for me Sandinismo was always a very clear reference point on a political level. I'm talking about the Sandinismo which I believe in, which is a Sandinismo which is opposed to any injustice, which will always be a force of opposition in this country. I'm not talking about the present-day Frente, because for me it has lost many things. ...[It has lost] several things that for me are basic, fundamental. For example, who we are defending, what we are fighting for. Because in the time that I was active in the party, it was very clear who we were fighting against, and why. But now I feel there is a mixture of interests. And most of these are economic interests. And ideological interests, political interests, class interests [are] the interests of a different world.

Graciela Blanco, 26 November 1999

It seems then that frustration with Daniel Ortega and the FSLN does not displace revolutionary consciousness, although it does clearly create a degree of confusion. When women say that 'the Frente is unique' or 'I wouldn't change my party for anything in the world', they continue to demonstrate a considerable degree of stoicism about their party. However, the FSLN is losing its discursive control of the revolution which is a broader and more dynamic movement than that represented within the limited structures of a political party.

Cameron (1998), following Foucault's critique of the Marxist notion that the freedom of the subject is awaiting the removal of some structure of oppression, argues that because the subject is decentred and lacking an essence, subjectivities can be transformed without the perfection of socialism or national liberation. Revolutionary subjectivities are therefore independent of the revolution as a historical project. I would argue that Nicaragua's revolutionary past has continued to be a source of inspiration to women long after the FSLN has ceased to be.

There are parallels here with F. Smith's (1999) work on women's neighbourhood activism in the former GDR after reunification. Her work demonstrates how women created politically active subjectivities in local areas, free from the limitations of party politics and in a distinct manner from that which had been possible within the hierarchical and centralised politics of the East German state. Smith sees this activism as constituting a rejection of passivity in the face of the political and economic restructuring which reunification brought. In Nicaragua, women were repositioned with respect to the FSLN as a result of its conversion from a revolutionary government to a party in opposition. The will and the ability to do things differently were apparent in the immediate aftermath of the elections.

However, the electoral defeat, while truly devastating for female Sandinista activists, did not usually lead to passivity. It seems that post-Sandinista passivity and activity are gendered in ways which undermine the association of the feminine with passivity and the masculine with activity. The electoral defeat generated a discourse of the need to defend the gains of the revolution. However, for mobilised soldiers, the defence of the revolution had hitherto been embodied in the draft which was coded masculine. The loss of direction that demobilisation entailed led to a high degree of male passivity as I argued in the previous chapter. For Sandinista women the electoral defeat did not lead to passivity because it did not compromise their gender identity in any way. Organised women were more able to continue in their political struggles but without the verticalism of the FSLN constraining them. This can be demonstrated by the experience of women within the Communal Movement who shortly before the electoral defeat were working to develop SIC (Communal Children's Services) in the forms of crèches or CDIs in Matagalpa. The Communal Movement was a Sandinista organisation in the 1980s which evolved out of the CDS (Sandinista Defence Committees) and became an autonomous organisation in the 1990s. The SIC experience demonstrates the potential of local gendered spaces in renegotiating new political subjectivities.

*The renegotiation of a feminine space*

At the end of the 1980s, with a small amount of foreign funding, two of my participants were involved in a Communal Movement initiative to create a number of CDIs in Matagalpa to provide childcare and pre-school education for children whom they considered to be at risk. These were children who were left alone while their parents went to work, who were being cared for by other children or who were left in the street. Despite the seemingly innocuous and benevolent nature of the project, the women volunteers found themselves in conflict, not only with the state, but also with the FSLN.

Aparte de tener todo el caos de la pérdida de elecciones en ese entonces, el gobierno creía que esos centros eran propiedad del estado y al estar peleando con el gobierno, también nos tocó en algún momento pelear con las estructuras del Frente Sandinista en ... Bueno, en el caso mío particular, yo sufrí horrible con la gente del Frente, porque la gente del Frente quería ir a mandar y poner una bandera rojinegra en el centro. Yo abogaba que no debería de ser así porque los niños no tenían colores políticos y que debíamos de atender a todos los niños independientemente, fueran Sandinistas sus padres o no.

Apart from having to deal with all the chaos of the electoral defeat at that time, the government thought that these centres were state property and while we were fighting with the government, we also had to fight with the structures of the Sandinista Front. ... In my case, I suffered horribly with the people from the Frente, because they wanted to be in control and put a red and black flag in the centre. I insisted that it shouldn't be like that, because children didn't have political colours and we should attend to all children independently, regardless of whether their parents were Sandinistas or not.

Carla Martínez, 4 December 1999

Carla found these conflicts with the Frente hard to deal with, particularly as it involved a reassessment of her own position and identity within and with respect to the party. Despite these conflicts and the shock of the electoral defeat, she described the will to work and the lack of passivity of the volunteers in the project.

Entonces verdaderamente fue algo bastante fuerte porque ...¿cómo decir? Yo catalogaba de sandinista, pero al mismo tiempo peleándome con los sandinistas. Peleándome porque nosotras nos oponíamos que ellos se metieran en cuestiones donde no tenían que meterse. Además porque en el 92, 93, estos centros ya estaban prácticamente construidos, y algunas personas de nuestras comunidades a que no les había costado el trabajo que nos había costado a nosotras se querían meter al centro. Entonces eso fue un conflicto bien problemático, [pero] nosotras



no dejamos de trabajar, porque antes de ser seguidoras de un partido, éramos trabajadoras de la comunidad, éramos personas que se interesaban por los problemas de la comunidad. Al caerse el partido, o no caerse sino más bien al ver toda esta situación del 90 con la pérdida de las elecciones, todo el mundo como que se quedó inagitado, se quedó ahí parado, paralizado sin hacer nada. Nosotras no. Algún grupo, especialmente éstas que trabajábamos en esos centros, nosotras seguimos trabajando.

This was really hard .... How can I explain it? I was classed as a Sandinista but at the same time I was fighting with the Sandinistas. Fighting because we were opposed to them intervening in places where they shouldn't. And also because by 92, 93, the centres were almost built and some people, who hadn't put in all the effort that we had put in, wanted to come into the centre. So this was a very problematic conflict, [but] we didn't stop working, because our loyalties to the community came before our loyalties to our party, we were people who cared about the problems in the community. When the party fell, or didn't fall but with all the situation in 1990 with the electoral defeat, everyone was kind of passive, they became inactive, paralysed without doing anything. But we didn't. Some people, and especially those of us working in those centres, we continued working.

Carla Martínez, 4 December 1999

While women's unpaid efforts and concern to create childcare spaces could be considered to be an extension of mothering and therefore complicit with dominant notions about women's roles, the transition of state power allowed for the formation of political subjectivities and autonomous political action which had not been possible under the verticalism of the FSLN. So while Carla's gender identity was not undermined by the electoral defeat, it was still renegotiated as her earlier quote about the difficulties of establishing a relationship with the father of her children after the war indicates. In effect, the women involved found themselves challenging not only the state, which was partially responsible for the conditions in which Nicaraguan children were living, but also the FSLN, their own party. This oppositional position has enabled the SIC today to do far more than provide childcare, they have made use of a feminine space to effect changes in gender relations.

Their location in a gendered site does not prevent them from addressing gender inequality in Nicaragua. Apart from providing quality childcare so that mothers, especially single mothers, are able to go out to work and providing a pre-school education for children, they are also attempting to change gender ideologies by the work they do with both

parents and children. The CDI is seen as a space in which boys can be socialised differently and sometimes the educators come into conflicts with parents for encouraging boys to play house and engage in domestic tasks like cooking or sweeping with a toy broom. They also hold gender awareness-raising workshops and theatre for parents which is seen as just as important as the physical care of children.

Cuando nosotras estamos en talleres, hacemos obras teatrales y lo hacemos representando la represión que existe del hombre hacia la mujer ... Y de esa manera hemos hecho llegar el mensaje de no al machismo, no a que las mujeres seamos esclavitas, que nosotras podemos con ellos y sin ellos. Y lo hacemos también con aquellas madres que son maltratadas.

When we are in workshops, we do plays, and we represent the repression which exists from men towards women. ... In this way we have sent a message which says no to *machismo*, no to women being little slaves, that we can manage with them and without them. We also work with women who have been abused.

Ana González, 21 September 1999

### *Revolutionary continuities*

Although the state transition and the political repositionings it brought meant that women renegotiated their political subjectivities, they have been able to maintain their identities as Sandinistas or revolutionaries. Consequently, many women, while criticising the FSLN, see their work as part of a revolutionary continuum. Carla believed she was working for the same things in 1999 as she was during the 1980s.

Durante los 80 yo trabajé como líder comunal del Movimiento Comunal en mi barrio, como brigadista de salud, como ... bueno, promotora de actividades con niños, como educadora también, como educadora social, porque estábamos viendo lo del asunto de las personas que no sabían leer, tratando de ver de qué manera los integrábamos a la escuela, ya fueran personas mayores o también niños. Entonces siempre ... yo siempre he trabajado sobre esa línea.

In the 1980s I worked as a Communal Movement leader in my *barrio*, as a health *brigadista*, as ... a promotor of children's activities, as an educator too, a social educator, because we were working with people who didn't know how to read, to see how we could get them into school, both adults and children. And so I have always worked in this area.

Carla Martínez, 4 December 1999

While Graciela had exchanged her military position for a job in an NGO, she also believed she was fighting for the same things in which she believed in the 1980s.

Yo creo que he seguido en el camino en diferentes momentos, he pasado por diferentes etapas, pero yo creo que en el trabajo que hago, sigo defendiendo una ... sigo luchando contra las injusticias. Las armas ya no son las balas, ya no es la lucha armada, pero es una lucha que para mí es igual de debido.

I believe I have followed the same path at different times, I have passed through different stages, but I believe that in the work that I do, I am still defending ... I am still fighting against injustices. Our weapons are no longer bullets, it is no longer an armed struggle, but it is a struggle which for me is just as important.  
Graciela Blanco, 26 November 1999

Stearns (1998) has argued that the politically positioned subject engages in an assessment of the social and political significance of state institutions and practices. This positioning can challenge the orthodoxy that the state is the subject of knowledge. The revolution, by positioning individuals as political subjects, generated the challenge posed by women to the revolutionary state's gendered discursive practices. Given that the revolution expanded as well as confined women's roles, women were unlikely to accept the post-revolutionary government's attempts to promote women's nurturing roles and many women have become engaged in struggles to resist discursive strategies which normalise sexual inequality and reproduce certain moral geographies. To some extent, the discursive practices of the present government have revealed the arbitrariness of the gender contract in Nicaragua, while the changing political environment in Nicaragua has allowed different constructions of femininity to emerge. As new femininities become familiar, challenging the dominance of conventional femininities, dominant forces engage in struggles to maintain or reproduce these conventional gender identities. These struggles are spatialised in the sense that they attempt to confine women to or exclude them from particular spaces, both physical and metaphorical. But as Sharp (1996:105) has written, while this often means that masculinity is privileged, power is not entirely concentrated in the hands of dominant political forces and these are also "constrained by their location in the discursive networks underwriting society". By engaging in oppositional politics with the state, women's revolutionary identities are reinforced, even

as they engage in open criticism of the FSLN. The FSLN and Nicaragua's revolutionary past (and present) are increasingly becoming separate entities.

### **Reworking the past**

The gender ideologies promoted by the post-revolutionary governments demonstrate clearly the extent to which there is a discursive struggle in Nicaragua over the meanings of masculinity and femininity. The struggle over gender ideologies is very much inserted within the attempt by anti-revolutionary forces in Nicaragua to reimagine the Nicaraguan nation by erasing the force of the revolutionary past. During both the revolutionary period and the present neoliberal period, women's lives have been affected by the political manipulation of motherhood with (differing) nationalist goals.

I have shown, however, that even when women are disaffected with and highly critical of the FSLN as a political party, their identities as revolutionaries continue to be reinforced through their opposition to the state. The sense of betrayal many women feel as a result of the political and ethical behaviour of the FSLN means that sacrifice has to be renegotiated and it appears that the legacies of the revolution are enabling women to rework their past in ways that are meaningful for the present.

Chavez Metoyer's (2000) analysis of the state in post-Sandinista Nicaragua separates the revolutionary period from the 1990s. This approach does not allow an adequate exploration of the inter-linkages between the past and the present, except to say rather simplistically that women's organising in the 1980s is proving valuable in the 1990s. Neither does it enable us to understand the way in which this relationship is enabling women to take up particular subject positions which resist not only the gender politics of governing forces but also those of the(ir) party in opposition, or why indeed at times women do not resist but instead recycle notions of mothers as symbolic markers. At times there is an elision between political and maternal identities which involves mobilising the more progressive aspects of their revolutionary past together with a reworking of more essentialised identities of motherhood. Despite the contradictory nature of this elision, it can nonetheless permit the renegotiation of gender identity or at the very least prevent the sense of betrayal from becoming overwhelming.

### *Revolutionary legacies*

The political vocabulary of the revolution continues to be part of everyday conversation in Nicaragua, and most Nicaraguans talk at ease about *capacitaciones* (training), *talleres* (workshops), *directivas* (committees) and *concientización* (awareness-raising). The neglect of gender interests in the 1980s did not prevent women from using their revolutionary political experience to press for greater gender equality in the 1990s. When I asked Azucena, for example, if she felt that her work in a theatre group was revolutionary, she replied:

Totalmente, y permanentemente y cuantas veces sea posible. Porque para empezar, una crítica que a nosotras nos hacen es que somos muy duras con los hombres, que exageramos mucho los papeles de hombre, que somos muy groseras, entonces yo digo pues no. Esa es la realidad que vivimos y no la podemos ocultar, no podemos negarla ... Y a nivel de los temas también siento que siempre estamos ... aquí le decimos chinchando, no, hincando, insistiendo en hablar de los temas, aborto, violación, mortalidad materna, violencia misma a nivel general, educación no sexista, todos estos temas siento que siempre estamos insistiendo en hablar de ellos, porque siento que es necesario abordarlos, y que sí somos revolucionarias en ese sentido de criticar además, somos un teatro crítico, que pone como el dedo en la llaga, no, de los temas, de las personas concretas, de las actitudes políticas, de las actitudes gubernamentales, estatales, y todo eso.

Completely, permanently and as often as possible. To start, a criticism which people often make of us is that we are very hard on men, that we exaggerate men's roles, that we are very rude, but I say that we are not. This is the reality which we are living and we can't hide it, we can't deny it ... And on the level of our themes, I feel that we are constantly prodding, poking, insisting that we talk about abortion, rape, maternal mortality, violence on a general level, non-sexist education. We are always insisting on talking about all these topics, because I think it is necessary to confront them, and we are revolutionary in this sense of being critical, we are a critical theatre, that puts its finger in the wound, of issues, of actual people, of political attitudes, of government and state attitudes and all that.

Azucena Mejía, 27 October 1999

The legacy of the revolution was often seen too in personal terms, that it provided the opportunity to attend school or university or provided an invaluable personal learning experience.

Yo creo que una de las cosas que aprendí fue defenderme, defenderme que yo era

mujer, y que tenía los mismos derechos, igual como los tenían todos, no, en primer lugar, y que podía participar de igual medida como participaba todo el mundo, y que se me lo tenía que reconocer en la misma medida como se lo reconocía a todas las personas.

I think that one of the things I learnt was to defend myself, to defend my rights as a woman, that I had the same rights as everyone else and I could participate the same as everyone else, and I deserved the same acknowledgment for that as everyone else.

Graciela Blanco, 26 November 1999

Lucía Espinoza believed that her revolutionary past was providing her daughters with important knowledge and survival skills. Even if you are too young to have experienced the revolution directly, having a revolutionary mother can be an asset.

He trabajado muchos años en el área de salud, haciendo jornadas de limpieza, haciendo talleres de salud reproductiva, de diarrea. Mis hijas también han seguido mi camino, porque las cuatro son brigadistas de salud. Porque ellas siempre venían conmigo a los talleres. Y tienen muchos conocimientos, son muy abiertas, no tienen miedo. Saben de muchas cosas, de las enfermedades contagiosas. Saben si van a fiestas que tienen que tener mucho cuidado.

I have spent many years working in health, doing clean-up days, holding workshops on reproductive health, on diarrhoea. My daughters have also followed my path, because all four of them are health *brigadistas*. Because they always used to come with me to the workshops. They have a lot of knowledge, they are very open-minded and they are not afraid. They know about a lot of things, about contagious diseases. They know they have to be really careful when they go to parties.

Lucía Espinoza, 11 August 1999

Amidst the sense of betrayal felt by many women and their criticism of a revolutionary party that is no longer so revolutionary, it is nonetheless the case that Nicaragua's revolutionary past is used to provide a powerful critique of the present and is therefore a constant challenge to state hegemony and the neoliberal orthodoxy. This challenge emerges through the way women remember the past.

Era difícil, pero no sé, era difícil pero era un sistema diferente. Teníamos un gobierno diferente al que tenemos hoy. La educación era gratuita, y por ejemplo, no era necesario que mis niñas llevaran uniforme. Les mandaba con un short y una camisa. ... Era diferente el sistema, y el asunto alimenticio era más favorable

para la gente ... a pesar de las escaseces de la guerra. ... [porque] todo estaba controlado con una tarjeta que se daba a cada familia.

It was difficult, but I don't know, it was difficult but it was a different system. We had a different government from the one we have today. Education was free for example, and my girls didn't have to wear uniform. I used to send them to school in shorts and a t-shirt. ... The system was different, and the question of food was more favourable for people ... in spite of the shortages caused by the war ... [because] everything was controlled by a card they gave to every family.

Lucía Espinoza, 11 August 1999

En otros casos, hay una escuela bonita, está la maestra pero no hay niños. ¿Por qué? Porque la situación económica no permite que los chavalos de los campesinos asistan a una escuela así, porque no tienen zapatos, no tienen ropa, falta lo principal para asistir a la escuela, verdad, porque no tienen una buena alimentación, hay que caminar mucho para llegar a la escuela, y llegar mal alimentado, no ... es muy difícil... En los 80 los centros de salud se sabía que tenían la medicina, no, lo importante en el centro de salud. A veces hay un centro de salud en el campo, pero no hay medicina. Y en el campo ni siquiera hay farmacias para decir si tengo un poco de posibilidad, puedo comprar la medicina. Entonces la situación es bien difícil por no creer en el sandinismo como alternativa, no hay otra opción, no hay otra hasta el momento.

In other cases, there is a nice school, a teacher but no children. This is because the economic situation does not allow children to go to school, because they have no shoes, they have no clothes, they don't have the basic things you need to be able to go to school, because they don't eat properly, they have to walk a long way to get to school, and to do that without having a proper meal, it's very difficult. ... In the 80s you knew that the health centres would have medicine, the most important things could be found at the health centre. Sometimes there is a health centre in the countryside but there is no medicine. And in rural areas, there aren't even any pharmacies where people could try and scrape enough together to buy the medicine. So the situation is too bad not to believe in Sandinismo as an alternative, there is no other option, not for the time being.

Claudia Moreno, 24 August 1999

Claro, [en los 80] los servicios sociales estaban al alcance de la mano, de los más pobres, de nosotros. Teníamos las escuelas, teníamos las universidades, teníamos los centros de salud, los hospitales, los hospitales que estaban bien abastecidos, que se te operaba inmediatamente, no tenías que estar esperando. La atención en los hospitales era buena, buenísima, los niños vivían vacunados, las casas fumigadas, el ambiente era más puro, era más sano. Mirá la juventud, era sana, una juventud sana, ves entonces claro que era super mejor. Ahora no, ahora se olvidaron, ahora han atacado las pestes, han atacado las enfermedades más dundas, los pobres nos estamos muriendo de hambre.

Of course, [in the 80s] social services were within reach of the poorest sectors, of us. We had schools, we had universities, we had health centres, hospitals, hospitals that were well stocked, that operated on you immediately, you didn't have to wait. The attention in the hospitals was good, fantastic, children were all vaccinated, houses were fumigated, the atmosphere was purer, healthier. Look at the youth, they were healthy, a healthy youth, it was much much better. But not any more, we have been forgotten, we have been attacked by diseases, by the most stupid illnesses, the poor are dying of hunger.

Lydia Sánchez, 21 August 1999

Mire, aquí si yo voy al hospital, a mí sólo me dan recetas, y antes no. Antes teníamos trabajo, teníamos comida, teníamos todo mejor dicho. Hoy no, hoy estamos más ...mejor dicho, más en sacrificio en este país, y también este ... si uno va grave al hospital, tiene que pagar, tiene que poner inyecciones, tiene que poner todo uno, y antes no se miraba eso, Antes, mire usted, yo iba al hospital, yo iba a traer mi propio tratamiento, no traía recetas, hoy no, hoy sólo recetas. Hoy se mueren los enfermos, mejor dicho, hoy se mueren, y antes no. Cuando estaba el gobierno del Frente Sandinista, abundaba todo . Había trabajo, había reales, había comida, había todo, mejor dicho. Cuando yo me quedé viuda, me metí de cocinera y yo a mis hijos los mantenía bien, comida y bien vestidos.

Look, here if I go to the hospital, they only give me prescriptions, but they didn't before. Before we had work, we had food, we had everything really. Not today, today we are ... having to make more sacrifices in this country and also ... if you go to hospital seriously ill, you have to pay, you have to pay for your injections, for everything and you never used to see that before. Before I would go to the hospital and I would come back with the medicine I needed, I didn't come back with prescriptions but today all you get are prescriptions. Nowadays, sick people die, today they die but before they didn't. When the government of the Sandinista Front was in power, there was plenty of everything. There was work, there was money, there was food, there was everything. When I became a widow, I became a cook, and I could maintain my children well, they were well fed and well dressed.

Elsa Jirón, 8 November 1999

### *Negotiating sacrifice*

Despite the fact that the 1990 elections can be seen as the exhaustion of the FSLN's conceptualisation of death through maternal sacrifice, almost ten years after this time, these revolutionary maternal identities persist but are being reworked in interesting ways.

In May 2001, I set up a meeting with the women I had interviewed in 1999 who belonged to the Movement of Single and Unemployed Mothers. When I turned up at the allotted time and meeting place, I was rather surprised to find that the leaders of the Movement



rather than inviting my participants from 1999 as I had requested, had filled an auditorium with single and unemployed mothers for my benefit and who were all keen to be interviewed. Although I was concerned about the expectations I might be generating, I talked to a considerable number of those women on that day.

In many ways their situation was even less enviable than that of many of my participants. Most were considerably older, many were illiterate and until their recent affiliation (after the end of 1998) to the Movement of Single and Unemployed Mothers, many had not participated in the NGOs or civil society movements that had proliferated since the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas. Consequently, many appeared to cling more tightly onto the maternal gender identities that were created for women during the revolution. Many of them prioritised their identities as Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs, beginning their explanations to me: “I am a mother of a hero and martyr ...”. However, they then went on to talk about their needs for literacy, employment and decent housing. One woman in her late 60s, who lived with her son and his family, told me she needed her own home and income because she was tired of living with her grandchildren whose naughty behaviour was intolerable to someone of her age. This suggests to me that the maternal identities of the revolution persist but are no longer so confining and women are also prepared to demand independence and not to have their lives revolve around children and grandchildren.

The setbacks to the ideals of the revolution are all too evident. In a context of poverty where daily survival is a struggle, it is tempting to cling onto the past and to feel part of some revolutionary national project. It is partly this need that has enabled a cult to develop around the figure of Daniel Ortega (Figure 4.4) despite behaviour which could be perceived as inappropriate for an anti-imperialist revolutionary. It explains why, as Clara Blandón said, we were all there “like ants” in the square on the 19 July and why so many women identify themselves as Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs because it is difficult in the context of daily life to find identities which provide such a sense of belonging.

For women who lost sons and daughters in the war, participating in a committee of Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs provided a support network, a sense of belonging and a



Figure 4.4  
FSLN leader Daniel Ortega speaking at the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations, Matagalpa, 19 July 1999  
Source: Julie Cupples

collective space in which to channel grief. Many women were therefore complicit with the Sandinista state-led gender regime and felt they benefited from it. My experience with the Movement women demonstrates how hard it is to let go of these maternal identities, because to do so could mean feeling overwhelmed by the sense of betrayal. As Katrak (1992) has indicated with respect to her work on India, when the rationale of using tradition to fight the enemy has passed, women are negatively affected by their prior insertion in reified discourses of tradition.

Ana González, who lost two brothers in the war, talked to me at length about her mother who was suffering the effects of having assumed a reified maternal identity in the 1980s which was no longer politically necessary, a situation of which she was critical. However, she simultaneously reinforced the essentialised notion that her sacrifice was necessary. Consequently, she adopted a number of contradictory subject positions simultaneously. On the one hand, she reinforced her sense of revolutionary sacrifice:

Ella no cambiaría el sandinismo por nada del mundo. Y ella dice que murieron por la causa, por defender, por los que se murieron, hoy en día estamos aquí. Si ellos no hubiesen muerto, dice, Matagalpa y este país no fuera lo que somos ahorita.

She wouldn't swap Sandinismo for anything in the world. And she says they died for the cause, to defend, because of those who died, we are here today. And if they hadn't died, she says, Matagalpa and this country wouldn't be what it is today.

Ana González, 25 August 1999

She was however also critical of the way in which the FSLN has dispensed with mothers now that they are no longer politically necessary.

Lo que ha venido opinando mi madre es de que dice que entregamos los hijos a la revolución, ya no hay nada que les remueva, que les haga pensar, que reconoce que ellas son las madres que entregaron sus hijos a la revolución, para que pensáramos. Más que todo, ella piensa de que ya no son motivados. ... Antes les invitaban a reuniones, actividades, actos, pero ahora hoy en día no. Entonces, por eso piensa que el Frente Sandinista de los altos mandos no se dan cuenta de lo que pueden perder, o lo que están perdiendo.

What my mother thinks is that she says that we gave our children to the revolution, but there is no longer anything to move people, to make them think, that acknowledges that they are the mothers who gave their children to the revolution, to make us think. Moreover, she thinks they can no longer be bothered. ... Before they would be invited to meetings, to activities, ceremonies, but not any more. That is why she thinks that the FSLN leadership does not realise what it might lose, or what it is losing.

Ana González, 25 August 1999

While she maintained that she "gave her sons to the revolution", her sacrifice was renegotiated in the sense that she shifted the responsibility onto the sons themselves, who wanted to go and fight and went of their own free will.

Ahora dice que ellos fueron por su propia voluntad, no fueron exigidos.

Now she says they went of their own free will, nobody made them go.

Ana González, 25 August 1999

I would argue that the emphasis on Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs identity, while privileging essentialist notions of self-sacrificial mothers, may also possess the power to contradict the narrow identities for women which are being promoted by the present government in its drive to erase the Sandinista past. To say "I am a mother of a hero and martyr" is a potent reminder of that revolutionary past, an identity which women will defend as they rework it. This process involves reworking what it means to be a good

mother or grandmother. It is perhaps in the juxtaposition of feeling proud of one's revolutionary past and critical of its narrow discursive framing that allows assigned gender identities to be destabilised and new subjectivities to emerge. Shurmer-Smith and Hannan (1994) have used Deleuze and Guattari's (1983) notion of lines of flight to explain why people invest in systems that oppress them. It can be through manipulating oppressive discursive regimes, that we find a line of flight out of them. This investment can also be better understood by recognising what Molyneux (1998:238) calls women's "embeddedness in the social". Understanding women as social beings is more productive than constructing women in essentialist terms as carers. If we see motherhood as contingent and flexible, using traditional notions of motherhood for strategic purposes does not undo its flexibility. Identities can be reworked as they are reproduced.

#### *Mothers of the nation and new spatial imaginations*

Keith and Pile (1993) have used Jameson's (1991) work on oppositional cultures to look at the way spaces are constituted through politics and ideology. Jameson believes that oppositional cultures can create a politics of resistance by confronting the past differently, a process which involves the constitution of a new spatial imagination. Women's engagement with Nicaragua's revolutionary past and the analysis of gender relations during the revolution has led to a new kind of spatial imagination. This imagination enables women to confront the totalising logic of the government's gender discourses and to demand other gender-specific interests such as the need for employment. The mothers of the nation discourse prevalent in Nicaragua during the revolution is now being recycled to challenge the state, in particular the way in which the desire for revenge on the Sandinistas is used to formulate policy. At times, sacrificial motherhood used in this way has the effect of broadening understandings of responsibility and positioning women as political subjects. The mothers of the nation discourse is being mobilised to press for social change and to undermine the polarisation of Nicaraguan society. It was expressed in the earlier extract from Carla Martínez on the need to make the CDI open to all children regardless of their parents' political sympathies. It has also been expressed both by Lucía Espinoza with reference to the

Communal Movement and by Silvia Montiel, also a second promotion militant, with reference to the social struggles for livelihoods taking place in El Hatillo in Sébaco.

Como te decía la política del Movimiento Comunal es ahora más amplia, tiene un sentido más amplio. No nos interesa, aquí vienen los liberales. ¿Necesitan una letrina? Les damos una letrina. ¿Necesitan una respuesta? Les damos una respuesta. Si los niños necesitan ir a un comedor infantil, no nos interesa cuál es su partido. No les decimos a la gente “como eres del partido liberal no te vamos a dar nada, o si es conservador”. Aquí hay demasiadas necesidades. Y te podría decir que las personas a que damos mayor respuesta son la gente que anda con la gorra que dice PLC. Vienen orgullosos con su gorra y aquí llaman y les damos respuesta.

As I was saying to you, Communal Movement policy is now much broader. We don't mind, if Liberal supporters come here and need a latrine, we give them a latrine. If they need some help, we help them. If children need to attend a communal kitchen, we don't care which party they belong to. We don't say to people “As you're from the Liberal party or the Conservative party, we are not going to help you.” The needs are too great. And I can tell you that the people we help most are the people who are wearing a PLC cap. They are proud of their cap and they come here and we help them.

Lucía Espinoza, 11 August 1999

Y me fui a la guerrilla, estuve luchando, soy luchadora. Salí tirada, me tiraron, todavía tengo unos balines por acá ... Fue una experiencia muy buena, ayudé y eso a mí me motivó a tener esa conciencia de ayudar a los demás. De ver ... cuando yo veía que los niños se morían en la montaña por falta de alimentos, estaban desnutridos ... aquí hay pobreza, aquí hay falta de florecimiento en las personas, que eso te motiva a ser una luchadora. Entonces yo decía si yo vivo después de esta guerra, yo voy a luchar. Y ¿luchar para qué? Luchar para que cambie el país, que no importa el color, que no importa la raza, que si vos sos sandinista, que si vos sos del otro partido, que queremos ayudar para que estos campesinos no estén sufriendo, que no se sientan tan humillados, que ellos tengan uso de razón, que piensen en ellos, que piensen en sus hijos, y así fue la lucha, la mía, siempre ha sido la lucha.

I joined the guerrilla, I was fighting, I am a fighter. I was shot, they shot at me, I still have bullets in here... It was a very good experience, I helped and this motivated me to become aware of the need to help others. When I saw that children in the mountains were dying through lack of food, they were malnourished ...there is poverty, people don't thrive, and that motivates you to be a fighter. So I used to say that if I survive this war, I'm going to fight. Fight so that the country changes, regardless of people's colour or race, or whether you are a Sandinista or of the other party, we want to help so that the *campesinos* do not suffer, so that they don't feel so humiliated, so they can think for themselves, and

think about their children. This was my struggle, this has always been my struggle.

Silvia Montiel, 2 December 1999

## **Conclusions**

This chapter has demonstrated how a historical period reconceptualised as a discursive entity has permeable boundaries. These boundaries can therefore be reworked to engage with the past differently and form a new kind of spatial imagination which has the potential to create oppositional politics and to renegotiate gender identities.

The form that the reworking of the past is taking in Nicaragua means that even in the context of economic hardships caused by structural adjustment, there are revolutionary continuities. These continuities are enabling women to press for demands for gender equality which were unthinkable in the context of the revolution itself.

If we conceptualise the Nicaraguan revolution as a development solution, it was one that clearly failed despite initial advances made in some areas. However, the revolution was successful in generating new epistemologies and new ontologies which continue to be of value even after the revolution has passed into history and the revolutionary leaders are no longer so revolutionary. However, despite the both interesting and sometimes painful shifts that have taken place in terms of gender identities, gender inequality is proving to be enormously resilient and discourses of motherhood and femininity continue to be manipulated by the state and other forces to pursue political aims.

The goal, stated by the FSLN in pre-revolutionary times, to abolish sexual discrimination in Nicaragua, is not a linear process and it is only by focusing on the constitution of gender identities within and outside of discourses of motherhood and femininity that we can appreciate the setbacks and the reproductions of hegemonic ideologies of gender as well as the moments and spaces in which these constructions are contested.

## **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> Radcliffe and Westwood (1996) call for separate understandings of nationalism, nations and national identity, given that the concepts tend to be conflated. Nationalism as an ideology can be distinguished from the nation as a territorial and civic entity, while national identities refer to the lived imaginaries of subjects.

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<sup>2</sup> As Enloe (1989) has stated, it is important to acknowledge that anything which passes for traditional has in fact been made, a point which has been further elaborated by Laurie et al. (1999) who explain that traditional femininities are only traditional in the sense that they emerged at a particular time and became hegemonic. While notions of traditional femininities might draw on naturalising discourses, they are never monolithic or static.

<sup>3</sup> *El Gueguence* is a play from the colonial era which is read as a parable for national identity in Nicaragua (Field 1999). According to Field (1999), the play has been understood by Sandinistas and Nicaraguan intellectuals as representing anti-imperialist struggle that partly “rescues the Indians of Nicaragua from total defeat” (p.xix). Since Rubén Darío, who is one of Latin America’s most famous poets, poets and poetry have been privileged in Nicaraguan culture and therefore nationalism in Nicaragua has a poetic aura (Cuadra 1997).

<sup>4</sup> While attending school in Nicaragua in 1999, my daughter would engage in a daily morning ritual of singing the national anthem and saluting the national flag before classes commenced. One morning I was paying my school fees when the daily rendition of the national anthem began out in the patio. The secretary who was filling out my receipt promptly put down her pen and stood to attention until the singing was over. As Radcliffe and Westwood (1996) indicate, flags and national anthems make up the ‘externalities’ of the nation and they do little to inform us of the ‘internalities’ of the nation, which they interpret as the subjective experience of a national identity within the complexities of place, class, gender and age.

<sup>5</sup> While acknowledging the importance of Marxist-Leninist thought, the Sandinistas tended not to refer to themselves as socialist, and focused more explicitly on the principles of national liberation and participatory democracy. In 1990 I was translating from English to Spanish for a member of our brigade of environmental volunteers in Boaco. He was speaking to our Nicaraguan co-workers on the brigade who were all Sandinista sympathisers or militants, and he pledged our ongoing support to them in their path towards socialism. I was later told how shocked many of those present had been by the use of the word ‘socialism’ because of its anti-Christian connotations.

<sup>6</sup> Leticia Herrera was the member of the commando that occupied the Christmas party of a leading member of Somoza’s government in December 1974. The FSLN, in return for the release of the hostages taken, successfully negotiated the release of a number of political prisoners and the receipt of \$1 million. Nora Astorga fought on the Southern Front and was the political leader of four squadrons. Mónica Baltodano was part of the famous tactical retreat to Masaya and also led the final offensive into the capital in July 1979. Dora María Téllez was Commander Number Two (*Comandante Dos*) during the occupation of the National Palace in August 1978 (Randall 1981).

<sup>7</sup> In Nicaraguan culture, a fighting cock represents a fight until the end, it is a machista image which evokes blood (Randall 1999).

## Counter-revolutionary women: Anti-Sandinismo, reconciliation and the geographies of “Resistance”

### Introduction

While the triumph of the Sandinista revolution in 1979 was a time of celebration for most Nicaraguans, for Luz Marina Castillo it was a time of fear. At the end of the dictatorship, she had been working as a nanny for Luis Larios, one of Somoza’s colonels, a job she had acquired through a cousin who was working as a *guardia*. On the eve of the triumph of the revolution, the colonel and his family had hurriedly left Managua for Miami, abandoning Luz Marina. She was in Managua’s Eastern Market just after the triumph when she was picked up by the Sandinistas and imprisoned for over a month. Before she was released and sent home to Waslala, she told me she was accused of having caused the death of various Sandinistas and was tortured by a machine they placed on her head. Fervently anti-Sandinista, she married a Contra. For two years, she accompanied him in combat to carry his ammunition and an anti-aircraft missile after he had been wounded and was no longer able to do so. He was later killed in the war and Luz Marina identified strongly as a widow of the Resistance.

Making sense of stories like these and talking to the Contra has not been a straightforward political or moral issue for me. During the 1980s I saw the Contra mainly as a US trained and sponsored army made up of *ex-guardias* and mercenary fighters. I realised after visiting Nicaragua in 1990 that the situation was actually much more complex and that hundreds of disaffected *campesinos* had swollen the Contra ranks. However, the Contra for me had still attempted to destroy something which I believed in and I had heard countless stories of Contra atrocities; how they had bombed schools, health centres and co-operatives, had raped women, had kidnapped and murdered Sandinista activists, sometimes breaking their spines with rifle butts, pulling out their nails, cutting out their tongues, cutting off their genitals or cutting their throats<sup>1</sup>. At Sadie’s wake, I met a man who had fought alongside Sadie in the FSLN guerrilla force



but had later defected to the Contra. He brought another ex-Contra to my house in Matagalpa to organise a visit to a group of women who had been Contra combatants and collaborators in Waslala. As they sat in the kitchen and I made them coffee, I felt decidedly bizarre and worried about the implications of making coffee for the Contra in a Sandinista household.

I travelled to Waslala twice to interview women who were members of the Asociación de Madres y Víctimas de la Guerra (Association of Mothers and Victims of the War), once in 1999 and again in 2001. They housed me, fed me, laughed and cried with me as they told me their stories, forcing me to try and make sense of their 'distorted' analyses of the political situation in Nicaragua in the context of their own lived realities. I think that the positive experiences I had in Waslala are part of the complexities of Nicaraguan politics.

Life is hard in Waslala, it is mountainous and predominately rural territory, which was not connected to anywhere else by road until 1977. It is only 120 kilometres from Matagalpa but because much of the road is unsealed, the bus trip from Matagalpa to Waslala takes between five and six hours. Waslala has very limited piped water and electrification and no sanitation services and only a quarter of households possess latrines. Having left my children behind in Matagalpa during my visit in 1999, I was very distressed to find I was not able to phone them from Waslala. All the town's telecommunications had been destroyed during the war and in 1999 there was still not one functioning telephone in the entire town.

Its location in Nicaragua's interior and its proximity to Honduras<sup>2</sup> meant it was a zone of intense conflict during the Contra war. The escalation of the war in that region bred Sandinista intolerance of potential and actual counter-revolutionary activity which in turn created a climate of harassment and persecution. Consequently, many inhabitants of Waslala opposed the Sandinistas and joined or sympathised with the counter-revolution. Ten years after the end of the war, Waslala is still a violent community with killings and kidnappings common in the mountains surrounding the town and the use of firearms to settle disputes and carry out crime is commonplace. On the day I arrived in 1999 a group of *desmovilizados* was holding a protest on the main road and my host told me how a

teenager working on the coffee harvest had been murdered that day. When I returned in 2001, I did so just a couple of days after a man had shot dead the local billiard hall owner, who had thrown him out the previous evening because of his level of inebriation.

The seven participants from Waslala were all women who identified themselves as Mothers of the Resistance and they were organised to varying degrees within the Association. Two were Contra combatants, others were collaborators and many were wives or mothers of men who fell fighting for the Contra forces. Some had close connections to the Somoza dictatorship in the sense that family members were *guardias* or members of Somoza's National Guard. All were living in a violent and polarised community in economically difficult circumstances.

This chapter explores the gender identities of this group of women who collaborated or fought with the anti-Sandinista guerrilla force or the Contra and were therefore positioned very differently with respect to the nation, the revolution and the FSLN from many of the women in the previous chapter. After briefly examining the development of the Contra forces during the 1980s and attention to the Nicaraguan counter-revolution in existing literature, it examines the circumstances which led this group of participants to turn against the Sandinista revolution and the attempts at reconciliation which have taken place since 1990. It then explores the implications for motherhood and other gender identities of being a Contra supporter during the 1980s and a mother of the Resistance today.

### **The development of the Contra war in Nicaragua**

The initial counter-revolutionary attacks against Nicaragua which took place after the triumph of the revolution were the result of regroupings of *ex-guardias*. Like Colonel Luis Larios, the higher ranking members had fled to Miami but many of the soldiers remained. Some of these were rounded up and were executed or imprisoned, while others managed to escape to El Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica or the United States. Some of these groupings began to engage in covert operations with CIA and Argentine support. While the Carter administration never intended to create an internal military opposition, the US government at this time lent economic and political support to anti-Sandinista

forces such as the newspaper *La Prensa* (Bendaña 1991). It was not until the election of Ronald Reagan in 1981 that counter-revolutionary military intervention in Nicaragua became more overt. This involvement was stepped up once it became clear that the FSLN had been supporting and supplying the Salvadoran insurgents, the FMLN. The pretext of blocking the supply of arms to the Salvadoran guerrillas became the justification for the financial and military backing of the Contra. While *ex-guardias* had attacked banks and state farms and assassinated Sandinista sympathisers, the conflict intensified after the FDN blew up the bridges of Río Negro and Ocotal and forced the FSLN to declare a state of emergency.

The Contra became increasingly made up of *campesinos* without Somocista pasts, including people who had formerly fought for or supported the Sandinistas. The most famous defected Sandinista was Edén Pastora. Pastora was a Sandinista war hero, known as Commander Zero (*Comandante Cero*), who in August 1978 led the attack on the National Palace and took the entire Somocista congress hostage, successfully negotiating the release of 50 Sandinista political prisoners and \$500,000 in cash in return for the hostages. There was significant political infighting between the different factions which made up the FSLN and Pastora was disliked by a number of Sandinista leaders for his political style. By 1983, marginalised by many of the FSLN *comandantes* and increasingly dissatisfied with the direction the revolution was taking, he defected to the Contra and led the southern front (ARDE) from Costa Rica.

Eighty per cent of Contra combatants were people of *campesino* origin who came from the interior and Atlantic regions of Nicaragua<sup>3</sup> (Abu-Lughod 2000), of which seven per cent were estimated to be women (Brown 2001). Most of them joined the Contra because of opposition to the agrarian reform process with its emphasis on collective rather than individual farming, state control of grain markets and to Sandinista repression and harassment (Langlois 1997). Many of those who were landless were opposed to farming collectively. While joining a co-operative and participating in the local CDS was supposed to be voluntary, the FSLN was nonetheless suspicious of those who refused (Bendaña 1991). Although the agrarian reform policy changed direction after 1985, when

land began to be distributed to individuals, state farms and co-operatives were prioritised in terms of access to credit and technical assistance.

Indeed, the agrarian reform initially was aimed at eliminating the peasantry as a class rather than as seeing them as economic actors in their own right (Enríquez 1997). The greatest weakness of the FSLN, which led to their inability to contain the Contra war, was the assumption that there was a coherent social class in the countryside (Bendaña 1991, Wright 1995). As Bendaña (1991) stated, not all of the Contra were landless *campesinos*. Many of those who initially supported the counter-revolution were the smallholders, landowning *campesinos*, who would not have been a high priority in the agrarian reform and were therefore more likely to identify with the concerns of the large landowners and producers. During the 1980s all basic grains had to be sold to the state at fixed prices and it was forbidden to transport grains for sale in other parts of the country. Consequently, bags of corn and beans would be seized and confiscated during roadblocks. This policy caused significant resentment amongst individual producers who were deprived of their freedom to sell their produce. Many of these also feared confiscation of their land and it was this fear which prompted their integration into the Contra.

The Sandinistas only ever intended to expropriate land belonging to Somoza and Somocistas. However, the war itself generated a climate of intolerance towards those suspected of being Contra collaborators. As more and more *campesinos* joined the counter-revolution, increasingly the expropriation of a counter-revolutionary's land was seen to be justified (Bendaña 1991).

There are many reports of Sandinista security forces acting with undue repression against suspected counter-revolutionaries (Wright 1995) as well as abuses of authority by CDS leaders (Gilbert 1988). A friend of mine was stationed with the EPS in Waslala during the 1980s and admitted to personally abusing his position of power. He told me he would try and dissuade individuals from supporting the Contra but when this failed, physical punishment would follow. He admitted to beating up a *campesino* who persisted in

collaborating with the Contra, and then added that sometimes physical elimination was the only option (Paul Leiba, personal communication).

Opposition to the revolution grew after the imposition of military service. The draft was enormously unpopular in rural areas, not just because of fear that the recruit would be killed in combat, but also because their absence affected the family's level of agricultural production and often meant a fall in family income (Enríquez 1997). Many young men preferred to voluntarily join the Contra than be forcibly recruited into the EPS, which of course perpetuated the need for the draft. It is important to remember that people in this part of the country were often influenced by the radio propaganda which came from FDN bases in Honduras. People had heard that the Sandinistas were communists who were going to take their children away, something which seemed to be confirmed by the draft and the forced recruitment of very young men (Sergio Sáenz, personal communication). Paradoxically, because people did not want to fight, they went to fight.

Enloe (2000) has pointed out how opposition to militarised situations usually involves militarised responses. The FSLN had always been and continued to be a military organisation. As Wright (1995) indicates, the FSLN vanguard was based in the military and revolutionary hegemony was gained and sustained through militarisation. Political leaders were known as *comandantes*, commanders, the police force was a militarised Sandinista organisation and the general population was armed and organised through the popular militias to defend the revolution.

Literature on the Contra has taken three overlapping forms. In the late 1980s and early 1990s a number of US journalists wrote works on the Contra in the context of US foreign policy, situating themselves on both sides of the debate (Dickey 1985, Cockburn 1987, Dillon 1991, Kinzer 1991, Garvin 1992). In addition, some studies have been written by people who are either ideologically opposed to the Sandinista revolution (Hager 1998) or who were closely associated with both the Resistance and the US government during the 1980s (Pardo-Maurer 1990, Brown 2001). There is thirdly a limited but growing number of works which have included testimonial accounts from members of the RN or have involved qualitative research with ex-Contras (Eich and Rincón 1984, Bendaña 1991,

Castillo-Rivas 1993, Langlois 1997, Abu-Lughod 2000, Brown 2001). Some of this work, while not explicitly anti-Sandinista (with the exception of the work by Brown), has aimed through interviews with ex-Contra, to provide more critical understandings of the Sandinista mismanagement which fuelled the counter-revolution, as well as the role of the United States in this process. Consequently, they have moved beyond simplistic analyses of the Contra as misguided peasants manipulated by the US or as anti-Communist freedom fighters. In this respect, the works by Langlois (1997) and Abu-Lughod (2000) differ greatly from those by Hager (1998) and Brown (2001) as they are aimed at providing more detailed understandings of counter-revolutionary activity rather than politicised attempts to undermine the Sandinista contribution to the democratisation of Nicaragua. While studies on Sandinista women abound, there has to date been no study to focus specifically on the lived experiences of women who fought or collaborated with the Contra.

Both Hager's (1998) and Brown's (2001) recent publications are presented as revisionist accounts of the Contra war in Nicaragua. Hager (1998), whose work is based entirely on secondary sources, disputes constructions of the Contra war as a US proxy war and argues that rather it was an ethnic war provoked by culturally insensitive and ethnocentric Pacific Sandinistas who misunderstood the interior of the country. He even goes as far as to say that the anti-Sandinista insurgency is evidence for the global failure of communism. Similarly, Brown (2001), a US Marine veteran and liaison officer to the RN between 1987 and 1990, calls for the Contra war to be understood as a civil war because so many *campesinos* joined the Contra ranks and because the Contra war began before Reagan came to power and continued after US Congress suspended aid to the Contra in 1988.

Previous works have however clearly acknowledged the domestic base of the Contra war. While most of the Contras were both young and had limited formal education (Abu-Lughod 2000), it would also be naïve to suggest support for the counter-revolution emerged from an inherent conservativeness or a misunderstanding of the goals of the revolution. Bendaña (1991), who was the general secretary of the Sandinista foreign ministry, acknowledges the mistakes made by the FSLN which led to large numbers of

*campesinos* joining the counter-revolutionary forces. As he states, the Contra army grew not out of sophisticated recruitment campaigns in the countryside but as a result of the impact of Sandinista policies and mistakes on the small landowning farmer, the *campesino parcelario*. According to Bendaña (1991), the US provided the objectives, defined the strategy and supplied arms and logistical support, while it was the Sandinistas who accelerated the growth of the Contra through their policies and administrative practices. Likewise, the development of armed counter-revolutionary resistance to the FSLN before 1981 has also been previously acknowledged (See Pardo-Maurer 1990).

Hager's (1998) assertion that the Contra war should be understood as an ethnic war is clearly misleading, as the ethnic question is not as pronounced as he suggests. I believe that urban-based Sandinista leaders clearly displayed a lack of cultural sensitivity with respect to rural *campesinos* from the interior of Nicaragua and that the Sandinista treatment of the indigenous and Creole communities on the Atlantic coast generated legitimate grievances. However, as Wright (1995) has indicated, the vast majority of the *campesinos* of the interior are Spanish-speaking *mestizos* and are therefore ethnically similar to other Nicaraguans. It is also the case that while Congress voted against continued support of the Contra in 1988, the US continued to provide "humanitarian support" right up until the 1990 elections.

While it is important to acknowledge the domestic base of the Contra war, it is equally important to acknowledge the role of the United States. Many *campesinos* were undoubtedly opposed to both the socialisation of farming and the nationalisation of markets (Langlois 1997) and as Bendaña (1991) states, the agricultural engineer from Managua who travelled to Río Blanco to implement farming techniques imported from Bulgaria was out of place. There is, however, no doubt that events would have unfolded very differently without US support. While Hager (1998) goes some way towards acknowledging this, his argument is undermined by his Reagan-like construction of the Sandinista revolution as a "Soviet-aligned regime" (p.135) and of the FSLN as possessing a "profound contempt for democracy" (p.154). To suggest that the Nicaraguan revolution was guided by the same basic theory as the Soviet Union is clearly short-sighted, given that political pluralism and the mixed economy were basic Sandinista

principles (Wright 1995). Events in Nicaragua were also very different from those in Cuba. Unlike Cuba, where Fidel Castro has been in power for more than 40 years, the FSLN held an election in which they became an opposition party and the right was returned to power.

By 1982, thanks to US support, the Contras had acquired much more sophisticated weaponry, including M-79 grenade launchers, light anti-tank weapons and FAL rifles (Dickey 1985). It was US support that encouraged opposition to Sandinista policies and repression to be resolved militarily, rather than politically. Moreover, despite Reagan's denial that US military personnel were used in the Contra war, it was the CIA, using US military personnel, and not the FDN, who destroyed Nicaragua's oil facilities and mined Nicaragua's harbours. In 1986, two US soldiers were killed and a third survived when a C-123 cargo plane, carrying crates full of arms and other supplies for the Contra, was shot down in southern Nicaragua (Cockburn 1987). The survivor, Eugene Hasenfus, talked at length about the secret supply operation to the Contra in which he was involved (Kinzer 1991).

The militarisation of the FSLN and the revolution and the militarisation of counter-revolutionary opposition through US support meant that the military occupied a privileged status in Nicaraguan society in the 1980s. As Enloe (2000) has stated, it is important to engage explicitly with the privileged status of the military if we are to understand how it can penetrate women's lives. The following section constitutes an attempt to understand this penetration and how women in Nicaragua as combatants, collaborators and mothers became positioned as counter-revolutionaries.

### **Counter-revolutionary women in Waslala**

Having supported the Sandinista revolution from afar during the 1980s, I was interested to learn what had led women to join the anti-Sandinista forces. Unlike many Sandinista women, particularly middle class women, who had supported the Revolution out of an ideological vision and drive to create a better society, these women adopted counter-revolutionary positions not because of ideological convictions but because of more personal circumstances. Although the differences between the personal and the



ideological are not always so straightforward, most of these women became counter-revolutionaries because of the men in their lives and the political decisions taken by their husbands, sons and employers.

Although Mercedes Hierro was only 25 years old when I first met her in 1999, she told me she was a widow of a war that had ended nearly ten years earlier. She was only 13 when she met her partner and became pregnant with her first child. Despite her youth, she had been living independently from her family for some time. A polio sufferer, she had left home at the age of seven to work as a domestic for a schoolteacher in Niquinohomo (Masaya) in return for tuition. Her family was poor, she had ten brothers and sisters, two of whom died of gastric illnesses and the school was too far for her to walk to. She returned to Waslala several years later, already a “*señorita*”. Her partner was 16 and six months after they met, by which time she was already pregnant, he joined the Contra. She never saw him again. He was blown to pieces when he stepped on a mine shortly before the end of the war. In Waslala in the 1980s, an adolescent relationship and a teenage pregnancy ended up having long-term political implications. Mercedes had two more children with another ex-Contra from whom she was separated, but nonetheless described herself as a “*viuda de la Resistencia Nicaragüense*”, a widow of the Nicaraguan Resistance. Her partner had joined up not out of ideological motives, but to avoid being recruited.

Los compas lo buscaban mucho, para que cumpliera el servicio, [pero] él no quería ser compa. Entonces se fue con la Resistencia para no ser reclutado. Porque en ese tiempo los jóvenes eran exigidos y llegaban y los reclutaban para que fueran a cumplir el servicio militar. Y él nunca quiso cumplir el servicio militar y por eso se fue a la guerra.

The *compas* were always looking for him to make him do his military service, but he didn't want to be a *compa*. So he joined the Resistance so he wouldn't be recruited. Because at that time, young people were required and they used to come and recruit them to do military service. And he never wanted to do military service and that is why he went to war.

Mercedes Hierro, 20 November 1999

Although her partner's reasons for joining the Contra were only ever explained in terms of the desire to avoid recruitment and Mercedes was only a teenager at the time, she had

assumed a counter-revolutionary identity, something that was probably strengthened by the daughter that her dead partner fathered.

Como él era de la Resistencia, yo soy de la Resistencia. [...] Soy de la Resistencia porque pienso que si uno no trabaja, no vive. Solamente por eso. Sí. Lo que pasa es que cada uno tiene una opinión, una sola opinión que tiene.

As he belonged to the Resistance, I belong to the Resistance. [...] I belong to the Resistance because I think that if you don't work, you can't live. Just because of that. The thing is everyone has an opinion, just one opinion.

[Mi hija] dice, yo no pude conocer a mi papa. Dice ella, nunca me conoció mi papa. Ella sabe que su papa está muerto, que murió en la guerra, cómo murió, todo eso lo sabe ella.

[My daughter] says, I never knew my dad. She says, my dad never knew me. She knows that her dad is dead, that he died in the war, how he died, she knows all that.

Mercedes Hierro, 20 November 1999

Norma Aguilar's life was marked by the death of family members in different circumstances, but she blamed all the deaths on the FSLN. During the dictatorship, many members of her family worked as *guardias* for Somoza and were subsequently killed by the Sandinista guerrilla forces during the insurrection. Rather than seeing the National Guard as brutal instruments of repression and torture, she saw them as uncles and brothers.

Mi familia había trabajado con Somoza en seguridad. Mataron a toda mi familia, mis tíos, cuatro hermanos. En mi familia sólo mujeres dejaron.

My family had worked with Somoza in security. They killed all my family, my uncles, four of my brothers. In my family only women were left.

Norma Aguilar, 22 May 2001

Norma had six children by three different fathers, the second of which joined the Contra and was killed in 1987, and she also clearly identified herself as a widow of the Resistance. Her two oldest sons were recruited to do military service and both of them were killed, one aged 16, the other aged 17. Although they had been killed by the Contra while fighting for the EPS, she blamed the Sandinistas for their deaths. After the death of her partner in 1987, she was marked as a counter-revolutionary and consequently lost her

farm. Throughout this period she collaborated with the Contra and frequently made trips to the mountains to deliver food and supplies, often fooling the Sandinista soldiers in the way that clandestine Sandinista sympathisers had fooled Somoza's guard during the dictatorship.

Yo les llevaba azúcar, jabón, que en ese tiempo todo era racionado, agujas, encendedores, hilo. Yo iba a Matagalpa a traer, como mi papa tenía una camioneta. Cooperaba ... hasta les llevaba botas, comida (risas). Un día me encontré con el ejército ... sandinista. Me dice “¿Eso para dónde lo lleva?” “A una tía mía que tiene un montón de niños”, le digo, “y no tiene quién le dé de comer”. No les dije que era comida para la contra. Y me dejaron pasar (risas). No se dieron cuenta. Entonces ...me decía mi papá, mis hijos, te van a matar. Entonces fue obra de Dios que no me pasó nada. Nada más que me mataron dos chavalos. Uno de 16 años. El otro de 17. Uno murió en el 86, el otro en el 88. [...] [Yo colaboraba con la contra] porque mi familia todita ahí andaba. Murieron mis hijos y quería terminar con eso.

I used to take them sugar, soap, things that were rationed at this time, needles, lighters, thread. I used to bring them from Matagalpa as my dad had a van. I used to cooperate ... I even used to take them boots, food (laughter). One day I bumped into the Sandinista army. They said to me “Where are you taking that?” I said “To one of my aunts that has a load of children and doesn't have anyone to give them food.” I didn't tell them that it was food for the Contra. And they let me pass (laughter). They didn't realise. My dad and my children used to say to me that they were going to kill me. It was a work of God that nothing happened to me. The only thing was they killed two of my kids. One was 16, the other 17. One died in 1986, the other in 1988. [...] [I collaborated with the Contra] because all my family was involved in that. My sons had died and I wanted to bring it to an end.

Norma Aguilar, 20 November 1999

Luz Marina Castillo, because of her experiences of imprisonment and torture by the FSLN, is the most virulent anti-Sandinista of the participants in Waslala.

Ahí lo investigaban drásticamente con una máquina en la cabeza, que la iban socando, tornillando, dando vueltas. Como si se iba a reventar en dos partes mi cabeza.

The interrogations there were drastic because they put a machine on your head, which they would tighten, screw up and turn. It was as if my head was going to burst in two.

Luz Marina Castillo, 22 May 2001

I am unsure whether her anti-Sandinismo developed as a result of her experiences after the triumph, or whether she was already opposed to the FSLN because several of her uncles, one of her brothers and a cousin had all been *guardias*. She stressed the domestic nature of her activity during the dictatorship and denied the accusations that were made of her.

A mí me acusaban de la muerte de unos sandinistas que habían muerto. Me decían de que yo era oreja de unos llamados Chilotes, que habían muerto porque yo los había acusado. [...] [Pero] yo vivía en la casa trabajando, cuidando a unos chavalos que estudiaban, lampazeaba, lavaba trastes, lavaba ropa, hacía mandados, iba a la escuela. No me daba cuenta de lo hacía mi patrón, de lo que hacía en las calles.

They accused me of the deaths of some Sandinistas. They said I had grassed on the Chilotes, that they had died because I had informed on them. [...] [But] I was just working in the house, looking after some schoolchildren, I used to mop the floor, do the dishes, wash clothes, do errands, go to school. I didn't realise what my boss was doing, what he was doing in the streets.

Luz Marina Castillo, 22 May 2001

While people who were members of the FSLN during the 1980s assured me that the FSLN never developed a systematic policy of torture, many individuals exercised their own sense of revolutionary justice and a number of summary executions of *ex-guardias* were reported in the days after the triumph. I can only speculate on Luz Marina's prior involvement in counter-revolutionary activities. She did of course come from a family where several relatives were employed as *guardias* and it was through these family connections that she came to be employed by the colonel. Moreover, when Somoza fled the country, he left all his intelligence files, which contained lists of informers, intact and so the new revolutionary government knew who the informers were (Dickey 1985). Luz Marina told me that her arrest came about because some neighbours had informed on her. Her captors confiscated all her belongings, a ring, a watch, a chain, a radio and 1,800 córdobas.

Llevaba un anillo de oro, llevaba un reloj empapado en oro, llevaba una radio, porque yo ganaba 600 pesos, porque en esos tiempos de Somoza, ganar 600 pesos era plata. Tenía reales, 1,800 pesos. Yo me los había ganado. Llevaba 1,800 córdobas y llevaba mi radio, mi anillo de oro, una cadena y un reloj. Cuando yo caí presa en las manos de los sandinistas, a mí me hizo perder todo, aparte de los

diez córdobas que me regalaron para que me regresara de donde venía, para que ahí buscara a mi familia.

I had a gold ring, a gold plated watch, I had a radio, because I used to earn 600 córdobas, and in the time of Somoza, that was good money. I had money, 1,800 córdobas. I had earned it. I was carrying 1,800 córdobas, and I had my radio, my gold ring, a chain and a watch. When I fell prisoner in the hands of the Sandinistas, I lost everything, apart from the ten córdobas which they gave back to me to get back to where I had come from, to look for my family.

Luz Marina Castillo, 20 November 1999

She subsequently married a man who joined the Contra in 1982. All her children were conceived in meetings with him in the mountains. When he was shot and injured and unable to carry his ammunition, she left her children with her mother and joined him in combat. She remained there until he was killed in 1989 and did not see her children for two years.

The first thing that María Julieta Vega told me about herself was that she was the “madre de un hijo caído”, the mother of a fallen son. She told me how one of her sons never wanted to be a soldier of any kind. He deserted from his military service several times and each time he was recaptured. After several attempts to desert, he began to fear for his life and so decided to join the Contra.

Mi hijo el que anduvo en la guerra, él anduvo siete años y nueve meses. Y entonces este muchacho sufrió demasiado. Porque él no quería ser militar, de ninguna clase de los dos bandos. El no quería ser militar. Pero entonces como usted sabe como era el Frente que andaba en eso, ellos reclutaban, quisiera o no quisiera, tenía que ser militar. Entonces lo reclutaron, se lo llevaron. Por primera vez, se desertó a los tres meses de haberlo reclutado. Se desertó y se vino a la casa. Ahí andaba escondido porque no quería andar en ningún ejército. Ciertamente el pobrecito murió y me desesperó, contra su voluntad él andaba en la guerra. [...] Para no cansarle el cuento, lo agarraron cinco veces y cinco veces volvió a desertar. [...] Entonces, como él se sentía acosado, en otras palabras, él se sentía desesperado pues, que ya no había otra decisión, como tantas cosas que le hicieron, lo apalearon, mejor dicho, lo maduraron al pobre.

My son who was in the war, he fought for seven years and nine months. This boy suffered too much. Because he didn't want to be a soldier, on either side. He didn't want to be a soldier. But as you know, it was the Frente that was involved in that, that they used to recruit people, so he had to be a soldier whether he wanted to be or not. So they recruited him and they took him away. At first he

deserted three months after he had been recruited. He deserted and he came home. He hid because he didn't want to be in any army. [...] To cut a long story short, they captured him five times and five times he deserted. [...] So he felt persecuted, in other words, he felt desperate, there was no other choice, they did so many things to him, they beat him or rather they forced him to grow up, the poor thing.

María Julieta Vega, 20 November 1999

Mónica Avilés joined the Contra as a combatant at the age of 16 not because of anti-revolutionary sentiments as such but because she was tired of the rationing which she blamed not on the Contra war but on the Sandinistas. She even admitted that she was in favour of the revolution at first.

El primer tiempo, cuando comenzó, se miraba todo bonito, porque iba a haber escuelas para niños, para los ancianos iba a haber ... sí, comenzó bonito. Lo que pasa es que al meterse el FSLN, lo que pasa es que racionaron todito, porque había que hacer fila para comprar una libra de azúcar. Era difícil para la pobre gente que vivía en Nicaragua. Porque no podía comprar más que la ración, había que remendar la ropa con hilos de saco. Porque todo era racionado. Porque una pelota de jabón tenía uno que estar quince días, el azúcar era racionado, las pobres madres lo que sufrían por el racionamiento. Ahora estamos en una Nicaragua donde hay pan, lo que hace falta es reales, porque ahora todo se compra, todo se puede comprar. Usted quiere un quintal de azúcar, ahora lo puede comprar. Y antes no, antes era media libra para una familia. [...] Antes uno no se podía vestir bien. Antes salía con una ropa que era bien fea.

At first, when it started, it seemed really nice, because there were going to be schools for children, for the elderly there was going to be ... yes, it started well. But when the FSLN began to interfere, the thing was they rationed everything. You had to queue to buy a pound of sugar. It was difficult for the poor people who lived in Nicaragua. Because you couldn't buy more than your ration, we had to mend our clothes with sack thread. Because everything was rationed. You had to make a bar of soap last for fifteen days, sugar was rationed, how the poor mothers suffered because of rationing. Now we are in a Nicaragua where there is bread, what you need is money, because you can buy everything now. If you want 100 lbs of sugar, now you can buy it. But before, you had to make do with half a pound for a family. [...] Before you couldn't dress well, before you had to go out wearing horrible clothes.

Mónica Avilés, 21 November 1999

Rather than seeing the Contra war as perpetuating the crisis and the need for rationing, she saw herself as fighting to bring an end to it.

[No me gustó] porque usted sabe que había que andar uno sufriendo. Aguantando hambre. Dormíamos en los montes. Casi toditos que andábamos, queríamos que se cambiara eso pues, que hubiera paz en Nicaragua.

[I didn't like it] because you know it meant having to suffer. Being hungry. We used to sleep in the mountains. Nearly all of us who were there, we wanted that to change, we wanted peace in Nicaragua.

Mónica Avilés, 21 November 1999

She had grown up in extreme poverty, had been unable to attend school and had had two miscarriages which she attributed to malnutrition. In 1986, she met a Contra commander who promised her clothes and shoes if she went to Honduras and joined the Resistance. It was her economic vulnerability which led her to join the Resistance, the ideological aspect of her involvement did not take shape until after she arrived in Honduras.

Y usted sabe que en Honduras había políticos que le consienten a uno, le dan políticas de esto y de lo otro, entonces después estábamos más de acuerdo. Para andar unidos pues. Y me dieron ropa y zapatos y todo.

You know that in Honduras there were politicians that would explain things to you, they explained the politics of this and that, so after that we were more in agreement. To be united. And they gave me clothes and shoes and everything.

Mónica Avilés, 21 November 1999

Evelyn Hernández lost a husband and a son as well as a brother who fought for the Resistance. After her husband was killed, two of her sons who were also Contras took her with them to Honduras where she lived for the remainder of the war.

Yo soy viuda desde los 17 años. Yo soy bien sufrida en mi vida, en la guerra, por ejemplo cuando mataron a mi marido, lo capturaron, lo llevaron y lo asesinaron. Después asesinaron a mi hijo. Después mis hijos se tuvieron que ir para el norte, para Honduras, a andar en peligro. Me quedé más sola, solamente con cuatro pequeños, el más chiquito estaba de cuatro años. A los dos años de andar mis hijos, yo me fui para Honduras.

I have been a widow for 17 years. I have suffered a lot in my life, in the war, for example, when they killed my husband. They captured him, they took him away and they killed him. After that they killed my son. After my sons had to go north, to Honduras, to be in danger. I was even more alone, with just four little ones, the youngest was four years old. Two years after my sons left, I went to Honduras.

Evelyn Hernández, 20 November 1999

Isabel Quezada and her husband were both supporters of the revolution, or so she thought. Isabel worked with AMNLAE and UNAG, both Sandinista organisations, just after the triumph. One day in 1983 her husband disappeared and it was some time before she saw him again. When he did return, he did so very briefly because he had left to join the Contra. She had been left to run their farm alone with eight children, the youngest was only six months old. Isabel was 23.

En el 80, yo trabajé con una organización de madres sandinistas. Trabajé con ellos en el 80, en el 79 comenzamos y en el 80 ya trabajaba con la organización de madres sandinistas. Todavía estaba mi marido. El trabajaba con el Frente. No sé lo que le pasó pues. Pensó diferente y se fue.

In 1980 I worked with an organisation of Sandinista mothers. I worked with them in 1980, we started in 1979 and by 1980 I was already working with the organisation of Sandinista mothers. My husband was still here. He was working with the Frente. I don't know what happened to him. He changed his mind and he left.

Isabel Quezada, 21 November 1999

Isabel's husband had bought a farm in a conflict zone and was therefore suspected of supporting the Contra and was persecuted by the Sandinista authorities every time he came into town. Many Nicaraguans talk about a *mentalidad campesina*, a *campesino* mentality. I have no way of knowing if such a mentality exists, but was told that by accusing a *campesino* of something, you give them licence to do it and it becomes self-fulfilling (Sergio Sáenz, personal communication).

Le pregunté por qué se había ido, si no me dijo a mí que se iba. El se fue escondido. No tenía motivos para irse. Entonces me dijo que era por haber comprado muy largo de Waslala, le habían creado desconfianza, lo acusaban de querer trabajar con la contrarrevolución. [...] Entonces me dijo que los mismos militares del ejército lo seguían, entonces tuvo miedo y mejor se fue.

I asked him why he had gone, as he didn't tell me he was going. He left in secret. He had no reason to go. Then he told me that it was because he had bought [land] far away from Waslala, and this had made them mistrust him, they accused him of wanting to work with the counter-revolution. [...] He told me that the soldiers of the army were following him, and he was afraid and so it was better that he left.

Isabel Quezada, 21 November 1999



These women, like all women in Nicaragua at the time, lived under the Sandinista gender regime, but their opposition to the FSLN and the revolution meant that they would be positioned differently in relation to this regime. This had potential implications for both gender relations and identities.

### **Anti-Sandinismo and gender identities**

Given that Sandinista discourses of gender and nationalism constructed women either as heroic warriors or self-sacrificial mothers, it is possible that women who were opposed to the FSLN and the revolution would have been less affected by these discourses. The illegal status of the Contra and the dangers of admitting one's involvement in the counter-revolution meant there was more silence surrounding both political activity of this kind and the sacrifice made by mothers who lost sons and daughters who had joined the counter-revolution. As Luz Marina said, it was not possible to say openly that you were opposed to the revolution.

Cuando se fueron mis patronos, yo me quedé así ambulante, trabajaba a medias así. Lavar, cocinar, cuidar niños. Porque ya era drástico para la gente campesina, las familias de los guardias porque cayeron presos. Ni hablar de que la familia de nosotros andaba en la guerra de la Resistencia. Era prohibido, porque me mandaban a ser presa o matarme.

When my employers left, I was left moving around, half working. Washing, cooking, looking after kids. Because it was drastic for *campesino* people, for the families of the *guardias*, because they were imprisoned. And I could never say that our family was in the Resistance war. It was forbidden, they would have imprisoned me or killed me.

Luz Marina Castillo, 20 November 1999

When family members were killed in the war, this prohibition meant that Contra mothers were deprived of the official recognition of their sacrifice and the public grieving space that Sandinista mothers had. María Julieta talked about the suffering associated with not knowing when or where her son had died and not being able to bring back his body for a wake and funeral.

Mi marido murió de derrame cerebral, del mismo dolor y pasión de haber visto como había sufrido nuestro hijo y no haberlo visto hasta el final pues, porque por lo menos uno cuando muere un hijo, hay una vela, aunque sea pues matado y

logró saber donde lo mataron, lo va a traer, luego lo tiene en la casa, lo enterró y sabe que lo enterró, se siente conforme. Al habernos dado cuenta a los dos meses de que cayó, ni lo supimos pues. Solamente cayó y cayó. Dos meses tenía de haber caído. No nos habíamos dado cuenta porque andaba en la guerra.

My husband died of a brain hemorrhage, from the pain and passion of having seen how much our son had suffered and not having been able to see him at the end. At least when a son dies, there is a wake, even if he has been killed, and you find out where they killed him, you bring back his body, you have it in the house, you bury him, and know that you've buried him, and you come to terms with it. We didn't know he had died until two months later. He just fell and that was it. He had been dead for two months. We didn't know because he was in the war.

María Julieta Vega, 20 November 1999

The Contra women appeared to talk much more about the war in terms of suffering and maternal sacrifice than had many Sandinista women, and were more likely to privilege their identities as mothers and widows.

Mi segundo marido, que es el papá de todos los hijos que tengo, murió en la guerra. Ya después me quedé sola, a sufrir a la voluntad de Dios.

My second husband who is the father of all the children [that have survived], died in the war. After that, I was left alone, to suffer according to God's will.

Evelyn Hernández, 22 May 2001

However, the dynamic of war can bring about shifts in gender identities regardless of political sympathies. Just as the revolution separated many Sandinista women from their children, fighting with the Contra also involved renouncing motherhood for some women. Luz Marina did not see her children for two years while she was in the mountains with the Contra, while Mónica's children were cared for in a military base in Honduras and she was only able to see them every three or four months. Furthermore, not all women felt the need to preserve the sanctity of the home while the men were away fighting or after they had died. Both María Julieta and Isabel made strategic decisions to abandon remote farms and move to the town because life on the farm was too hard and because their children could not attend school.

While all of these women today refer to themselves as *madres* or *mujeres de la Resistencia*, as mothers or women who belonged to the Resistance, this is clearly an identity that they have only been able to assume openly since the end of the war. During

the 1980s, these identities were more ambiguous than the polarised situation of the war would suggest. Isabel, for example, continued to support and work for the revolution, as she had no idea her husband had joined the Contra. She swapped sides when she learnt of her husband's involvement. María Julieta, as a mother of a Contra son, also became opposed to the revolution but her maternal identity dominated her political identity in the sense that she actually collaborated with both sides. Her farm was in a particularly conflictive area during the war and she could frequently hear the gunfire and fighting from her house. Combatants from both sides would come to her house looking for food. María Julieta took on a mothering role and often fed both armies. She told how on one occasion, a group of Contras had spent three days and nights at her place and had killed two cows in her patio. They left at five in the morning on the third day. Two hours later, the *compas*, the Sandinista soldiers arrived, also wanting to be fed.

La contra se había ido a las cinco de la mañana, a las siete de la mañana empezaron a arrimar los primeros sandinistas. 800 hombres. “Y ¿esa carne?” decían. “Sí, esa carne es de la contra, mataron dos vacas. No sé. Si la quieren comer”. Entonces me pusieron a fuerza que yo cocinara esa comida. A pelar una gran cabeza de guineos, para los Sandinistas. [...] Yo hice la carne en sopa, se la compuse, no tan bien, porque como esas cosas eran así del momento pues, sin nada de preparación, entonces ... bueno, yo les daba comida y así. [...] A como me quitaban gallinas y chancos los sandinistas, me quitaba la contra también.

The Contra left at five in the morning. At seven in the morning, the first Sandinistas started to arrive. 800 men. “What is that meat?” they were asking. “Yes, that meat belongs to the Contra, they killed two cows. You can eat it if you like.” So they forced me to cook that food. I had to peel a whole bunch of plantains, for the Sandinistas. [...] I made the meat into a soup, not so well, because these things had to be done in a hurry, without any preparation, so ... I used to feed them like this. [...] Just as the Sandinistas took my chickens and my pigs, the Contra did too.

María Julieta Vega, 20 November 1999

The consumption of her plantains, pigs, chickens, rice and beans by the two armies was clearly a drain on household resources. In order to exercise the ultimate in wartime maternal identities, María Julieta often had to let her own children go hungry.

¿Cuántas veces tuve que dejar a mis hijos en hambre? Sufrí en carne propia por mis hijos.

How many times did I have to let my children go hungry? I really suffered [lit: in my own flesh] for my kids.  
María Julieta Vega, 23 May 2001

But she felt there was no alternative, the war meant they had to suffer and those who were fighting were suffering more than they were. However, rather than see the war as pointless, she saw it as necessary and their suffering as inevitable.

Sí claro, tuvimos que ser sufridos, pero así tenía que ser. Porque de todas maneras una parte y otra iba sufriendo, entonces había que cooperar con los dos. Porque a cooperar con uno, el otro se enojaba. A como miraba uno, miraba el otro. Como de todas veces, me enojaba con uno, el otro ... entonces no se podía. Tenía que ser así. Sí. Yo le voy a decir que sufrimos en la guerra demasiado. Tal vez a veces como le digo, había que darles de comer porque ellos andaban sufriendo más que nosotros, porque por lo menos nosotros estábamos en la casa. Y esta gente andaba sufriendo hambre, durmiendo en las montañas y así pues, era una vida amargada la que pasaba esta gente. Así tenía que ser porque de otra forma no podía.

Of course, we had to suffer, but it had to be like this. Because in any case, both sides were suffering, so I had to cooperate with them both. Because if you cooperated with one, the other would get angry so there was no choice. This was the way it had to be. I have to tell you that we suffered too much in the war. But we had to feed them because they were suffering more than us, because at least we were at home. But these people were starving, sleeping in the mountains, it was a bitter life that these people lived. So this was the way it had to be, there was no other way.

María Julieta Vega, 20 November 1999

Just as María Julieta felt a maternal responsibility to the soldiers, even feeding the men who might later kill her son, she stressed that she was never badly treated by the *compas* and felt no resentment towards them.

Yo sé que otras personas tienen quejas del Frente Sandinista, yo no. Yo le tengo que decir que no tengo quejas del Frente Sandinista, no, no. [...] Yo no fui maldita por los Sandinistas. Una vez se me gravó un niño, y necesitaba medio litro de sangre. Y el compa me regaló medio litro de sangre. Y el pobrecito, a los dos meses de haberme dado el medio litro de sangre, murió, cayó.

I know that other people have complaints about the Sandinista Front, but I don't. I have to say that I have no complaints about the Sandinista Front. [...] I was never badly treated by these people. Once one of my children was seriously ill, and I needed half a litre of blood. And the *compa* gave me half a litre of blood. And the

poor thing, two months after he had given me the half litre of blood, he died, he fell.

María Julieta Vega, 20 November

While maternal discourses of suffering and sacrifice were also manipulated by Contra mothers, their opposition to the revolution provided the possibility to resist the draft and its concomitant notions of masculinity and honour, which could at times have interesting outcomes for gender identities. Like many other mothers at the time, María Julieta helped her sons to hide to avoid the draft. They slept in hammocks hidden in the mountains and she would take them food. Through them, María Julieta was able to envisage alternative forms of masculinity that could be accepting of the evasion of military service. When one son, despite her pleas to the contrary, decided to go and join the Contra, he dressed as a woman to avoid being recaptured by the Sandinistas. He became integrated into the counter-revolutionary forces wearing a wig and false breasts.

Fue toda una noche de llorar por ese hijo, “hijito, no te vayás, hijito, no te vayás”. “No. Me voy. Alísteme mis cosas, que me voy.” Entonces le alisté sus cositas y se fue. Se vistió como una chavala, se pintó, se puso bustos, pero era mentira, porque era un varón. Entonces cuando él se fue a ingresar, se puso una peluca como chavala y así con ropa de chavala. Así se fue a ingresar.

We spent the whole night crying for that son. “Son, don’t go, son, don’t go” “No, I am going. Get my things ready, because I am going.” So I got his things ready and he went. He dressed like a girl, he put make-up on, breasts, but it wasn’t for real, because he was a boy. When he went to join [the Contra], he put on a wig like a girl and wore girls’ clothes. And that was how he went to join.

María Julieta Vega, 20 November 1999

María Julieta’s quote demonstrates how notions of sacrifice and masculinity shift within the context of war. Despite talking about her son in ways that are destabilising to dominant discourses of masculinity, in the final instance she attempted to restore his masculinity, possibly to prove that it was never under question despite having deserted the army and having dressed as a woman to join the Contra.

A los siete años y nueve meses de andar con la contra, él cayó. Cayó combatiendo. Le hicieron una emboscada. El cayó en un lugar que le dicen ... Pantasma. Decían de él que era muy valiente.

After seven years and nine months of fighting with the Contra, he fell. He fell in combat. He was ambushed. He died in the place they call Pantasma. They said he was very brave.

María Julieta Vega, 20 November 1999

Regardless of positioning with respect to the revolution, discourses of gender are used to make sense of the deaths of children, especially sons, in combat and their significance is augmented by the way in which they are imbued with politics. It was not until my second visit to Waslala in 2001, when I was attempting to clarify with María Julieta how many children she had actually had and how many were surviving today, that she told me about the death of a 12-year-old daughter, whom she believed died from the fear she felt living amidst constant fighting.

Se afligía porque en ese tiempo estaba la guerra, bam, bam, bam, bam. A los diez meses de muerto el papá, murió la niña, porque eran unos combates en el patio de mi casa. Y yo me acuerdo que esa vez la niña ... hasta que temblaba y su corazoncito se paró.

She used to suffer because at that time the war was on, bang, bang, bang, bang. Ten months after her dad had died, the girl died, because the fighting used to take place outside our house. I remember that on this occasion ... she was shaking and her little heart stopped.

María Julieta Vega, 23 May 2001

María Julieta had talked at length about the death of her son, who had voluntarily joined an illegal force. In many ways her daughter was more a “victim” of the war than her older brother was. Yet I might never have found out about her, had I not specifically asked for this information. Deaths of children are not therefore all as equally significant or tragic. It seems that greater value is placed on sons who can bring status and honour even in death, unlike a “weak” and “sensitive” daughter.

Many of the Contra women mobilised discourses of suffering and prioritised their identities as mothers and widows during the war. However, the end of the war in 1990 and the demobilisation of the combatants were not straightforward processes that brought peace and prosperity to ex-combatants and their families.

### **The 1990 elections and demobilisation**

After the 1990 elections the Toncontín accords were signed with Contra leaders to demobilise and disarm the Contra soldiers. In return for handing over their weapons, they received civilian clothes, \$50 each in cash and a promise of land (Abu-Lughod 2000). The new government also intended to resettle the ex-Contras in development poles, areas which would include schools, health centres, water, electricity and land to farm and which would be protected by a rural police force made up of ex-Contras. The idea failed, however, because of a lack of funds and because the areas selected were too small, unsuitable for intensive agriculture or already inhabited (Abu-Lughod 2000).

At the height of the war, the Contra forces estimated that they had 12,000 combatants in their ranks. However, in 1990 nearly 20,000 Contra soldiers turned up to hand over their weapons, which suggests that numbers were probably inflated because of the benefits that were being promised to ex-combatants (Wright 1995).

The situation for many ex-Contras was one of economic desperation and many had lost their land and homes. As Abu-Lughod (2000) has said, the Contras had never fought specifically for land, given that agrarian reform was a significant aspect of the Sandinista programme. However, the demobilisation accords and the economic situation led to demobilised Contras making demands for land. These demands came into conflict with those of confiscated landowners who were pushing to regain lands after the Sandinista electoral defeat. The US government, indifferent to the Contras' demands for land, supported the confiscated landowners. In practice, the Chamorro government also prioritised former owners in the distribution of land (Abu-Lughod 2000).

The Chamorro government is seen to have largely failed in its attempts to reintegrate ex-Contras into civilian life (Close 1999) and consequently, after 1990, some ex-Contras, as well as some ex-EPS soldiers, rearmed to press for their demands. These groups became known as *recontras*, *recompas* and *revueltos*, leading to ongoing armed conflict after the end of the war. Rearmed Contras killed police officers and members of Sandinista co-operatives in the early 1990s (Wright 1995).

The promised benefits of demobilisation have been elusive. Although Mónica had been a combatant for four years, she missed out on demobilisation and its benefits because she had just given birth and was unable to leave Honduras and travel to where ex-Contras were being disarmed in Nicaragua. She said that to demobilise would have meant giving away her child, as she could not have carried her children and her weapons back to Nicaragua, something she was not prepared to do. When she did return, she was not even provided with transport and had to return on foot through the mountains.

El viaje para acá era muy difícil porque había que venir por la montaña. Me llevé mes y medio para regresar a casa, allí en Yaosca. Un mes sólo en la montaña, que el canto de un gallo no se oye. Sólo tigres y animales fieros hay. Nos caminábamos de día, en la noche hacíamos la alimentación para los niños. Y el día siguiente empezábamos a caminar de vuelta. Tardamos un mes y medio para regresar a Nicaragua. [...] Venía con el papá de los niños. Nos veníamos juntos. Después él me dejó en la casa y se fue a un lugar que le dicen El Almendro. Se fue a desmovilizar. Y yo como no tenía armas y eso para desmovilizar, me quedé ahí donde mi mamá. Hasta la vez el comandante me dijo que me iba a conseguir armas para que me fuera a desmovilizar y recibir ayuda pero ya fue difícil.

The journey back was very difficult because we had to come through the mountains. I took a month and a half to get home, to Yaosca. A whole month just in the mountains where you can't even hear a cock crowing. There were just jaguars and fierce animals. We walked by day and at night we made food for the children. And the next day, we started walking again. We took a month and a half to get back to Nicaragua. [...] I came with the children's father. We came together. After he left me at home and went to a place they call El Almendro. He went to demobilise. But as I didn't have weapons to demobilise, I stayed there at my mum's place. The commander told me he was going to get me some weapons so I could go and demobilise and receive aid, but by then it was difficult.

Mónica Avilés, 21 November 1999

When the father of her children left her to go and demobilise after their return, she did not see him again. She talked about the benefits she heard about but missed out on.

Ellos recibieron semillas, hasta ropa, comida, alimentación, reales, zapatos, útiles para la cocina de las mujeres. [...] Yo anduve cuatro años, hermanita, no he recibido hasta hoy ayuda de nada y nosotros somos pobres. Vivo en la finca de mi mamá. Allí trabajo para cubrir las necesidades. Para sembrar los frijoles y el maíz. Porque no tenemos lugares, tierras para trabajarlas. Estoy todavía donde mi mamá. Ahí trabajamos.



They received seeds, clothes, food, money, shoes, kitchen utensils for women. [...] I was there four years and I still haven't had any help from anyone and we are poor. I live on my mother's farm. I work there to meet our needs. To plant beans and corn. Because we don't have land to farm. I am still at my mum's place. We work there.

Mónica Avilés, 21 November 1999

For some women whose partners and sons had been combatants, the end of the war and demobilisation brought the hope that they might now return home. However, for many it brought the tragic confirmation of their deaths. Isabel had been told her husband had died but she clung onto the hope that it was a mistake and he might still be alive. She took a job as a cook in Kubalí, a village 25 kilometres from Waslala, where ex-Contras from that area were turning up to hand over weapons.

Y yo ... para estar segura me fui en el 90 a la desmovilización en Kubalí. Entonces me fui con mis niños a trabajar en una cocina. En los cuatro meses que estuve ahí trabajando esperándolo a ver si llegaba, para comprobar que era cierto pues, entonces ya me dijo el jefe que mi marido era caído, que ya no estuviera pensando en que lo iba a volver a ver. Entonces me enseñaron los documentos que ellos andaban, me vi una tropa con ese nombre, y ahí confirmé yo pues ... porque tantos desmovilizados de la misma zona donde él estaba, entonces yo me di cuenta que era cierto. Entonces siempre seguí trabajando, para terminar ese trabajo. Después de que terminé el trabajo, ellos me pasaron dejando aquí en Waslala.

To be sure I went to the demobilisation in Kubalí. I went there with my kids to work in a kitchen. I spent the four months I was there working waiting to see if he came back, to find out if it was true. Then his commander told me that my husband had died, that I should stop hoping that I was going to see him again. Then he showed me the documents that they were carrying, I saw the name of his unit, and then I was sure ... there were so many demobilised soldiers there from that same area, so I realised that it was true. But I carried on working, to finish the job. When I finished the job, they brought me back to Waslala.

Isabel Quezada, 21 November 1999

In many ways, the ex-Contra combatants and supporters found themselves in an unenviable and ambiguous situation. While the Sandinistas had been defeated in the elections, the Contras had neither won the war, nor were they being rewarded for their anti-revolutionary activities by either the new government or the United States. Most of the women in Waslala expressed their relief at the end of the war but this relief is tempered by the economic difficulties they have had to endure since 1990.

Yo me siento alegre porque cuando se terminó la guerra, se terminó todo. Todos los jóvenes ya pudieron vivir en sus casas tranquilos, ya no ... ya no tenían miedo de que tal vez los fueran a mandar a la montaña. Se terminó esa recluta. Teníamos miedo a la recluta y todo eso se terminó. Después los jóvenes podían vivir en sus casas, los niños también. Por una parte, pero por otra parte, como usted sabe, Nicaragua está bien pobre ahorita. No hay dinero. Es la vida. Hay muchos problemas económicos.

I feel happy, because when the war finished, everything came to an end. All the young men could live in their houses without worrying, they were no longer afraid that they were going to be sent to the mountains. The draft came to an end. We were afraid of the draft and it came to an end. Afterwards, young men could live at home, children too. But on the other hand, as you know, Nicaragua is really poor now. There is no money. That is life. There are many economic problems.

Mercedes Hierro, 20 November 1999

Estamos claros de que [la situación] es mejor en el sentido que se terminó ese miedo, todos los combates pero la situación es bien difícil para nosotras, para las madres solteras. Es duro. Además ... yo que tengo un poquito de familia, pero ... digo estas pobres madres, ¿cómo harán para dar de comer a los hijos, cuando no hay fuentes de trabajo? Es muy difícil la vida que tenemos aquí.

We are clear that [the situation] is better in the sense that that fear is over, all the fighting but the situation is really difficult for us, for single mothers. It is hard. I have a bit of family, but I wonder what these poor mothers do to feed their children, when there are no jobs. The life we have here is very difficult.

Norma Aguilar, 20 November 1999

Just as some of the rearmed groups after 1990 found common ground and fought as *revueltos*, many women, regardless of their political sympathies, would have had similar negative experiences of neoliberalism and economic difficulties. Moreover, Violeta Chamorro had come to power on a platform of reconciliation using her politically divided family as an example. Chamorro's policies with respect to this were clearly contradictory. The notion of development poles for ex-Contras, for example, was based on an assumption that ex-Contras and Sandinistas could not live together (Abu-Lughod 2000). However, not long after the electoral defeat, a number of ex-Contra and ex-EPS had joined forces with UNAG to create the Coordinadora Nacional Campesina (National Campesino Co-ordination) (Wright 1995). The discourse and practice of reconciliation became very powerful after 1990 and was a process in which the women in Waslala became very much involved.

## **Reconciliation**

The end of the war brought hopes that political differences could be put aside in order to prevent further violent conflict in Nicaragua. Many women had voted against the FSLN in the 1990 elections to bring an end to the draft and the suffering associated with the war (Chavez Metoyer 2000). Most of my participants in Waslala lost sons or partners in the war and all were economically devastated by it.

In the interests of improving economic well-being and ending the polarisation in their communities, women in Waslala from both sides of the conflict tried to put the past behind them and unite in their political demands. Sandinista and Contra women initially found common ground in the difficulties both groups were having in securing from the Institute of Social Security (INSSBI) the war pensions to which they were entitled. The procedure for obtaining a pension was proving to be extremely difficult and many women were becoming entangled in bureaucratic complications with the government department. Some of them realised that their struggle to obtain pensions would be more effective if they pressured the government jointly. This uniting was not unique to Waslala. After 1990 the Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs committee in Matagalpa also began to work with a number of Resistance mothers (Esperanza Cabrera, personal communication).

The joint effort in Waslala led to the formation of a Mothers' Committee made up of two Resistance women and three Sandinista women. Isabel Quezada was part of this committee. From the beginning the committee talked of the need for reconciliation.

Entonces comenzamos a hablar pues tantas dolientes tenían ellas como nosotras. Es cierto que mi marido se había ido a la guerra y había muerto pero que así también habían muerto los de ellas, era el mismo dolor y entonces compartíamos pues que bajáramos ese odio y empezamos a trabajar en la organización.

We began to say how as many of them were in pain as we were. It is true that my husband went to war and died, but their husbands had died in this way too. It was the same pain, and so we agreed that we had to diminish this hatred, and we began to work in the organisation.

Isabel Quezada, 21 November 1999

However, the hatred and resentment created by the war was not easily overcome and not all of the women were in favour of unity and reconciliation. Isabel was heavily criticised by other women of the Resistance for her involvement in the committee and they accused her of being a *revuelta* in a derogatory fashion. She even received death threats for her association with Sandinista women.

Yo empecé a trabajar con pocas mujeres, pero me decían a mí que yo era una mujer vendida al Frente, que era la presidenta y que yo no tenía que andar con las mujeres sandinistas, que yo era una *revuelta*, que no iban a confiar en mí, que a mí me iban a matar, que a mí me iban a secuestrar, que me iban a matar en la montaña, porque yo no tenía que andar hablándoles a las sandinistas. Entonces yo no les hice caso.

I started working with just a few women, but they said to me I had sold myself to the Frente, that I was the president and had no reason to mix with the Sandinista women, that I was a *revuelta*, that they didn't trust me, that they were going to kill me, they were going to kidnap me and they were going to kill me in the mountains, because I had no reason to be talking to the Sandinistas. But I took no notice.

Isabel Quezada, 21 November 1999

Despite these difficulties, by 1993 the organisation had become part of a national commission of reconciliation and, through joint efforts, managed to secure funding from international agencies for a number of development projects. Many of my participants were beneficiaries of these projects. Both Sandinista and Resistance women were jointly organised in a self-help housing project, known as El Progreso, which built 26 houses for mothers of the Resistance and 26 houses for Sandinista mothers (See Figures 5.3, 5.4 and 5.5 for pictures of El Progreso). Unlike the development poles, El Progreso was aimed at peaceful co-existence and bringing the two communities together, as well as resolving housing needs. The *barrio* was inaugurated by the “Mother of the Nicaraguans” herself, President Violeta Chamorro (See Figure 5.1).



Figure 5.1  
The inauguration of El Progreso, Waslala by President Violeta Chamorro, 1995  
Source: Valentina Cortedano

Entonces cuando nosotras nos unimos en las organizaciones, gestionamos un proyecto de viviendas. Logré beneficiar a 26 mujeres de la Resistencia. En el mismo proyecto se beneficiaron 26 mamás del FSLN, y viven todas juntas en el barrio. Después yo gestioné un CDI para los niños de este barrio y lo logré conseguir.[...] Bueno, me costó porque las mujeres teníamos un odio para con otras mujeres, porque ellas eran mujeres de compas y nosotras mujeres de contrarrevolucionarios. Pero fui yo hablándoles a ellas. Me costó, fue difícil. Una vez que todas comprendieran .. esas mujeres que les mandé a traer, esas no querían ni hablarles a las madres. Y ahora no, si una no tiene sal, le presta la otra. Es bonito, y se celebró las 52 mujeres en la vivienda con la presencia de Doña Violeta, le hicimos venir. Miraba muy lindo el proyecto.

So when we joined our organisations, we set up a housing project. I managed to include 26 women of the Resistance as beneficiaries. In the same project, there were also 26 Sandinista mothers, and they all live together in the same *barrio*. Then I also managed to set up a CDI for the children of the *barrio*. [...] But it was difficult, because we women feel hatred towards the other women, because they were the wives of *compas*, and we were wives of counter-revolutionaries. But I kept talking to them. But it was really hard. Once they understood .... when I first brought them together, they didn't want to talk to the other mothers. But not any more, if one of them runs out of salt, the other lends her some. It is nice and the 52 women celebrated their homes in the presence of Doña Violeta, we persuaded her to come. And she thought the project was very nice.

Isabel Quezada, 21 November 1999

The project, which successfully provided 52 women with houses, received little local government support. Roads through the *barrio* had not been provided so the streets filled with mud when it rained and the inhabitants had to tap illegally into the electricity supply (See Figure 5.2).

A number of Sandinista and Resistance women jointly created a construction co-operative in which beneficiaries learned to make bricks and build latrines.

Después conseguimos a ver como llevábamos las mujeres a Mulukukú y Río Blanco, Chontales para que aprendieran a hacer bloques y a conocer otras experiencias de las mujeres de Mulukukú. Había una cooperativa de mujeres carpinteras y de mujeres bloqueras y las llevamos. Entonces logramos hacer una cooperativa de 16 mujeres y estuvo funcionando. Entonces involucramos siempre los dos sectores, hay mujeres de la Resistencia y mujeres del FSLN. Eran beneficiarias en la cooperativa haciendo bloques, salen al campo para hacer contratos donde hay viviendas, hacen las letrinas de los barrios y del campo.





Figure 5.2  
Getting electricity at El Progreso, Waslala  
Source: Julie Cupples

Then we managed to take the women to Mulukukú and Río Blanco and Chontales so they could learn how to make bricks and learn from the experiences of women in Mulukukú. There was a co-operative of women carpenters and women brick-makers and we took them there. Then we managed to set up a co-operative the Resistance and women of the FSLN. They became beneficiaries in the co-operative making bricks and they go out to the countryside to do contracts where they are building houses, and build latrines in *barrios* and in the countryside.  
Isabel Quezada, 21 November 1999

Subsequently, the organisation received funding from a German agency to purchase a house in which they could run an office and hold meetings, workshops and courses. Once they had purchased the house, other initiatives followed which included a revolving credit fund, the provision of art classes for street children and training courses for women with disabilities in beauty therapy, floristry, bakery, dressmaking and *piñatas*.



Figure 5.3  
The primary school and *comedor infantil* at El Progreso, Waslala  
Source: Julie Cupples

Although these achievements are impressive, they involved significant amounts of persuasion. Isabel continually had to stress the importance of working together to secure funding for projects, as funding would only be provided if working together was demonstrated. So the need for aid for housing and sources of employment was constantly overlaid with the need to bring about reconciliation. This reconciliation would come about by privileging their identities as mothers and widows and their common experience as mothers who had suffered because of the war.

Les dije, “mientras no nos reconciliemos, y no hablemos con estas mujeres, no vamos a poder ser beneficiadas en las casas. ¿Ustedes necesitan más casas?” “Sí”. “Ah bueno, dejemos odio y rencores porque la guerra pasó, todas perdimos, todas tenemos hijos huérfanos, todas tenemos hijos caídos, así que entonces no sabe quién mató a mi marido, ni yo no sé quién mató al tuyo. Así que entonces para



poder progresar, olvidémoslo todo y vivimos en paz”. Era lloronsina, lloraba la una, lloraba la otra, lloraba la otra. Pero me agradecen a mí pues, porque nunca habríamos logrado nada si no hubiera sido de la forma de reconciliación. No se habría logrado nada. Nada, nada, nada, de los proyectos que gestionamos y que fundaron, no se habrían logrado.

I said to them “If we don’t make up with those women, and don’t talk to those women, we are not going to get the houses. Do you need houses?” “Yes” “Well then, let’s drop all the hatred and resentment, because the war is over. We all lost, all our children have lost their fathers, we have all lost sons, but you don’t know who killed my husband and I don’t know who killed yours. So if we are going to make progress, let’s forget it all and live in peace.” There was so much crying, one was crying, the other was crying. But they are grateful to me, because we would never have achieved anything if it hadn’t been for that kind of reconciliation. We wouldn’t have achieved anything. None of the projects that we set up would ever have been achieved.

Isabel Quezada, 21 November 1999

This reconciliation was also very much aimed at their children with the intention that they would not grow up feeling the same resentment towards others that their mothers had felt. By focusing on the next generation, discourses of reconciliation became powerful and persuasive.

Nosotras tenemos que concentrarnos en nuestros hijos que van creciendo. Incluso mis dos hijos varones, no debo decirles yo de que odien a los *compas*, o que odien a los hijos de las otras madres sandinistas. Yo como madre de la Resistencia tengo mis dos hijos varones, yo les voy a dar el ejemplo que yo fundé. De que nos reconciliamos con las madres, de que mayormente no tenemos culpa de la guerra, no estamos de acuerdo con que nuestros maridos se fueran a la guerra, peor nuestros hijos, porque son pedazos de nuestra vida los hijos. Si ellos ven que tenemos odio nosotros, ellos se crían con ese odio. Entonces si yo les digo a mis hijos “miren, no jueguen con esos chavalos de esa otra madre sandinista, porque esos son enemigos de nosotros porque mataron a tu papá”, podría decirles. Pero yo no sé si el marido de ella mató a mi marido, ni ella sabe si mi marido mató al de ella, éstos fueron los conflictos de combate en la guerra. Entonces para mí, lo importante era de que esa juventud que se está creciendo de madres y viudas de la Resistencia, tanto de los sandinistas, los niños se quieran, que jueguen juntos, que ellos nunca van a tener ese odio a través de las muertes de los familiares, los papás, los tíos, las madres, porque hay madres que murieron en la guerra.

We have to concentrate on our children who are growing up. Even with my two sons, I mustn’t tell them to hate the *compas*, or to hate the children of the other Sandinista mothers. As a mother of the Resistance I have my two sons and I am going to give them the example that I created. That we made up with the mothers,

that mostly we are not to blame for the war, we weren't in agreement with our husbands going to war, and especially not our children, because our children are fragments of our lives. If they see that we are filled with hatred, they'll grow up with that hatred. I could say to my sons "Don't play with the kids of that other Sandinista mother, because they are enemies of ours because they killed your dad." But I don't know if her husband killed my husband, and she doesn't know if my husband killed hers, these were the conflicts of wartime combat. So for me the most important thing is that the children of mothers and widows of the Resistance and of the Sandinistas love each other, that they play together, that they are never going to have this hatred which comes from the death of relatives, their fathers, uncles, mothers, because there are also mothers who died in the war.  
Isabel Quezada, 21 November 1999

Despite the strength of the joint organisation, the power of the discourse of reconciliation and its success in attracting funds for development projects, reconciliation did not last and the Sandinista and the Resistance women once again separated into two different organisations. This occurred despite the fact that much of the aid received was on the condition that they worked together and that many of the members of the organisation lived together in El Progreso and were forced to co-exist on a daily and more immediate basis.

Mullholland's (2001) work on women in Northern Ireland has shown that Protestant and Catholic women have been able to work successfully across the divide by emphasising their gender identities rather than their political identities. Women in Waslala have attempted to achieve the same form of reconciliation by focusing on their common difficulties as mothers and widows. However, this attempt has failed here because it is impossible to separate gender identities from political identities. Because of the way that motherhood has been politically manipulated in Nicaragua, gender identities and political identities are not only closely intertwined but are mutually constituted. Through the war, women's identities as mothers became entrenched in politics and despite moves towards reconciliation these identities have been strengthened since 1990. This is perhaps because it has only been possible to openly assume a Contra/Resistance identity since 1990. It would have been too dangerous to do so in the 1980s. Women constructing themselves as *Madres de la Resistencia* and *Madres Sandinistas* has further politicised gender identities and perpetuated ideas of conflict and irreconcilability.



Figure 5.4  
El Progreso, Waslala  
Source: Julie Cupples

The Resistance women felt that the development projects had been appropriated by the Sandinista women who deliberately worked to isolate them.

Sin embargo, en la Asociación de Madres, ni empleo me dieron. Después de que les entregué todo, nunca me han dado empleo. Hay mujeres que ganan \$115, \$120 ahí en la asociación que yo fundé. Pero no me han dado empleo para nada. Ni en la cooperativa de las mujeres, en ninguno de los proyectos me han tomado en cuenta para un empleo. Me han aislado totalmente, sólo es una organización sandinista. Después con nuestras firmas, con nuestras fuerzas, se logró todo, entonces ahora sólo están ellas. [...] Entonces nosotras tenemos otra organización aparte otra vez. Tenemos la organización de la Resistencia aparte. Que no es bueno eso pues. Hicieron campañas entre ellas para inscribir en la asamblea sólo a las madres sandinistas. Nosotras no nos dimos cuenta de ese juego, entonces ellas al momento de hacer la asamblea, sólo tenían voz y voto las que estaban en la lista constituida. Nos hicieron eso pues. Entonces ellas tienen esta organización, que a mí me costó mucho. Yo soy la fundadora de la organización, de la Asociación de Madres. Por mí tienen todo eso, y no me han querido dar un empleo. Sólo las madres sandinistas viven ahí. Y cuando viene el organismo, ellas les dicen que nosotras estamos ahí siendo beneficiadas pero no es cierto. Y yo nunca gané ni un córdoba. Entonces en la directiva que ellas tienen, tienen sólo madres sandinistas, no tienen una madre que sea de la Resistencia.

However, in the Mothers' Association, they never even gave me a job. After I did everything for them, they have never given me a job. There are some women who earn \$115, \$120 in the association that I founded. But they haven't given me a job





Figure 5.5  
El Progreso, Waslala  
Source: Julie Cupples

at all. Or in the women's co-operative, in none of the projects have I ever been considered for employment. They have totally isolated me, it has become just a Sandinista organisation. With our signatures, our efforts, we achieved it all, but now they are the only ones there. [...] So we have a separate organisation once again. The organisation of the Resistance is separate. And that is not a good thing. They conducted campaigns just to nominate Sandinista women for the assembly. We didn't realise what they were up to, so when it came to the assembly, only those that were on the list had a say. That is what they did to us. So they have taken over the organisation that I put so much effort into. I am the founder of the organisation, of the Mothers' Association. It is because of me that they have all that, and they wouldn't give me a job. There are just Sandinista mothers there. And when the aid agency comes, they tell them that we are also beneficiaries but it is not true. And I have never earned a penny. In the committee there are only Sandinista mothers, there is not a single mother from the Resistance.  
Isabel Quezada, 21 November 1999

While Isabel reproduced discourses of reconciliation beautifully, as her quote on pages 210-211 demonstrates, closer probing revealed much more conflicting responses. The Sandinista women took over the house that was purchased and the Resistance women were no longer able to use it.

[Las madres sandinistas] nos quitaron la casa, la mitad de la casa. Las madres sandinistas arreglaron toda la casa, y Alemania dijo, se les va a dar la casa, pero la mitad es para que la Resistencia tenga su oficina, y la otra mitad para que las madres sandinistas tengan su oficina, y cada quien atienda su gente. Pero no cumplieron ellas, ellas todita la casa la agarraron, ellas tienen su oficina ahí y a nosotras no nos dejan entrar adentro. No. No vamos nosotras a esa casa, ni a esa organización. Nosotras vivimos reuniéndose, prestamos una casa prestada para reunirnos. Y no tenemos una silla, no tenemos una mesa, no tenemos nada. Y ellas ocuparon las firmas de nosotras, ocuparon la organización para después aislarnos. Y entonces por eso yo siempre sigo trabajando con las madres de la Resistencia.

[The Sandinista mothers] took the house off us, half of the house. The Sandinista mothers did the house up and Germany said they were going to give them the house, but half was for the Resistance women to have their office and the other half was for the Sandinista mothers, so that they could both attend their people. But they didn't stick to this agreement, they grabbed the whole house, they've got their office there and they won't let us in. No, we don't go to that house, or to that organisation. We still meet up, we borrow someone's house to hold a meeting. And we don't have a chair or a table or anything. And they used our signatures, they used the organisation to isolate us. And that's why I'm still working with the mothers of the Resistance.  
Isabel Quezada, 21 November 1999

Friendships and solidarity with other women in Nicaragua are often difficult anyway. Evelyn lived at El Progreso, and while she and Norma were “like sisters”, she did not have close friendships with other women in the *barrio*.

Cuando viene la gente de fuera como usted, compartimos amistades. Nosotros somos distintos. Aquí no nos queremos casi.

When people come from elsewhere like you, we share friendship. But we are different, we don't really like each other.

Evelyn Hernández, 22 May 2001

If friendships with other women are difficult in Nicaragua, they are even more unlikely when they are complicated by political resentment. A decade after the end of the war anti-Sandinista feeling persists among many of the Resistance women. Luz Marina had never forgiven the Sandinistas for her experience in 1979 and had never been able to have anything made of gold since they confiscated the jewellery she had bought while working for the colonel. She compared the difficult economic situation to an ongoing war which she called the “guerra de hambre” and the “guerra de medicinas”, the hunger war and the medicine war, which she clearly saw as a Sandinista legacy. Despite popular understanding of neoliberalism in Nicaragua and the role of the IMF, Luz Marina did not relate Nicaragua's economic situation to the economic model, but tended to blame the FSLN and not the US or the IMF for all of Nicaragua's problems. This blame easily translated into resentment towards individual Sandinista women. Ironically, she was critical of her Sandinista neighbours at El Progreso who seemed to making progress, such as the Sandinista woman whose garden was overflowing with corn and yucca that she had planted. According to Luz Marina, this woman had “una boca como una ráfaga de balas”, a mouth like a burst of gunfire. The persistence of anti-Sandinista sentiment was also augmented by fear of the Sandinistas and the possibility that they might return to power. Norma, who lost her two oldest sons, was fearful for the next two, who were too young to have been recruited in the 1980s but had now grown up. She saw a future Sandinista victory as the possibility that military service might be reinstated.

The geographies of reconciliation in Waslala have therefore been complex. Motherhood identities have been used to promote discourses of reconciliation and to position women

with very different political trajectories in the same discursive and material space as mothers and widows. The discourses of reconciliation promoted by the Chamorro government appealed to aid agencies who provided funds for projects on this basis. This approach forced Sandinista and Resistance women together in the same physical space, in the office, in the housing project and in the co-operative. Aid was given on the condition that they would live and work together. Consequently, aid agencies in their attempt to foster peace and reconciliation, unwittingly reinforced polarised political identities. Bitterness and resentment prevailed because ironically the process intensified political identities that during the war were less overt and more ambiguous.

Nonetheless, these wartime identities are not static and a number of shifts could be detected. The process is fraught with contradictions but there is some evidence that even counter-revolutionary women are not necessarily opposed to adopting “revolutionary” and feminist positions.

### **Revolutionary legacies?**

Despite the failure of reconciliation in Waslala and the persistence of resentment towards Sandinistas, most of these women had nonetheless experienced significant personal transformations since the 1980s. Their identities as mothers, widows and victims of war were still very important to them and in many ways their wartime identities had become entrenched. They called their organisation the Association of Mothers and Victims of War, using the terminology of victimhood to portray themselves. However, there was also evidence of a willingness to attempt new ways of being that were not so politically confining. These include an openness to forms of political organisation and work that could be considered to be legacies of the revolution. While this change of tack might be a pragmatic move given the changed circumstances, it does suggest that opposition to the revolution was not ideological as such but had more to do with Sandinista errors, the dynamic of the war and the climate of intolerance. It undermines Hager’s (1998) view that rural people from the interior of Nicaragua are inherently conservative and deeply religious and therefore ideologically opposed to collective forms of agriculture and other work.

Both María Julieta and Isabel talked about the tragic ways in which their husbands died. However, they were both aware of how much progress they had made since the deaths of their husbands and did not idealise their dead husbands in the way that I discussed in Chapter 3. When Isabel's husband left to join the Contra, she felt unable to manage the farm alone.

Pero me hacía falta él por la dirección de los trabajos, porque en ese tiempo las mujeres nunca decidíamos, estábamos sujetas a los maridos, nunca salíamos a ningún lado, éramos unas personas tímidas, entonces no se podía uno independizar solo, hacer su trabajo uno solo con sus medios propios.

I needed him to oversee the jobs, because at that time women never made decisions, we were subject to our husbands, we never went out anywhere, we were shy people, and so it was hard to become independent and work with your own means.

Isabel Quezada, 21 November 1999

She went on to lead the organisation of the Resistance women, mobilising women from the entire area, and has worked tirelessly to improve the lives of women. By 1999 she was a high-profile and respected community leader amongst the Resistance women, who had done much to improve women's self-esteem and seek solutions to their material deprivation. María Julieta also recognised that her husband was a "machista" who prevented her and her children from making progress. Although he was dead, she said she should never have married him.

Nunca debería haberme casado con él. Yo ya había terminado la escuela primaria y él ni sabía poner su nombre.

I never should have married him. I had already finished primary school and he didn't even know how to write his name.

María Julieta Vega, 23 May 2001

After he died, she brought her children to live in town so they could go to school and she began to work as a community healthworker and midwife. While she had a significant amount of informal experience attending labours and her mother had also been a midwife, she also received some formal training at this time. For ten years she had been attending labours and curing illnesses with natural medicine and was proud of her achievement and personal transformation.



Ya tengo diez años de atender partos. Gracias a Dios, no se me ha muerto ni una mujer ni un niño. Y entonces ya más que todo, soy capacitada y me estoy capacitando más, para saber más, con más experiencia, para que no se me vaya a morir una mujer jamás, porque es un problema la muerte materna en la mujer.

I have been delivering babies for ten years. Thank God, I have never had a woman or a baby die. More than anything, I am trained and I am still training, to learn more, to be more experienced, so that I am never going to have a woman die, because maternal mortality in women is a problem.

María Julieta Vega, 23 May 2001

While the intensification of war-related identities has been an obstacle to reconciliation, these identities have also been used in “revolutionary” ways as a form of political action. Mónica had joined forces with a group of ex-Contras and they were using their identities as *desmovilizados* to make demands on the government for land. Seven hundred demobilised Contras occupied 8,200 *manzanas* of land in Ceiba Dudú, which is a three to four hour walk from Waslala. The owner, Carlos Argüello, was willing to sell the land and they were lobbying the government to buy the land from him and keep the promises that were made to them by the government of Violeta Chamorro. They were taking it in turns to live in makeshift shelters on the land to maintain a constant presence. If successful in their demands, they might decide to divide the land up and farm it individually. However, in 2001 they were a highly organised collective force fighting for the right to a livelihood.

Norma, who was working in the construction co-operative with Sandinista women before the collapse of reconciliation, saw working in this way as a positive solution to their economic situation and she hoped to be able to work collectively in a co-operative again.

Organizamos una cooperativa de 22 mujeres de lotes, lavaderos, cementos ..todo ... para construir las casas. [...] Pero nos ha sacado la presidenta de la cooperativa. Entonces nos hemos quedado sin trabajo. [...] Es muy difícil la vida que tenemos aquí. Por eso trabajamos en la cooperativa. [...] Pero como nos hemos desubicado, entonces ya no tenemos trabajo. Las demás trabajan. Tal vez si vienen más proyectos, tal vez conseguimos trabajo otra vez. Pero no creo. Estamos pensando poner una cooperativa. Vamos a ver si lo hacemos. Para salir adelante.

We organised a co-operative of 22 women, to build sites, wash tubs, cement ... everything ... to build houses. [...] But the president of the co-operative has

thrown us out. We have been left without any work. [...] Our life here is very hard. That is why we worked in the co-operative. [...] But as we have been removed, we don't have work anymore. The rest are still working. Perhaps if there are more projects, we will get some work again. But I doubt it. We are thinking about starting a co-operative. We'll see if we can. In order to survive.  
Norma Aguilar, 20 November 1999

The women in Waslala, despite their difficulties and the ambiguities of their political position, attested to the benefits and power that have come from political organisation. María Julieta and Isabel in particular were motivated by an ongoing desire to work with other women for positive social change and in the process they were also transformed.

El ser organizada ha sido una gran cosa para mí. Por medio de ser una mujer organizada, hasta he logrado ... becar a un hijo. El que está en primer año. [...] Gracias a Dios y a la organización he logrado muchas cosas. Por trabajar en salud también he logrado muchas cosas. Conozco bastante porque las madres no se me mueren.

Being organised has been a great thing for me. Through being an organised woman, I have even managed to get a scholarship for my son. The one in the first year of secondary. [...] Thanks to God and organisation, I have achieved many things. From working in health I have also achieved many things. I know a lot because the mothers do not die on me.  
María Julieta Vega, 23 May 2001

When I returned to Waslala in 2001, Isabel had used her extensive experience to get a job as a social promoter with the local council. She told me jokingly how she had threatened the mayor and told him that if they did not give her a job, she would leave and Waslala would lose out. Consequently, she was now overseeing the electrification of a number of the *barrios* in the municipality. She wore her widowhood on her sleeve but was also capable of making political demands and mobilising large numbers of women. She told me how she had received a marriage proposal from a farmer in one of the *barrios* where she had been working. She said he was very nice but was not going to accept his offer because she knew that marriage would have a negative impact on her independence.

Salgo cuando yo quiera, regreso a la hora que yo quiera, y platico con quien me dé la regalada gana.

I go out when I like, I come home at the time I want, and I talk to whoever I damn well please.

Isabel Quezada, 22 May 2001

Like many Sandinista women, the women in Waslala had committed themselves to working to improve women's lives but were doing so by maintaining a distance from political parties. None of the participants in Waslala had anything to do with the Partido de la Resistencia, the Party of the Resistance. Politicians were not judged on the party they belonged to but by their commitment to women's issues. The PLC mayor of Waslala in 1999 was compared unfavourably with the Sandinista mayor of La Dalia.

Aquí no hemos tenido ayuda del alcalde, jamás. De ninguno de los alcaldes a nosotras como mujeres nos han apoyado. Y nunca nos dijeron "tomá para el pasaje ida y vuelta". Nosotras alabamos mucho al alcalde de La Dalia, el alcalde de La Dalia les ayuda a las madres cuando van a hacer gestiones. Les da para que coman y para hospedaje. [...] Pero el alcalde que tenemos, no le gusta la organización de mujeres, no le gusta que hayan mujeres organizadas, entonces el alcalde de nosotros no nos apoya pero en nada, en nada, ni en una tabla, porque a él no le gusta la organización de mujeres. A él le gusta la organización de mujeres pero para él, para que le estén apoyando para ser líder, pero para que sea una junta directiva que se presente pues con alguna necesidad de las madres, eso no le gusta a él, a ninguno, ni al alcalde, ni al vicealcalde. Aquí nosotras por ayuda del alcalde no tenemos esperanza para nada. [...] El alcalde de la Dalia apoya a la organización de mujeres, y les escucha las peticiones, a todititas les ha dado casas, a todititas les ha puesto la luz en los barrios. Y nosotras con ese alcalde estamos fritas, no tenemos ninguna ayuda.

Here we have never had any help from the mayor. None of the mayors have supported us as women. They have never given us anything towards our travel expenses. We praise the mayor of La Dalia, the mayor of La Dalia helps women when they travel to approach agencies. He gives them money for food and accommodation. [...] But the mayor that we have, he doesn't like women's organisations, he doesn't like women being organised, so he doesn't support us at all, he has never given us so much as a plank of wood, because he doesn't like women's organisations. He likes women's organisations, but for him, when they support his leadership, but if a committee presents itself to him with the needs of mothers, he doesn't like that, nor does the deputy mayor. There is no hope of any help from the mayor. [...] The mayor of La Dalia supports the organisation of women, he listens to their requests, he has given them all houses, and he has put electricity in all the *barrios*. We've had it with our mayor, we don't get any help.

Isabel Quezada, 21 November 1999

While opposition to the FSLN in this part of Nicaragua grew partly out of a resistance to collective forms of agriculture and political organisation, none of the women in this study remained opposed to these on ideological grounds. Indeed for some, collective or co-operative ways of working were seen as the most appropriate solution to their economic situation. During struggles such as these, women undergo profound personal transformations which are characterised by a high degree of pragmatism, but are also very pro-woman and ready to take on authority in their positions. Consequently, “revolutionary” forms of organisation co-exist with suspicion and fear of the FSLN and scepticism towards political parties in general.

### **Conclusions**

Women in Waslala became Contra supporters or combatants not out of a coherent objection to Marxism-Leninism but because they were politically positioned through the gender relations in which they were implicated and their gendered roles and identities as wives, mothers or domestic employees.

My conversations with these women suggest that gender identities are simultaneously powerful and tenuous as a basis for reconciliation or subsequent political action or development initiatives. While motherhood and its connotations of sacrifice and nurturing enable women to attempt reconciliation towards former “enemies” and to both deconstruct and reconstruct masculinity, reconciliation collapses in practice because of the way in which the war, the revolution and post-war circumstances have led to the mutual constitution of gender and political identities. It demonstrates the extent to which the two are inseparable in Nicaragua and in some ways have paradoxically been intensified since the end of the war. The failure of reconciliation is further fuelled by both the economic hardship and individualism created by neoliberalism and the difficulty that women have in forming friendships with other women because of the ways in which constructions of masculinity and femininity are embedded in society and tend to create antagonisms between women.

By focusing on the gender and political identities of a group of counter-revolutionary women in Waslala, I have demonstrated how women simultaneously perform multiple

and often contradictory identities which are constantly shifting. Women have reinforced both traditional and war-related identities, which has had a negative impact on reconciliation with Sandinista women. However, my data suggest that these women were not inherently conservative or reactionary. While they privileged their identities as mothers, widows and victims of war, many were also inspired by the potential of political organisation and some had experienced significant personal transformations since the deaths of their husbands. Consequently, there was a positive attitude towards collective and co-operative forms of agriculture and other work and an awareness of the need to work for women's specific interests.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Contra brutality and atrocities of this kind have been documented in Cabestrero (1985), Dickey (1985) and Bush and Shauffer (1985).

<sup>2</sup> There were two main Contra armies, the FDN (Nicaraguan Democratic Front) operating out of Honduras and the ARDE (Revolutionary Democratic Alliance) operating out of Costa Rica. They were later renamed the RN (Nicaraguan Resistance). Today there is a political party of the same name.

<sup>3</sup> These regions are made up of the departments of Matagalpa, Jinotega, Chontales, Boaco, Río San Juan, the RAAN and the RAAS.

## Love and money in an age of neoliberalism: The complexities of gender and work in Nicaragua

### Introduction

When I returned to Nicaragua in 2001, I went to visit Conchita, a single mother with whom I developed a close friendship in 1999. I had heard from a mutual friend in Matagalpa that she had recently lost her job as a domestic servant. She was not at home when I arrived and I sat chatting to her adult daughter, Rosa, and enquired whether or not her mother was working to which she replied she was not. I then asked Rosa whether she was working and she told me she was not working either. When my friend returned I discovered that her “non-work” involved washing and ironing six days a week from 6.30am to 5pm for a family of eight. Later that afternoon, Rosa set up a stall outside the house from which she proceeded to sell 100 freshly prepared *enchiladas*, an exercise which she repeated every afternoon. I could only assume that to Rosa not working meant not having a formal salaried job and this is indicative of the extent to which she had internalised normative gendered notions which undervalue women’s work in the informalised sectors of the economy and render it invisible.

Nonetheless, Conchita herself had very clearly assumed the identity of a working mother. In 1999 she was very critical of the children who were always begging in the streets and knocking on doors asking for food. She blamed their parents for not caring for them properly. When I pointed out that the economic situation probably made it difficult for them to support their children adequately, she stated that without doubt the situation was desperate, but that there was always something you could do. If you could not find a job in domestic service, then you could always go out and sell something. Then she added with a degree of pride as well as bitterness: “I have been poor all my life but I have never ever sent any of my children out begging. I have always supported them myself.”

With a combined unemployment and underemployment rate of 60 per cent (Vargas 1999a) and a situation of widespread economic desperation which creates an abundant

pool of cheap labour, finding a job that can sustain a family in Nicaragua is not easy. According to official figures, women make up 47 per cent of the economically active population in urban areas and 36 per cent in rural areas (Renzi and Agurto 1997). Although these figures record high labour market participation for women, they are not particularly illustrative of the types of work women do.

All of the women in this study were working in some way, usually combining a complex blend of productive and reproductive activities, formal sector work with informal sector work and paid and unpaid political work. Those seeking work in Nicaragua have to contend not only with the lack of available employment and the abysmally low wages paid, but also with the gender segregation of the labour market which tends to discriminate against women on the basis of their caregiving responsibilities. A number of the participants in this study had salaried (although often temporary or funding dependent) positions within civil society organisations or development NGOs, a few as journalists or actors, and were to some extent in a more progressive working environment in which gender subordination could be challenged. The majority, however, worked predominately in activities which tended to be both informal and constructed as feminised segments of the economy which in terms of the impact on gender identity could be dismissed as negative. Some participants carried out paid domestic work, often doing other people's washing and ironing, others prepared food for sale from their homes or in the street, some worked from home as seamstresses and others worked in subsistence agriculture or took on seasonal jobs in coffee processing plants (*beneficios*). Rosario Peña raised 14 children alone by brewing *cususa*, an illegal liquor made of maize, which she frequently exchanged for rice and beans rather than cash. Two participants were employed by the state, both within the military. Paula Montecino, who was only 14 in 1999, was the only participant who had never earned money of her own and was engaged full time in domestic work and childcare. In addition to income-generating activities, many women were also engaged in some form of political activism as well as domestic work.

As McDowell (1999:125) states, the "definition of work as waged labour in a formally structured employment relation is based on a masculine ideal of work" and therefore for

the purposes of this chapter I am defining work more broadly to include waged labour but also unremunerated domestic work, childcare and subsistence agriculture and also both paid and unpaid political work.

By focusing on the broader picture of women's work, the intersection of paid work with unpaid and political work, the blurring of boundaries between these areas, and on the reorganisation of the labour division within the household, this chapter explores the meanings women give to the work they do. It is based on the understanding that economic restructuring can generate both crisis as well as a space for changes in gender identities and that work is a discursive site in which gender ideologies can sometimes be destabilised.

After reviewing the debates which have taken place within the literature on gender and work in Latin America, this chapter considers the contradictory impacts of neoliberalism on work in Nicaragua. I then explore how maternal identities are constructed and renegotiated in relation to the work that women do. This is followed by a consideration of the processes by which jobs as well as workers are given gendered attributes. Subsequently, I wish to question the GAD emphasis on the double burden. Without wishing to deny the huge contribution made by Nicaraguan women's unpaid labour to the national economy, my evidence suggests that when women engage in productive work, domestic work is not simply added on but is renegotiated in a number of ways. I then examine the non-market conceptualisations of work by Nicaraguan women by considering the "labours of love" in which they are involved. Finally, I look at how women feel about the work that they do particularly in terms of personal ambitions or aspirations which undermines assumptions that women's work in impoverished third world countries is primarily about survival or subsistence.

### **Gender and work in Latin America**

The literature on gender and work in Latin America is extensive<sup>1</sup> and has seen a number of theoretical shifts over the last two or three decades. The restructuring of the global economy has had a decisive impact on women's labour market participation in the third world (Stichter 1988, Standing 1989) and it was this increase which led to a series of



studies dedicated to the exploration of this phenomenon. Early research on women's work in Latin America was influenced by a political economy or socialist feminist framework and focused primarily on the gender division of labour and the role played by women's work in the development process. Many of these early studies tended to rely on stereotypical notions of femininity (McDowell 1999) and concluded that women were marginalised during industrialisation (Acevedo 1995). Women were seen as victims of modernisation or industrialisation rather than as economic actors in their own right and the discrimination women have felt within or on entry to the labour market was explained by reference to ideological constructs such as motherhood and the family (Segura 1994). An attempt to explain women's subordinate position in the global economy produced a stereotypical third world factory worker which failed to account for the wide variations in women's experiences (Pearson 1986, Acevedo 1995, Laurie et al. 1999, Benería et al. 2000) and neglected to provide an explanation for the persistence of gender as a differentiating factor (Faulkner and Lawson 1991).

Much of this early research is now seen to have focused too narrowly on exploitation and failed to adequately theorise women's non-economic behaviour (Fernández-Kelly and Wolf 2001). Consequently, over the course of the 1980s a theoretical shift could be detected away from dualistic analyses of women's lives and an exclusive focus on women to a more integrated analysis which focuses on how gender shapes social processes (Acevedo 1995, Ward and Pyle 1995). In addition, the marginalisation thesis which saw women principally as a reserve army of labour (Nash and Safa 1980) was revised as the limitations of this approach became apparent (Scott 1986, Faulkner and Lawson 1991).

As production processes became globalised in many parts of the world, women became the preferred labour force because of an assumption that they could be paid lower wages and are more naturally suited to factory work (Elson and Pearson 1981, McClenaghan 1997). According to Mohanty (1997), these naturalising and often racialised assumptions are crucial to understanding the sexual politics of global capitalism. Consequently, most of the scholarship on gender and work has been in the context of the New International Division of Labour (NIDL) and has been sectorally based with most studies focusing on

the Mexican *maquiladoras* (Fernández-Kelly 1983, Ruiz and Tiano 1987, Tiano 1990, 1994, Sklair 1993, Pearson 1995), export processing elsewhere in Latin America (Arizpe and Aranda 1986, Truelove 1990, Safa 1995, Barrientos 1997, Bee and Vogel 1997, Reynolds 1998, Meier 1999, Bee 2000), homeworking (Benería and Roldán 1987, Wilson 1993, Miraftab 1996), domestic service (Bunster and Chaney 1985, Chaney and García Castro 1989, Radcliffe 1990) and the informal sector (Bunster and Chaney 1985, Babb 1989, Scott 1991, 1994, Pérez Sáinz and Menjívar Larín 1994, Hays-Mitchell 1995). This research has generated a debate on whether women benefit from or are exploited by globalisation (Benería et al. 2000). In addition, a number of studies have focused on women's work and coping strategies in the context of economic restructuring (Moser 1993, González de la Rocha 1994). A number of authors have criticised the proponents of restructuring for assuming women's work is infinitely elastic and for overlooking how restructuring leads to a double or triple burden where women are forced to combine paid work with domestic work and political activism (Bronstein 1982, Elson 1991, Feldman 1992, Moser 1993, Bustos Torres 1994, Safa 1994, McDowell and Sharp 1997).

Some of this research has enabled a better understanding of the linkages between reproductive and productive work and between the formal and informal sectors of the economy. Feminist analyses of work have rendered the productive/reproductive dichotomy largely irrelevant (Kobayashi et al. 1994, Segura 1994) and it is now accepted that the informal and the formal economy cannot be usefully conceptualised as separate spheres (Benería and Roldán 1987, Wilson 1993, Scott 1994). This understanding has been achieved by studies which focus on the household as well as the workplace. Scott's (1994) study on the family in Peru undermined the widely held assumption that family structures have a limited impact on the labour market and demonstrated the complexities of kinship systems in Latin America and their links to the wider economy. Within this approach is the understanding that home should not be constructed as a site which is separate from paid work (Lawson 1999).

The emphasis on women's work within the NIDL, however, has tended to overlook questions of identity, as well as the gendered nature of restructuring on the relationship

between the constitution of gendered identities and the workplace (Radcliffe 1999a). More recently, however, there has been a theoretical shift from political economy analyses to those influenced by post-structuralism. In this respect, a recent paper by McDowell and Court (1994) on merchant bankers in London has been particularly influential in enabling an understanding of the ways in which gender identities are constructed and contested at work and that workers do not enter the labour market with pre-constituted gender identities. With respect to Latin America, a small number of authors have begun to focus on the constitution of gender identities through work (Radcliffe 1990, 1999c, Laurie 1997a, 1997b, 1999, Lawson 1999, Tiano and Ladino 1999), although research in this area is still lacking (Hays-Mitchell 1999). Laurie (1999) has called for a shift of focus from visible transformations in gender relations to changing and multiple constructions of masculinities and femininities. Such an approach, according to Hays-Mitchell (1999), can enable us to move away from the construction of women's unpaid or paid work as survival strategies which, like much early research on women's work in export processing industries, tends to construct women as victims of globalisation. A more integrated analysis of gender and work can be gained by shifting the focus away from the actual work that women do to how they feel about the work that they do (Laurie 1999) and to the way in which women's work is constitutively defined by dominant discourses of femininity, domesticity and sexuality (Mohanty 1997).

Research on gender and work has been limited to a few Latin American countries with the majority of scholarship being conducted on Mexico, Chile, Peru, Colombia, Ecuador and the Dominican Republic. Apart from a recent work (Renzi and Agurto 1997) which attempts to quantify the invisible contribution made by women to the Nicaraguan economy and studies by Babb (1998, 2001b) on the impact of neoliberal restructuring on four urban co-operatives in Managua, scholarship on gender and work in Nicaragua has been lacking. During the 1980s, many Nicaraguan women, including many in this study, were able to take advantage of increased employment and labour mobilisation opportunities created by the revolution. These opportunities could be considered political work in a number of ways, given that they were contributing to a revolutionary political project and their insertion in such a space usually involved a substantial amount of

political awareness-raising or *concientización*, as well as the fact that many women also occupied masculinised occupations in agricultural production and other areas, while men were recruited to fight the Contra war. Neoliberal restructuring since 1990 has brought about a significant amount of social, spatial and economic reorganisation. This reorganisation has inevitably had a dramatic impact on the labour market and on the linkages between paid and unpaid work. Nicaragua makes an interesting case study in terms of the impact of structural adjustment on gender and work, given that restructuring in many Latin American countries has taken place during or after a period of military dictatorship, while in Nicaragua this has occurred after a period of revolutionary transformation which had significant labour market implications. The following section considers the gendered nature of restructuring in Nicaragua before going on to consider its implications for gender identities.

### **Coyol quebrado, coyol comido: Structural adjustment and living costs**

With respect to neoliberal restructuring, Nicaragua can be considered a late reformer in comparison with other Latin American countries, implementing IMF reforms almost two decades after Chile and almost ten years after Mexico. Nicaragua was only one of four countries in Latin America not to negotiate with the IMF in 1982-3 after the debt crisis<sup>2</sup> (Green 1995). Nicaragua also differs from other Central American countries which have been linked to the global economy for some time through *maquiladora* production (mostly garment assembly) and non-traditional exports (Robinson 1998). Within two months of the 1990 elections, the Chamorro government had already begun to negotiate with the IMF, the World Bank, the IDB and USAID and in 1991 the government created a free trade zone just outside Managua as part of its USAID-sponsored *maquiladora* programme. By 1993 the economy had been stabilised, with inflation under control and *maquila* production and non-traditional agricultural exports making up 43.5 per cent of all exports (Robinson 1998). These “positive” economic indicators have not been accompanied by sustained economic improvement and the biggest impact of the economic programme has been an increase in unemployment and poverty, factors which have led to a substantial expansion of the informal sector. To comply with the agreements reached with the international financial institutions, the Chamorro government laid off

nearly 300,000 state employees, froze expenditure on health and education and privatised state-owned companies (Green 1995).

Given that neoliberal restructuring produces contradictory and heterogeneous impacts across the continent and individual countries differ widely in the extent to which neoliberalism is implemented (Green 1995), existing gender relations are sometimes reinforced and sometimes modified as a result of these economic processes (Benería et al. 2000).

Many Nicaraguans perceive their economic circumstances to have deteriorated over the course of the 1990s and describe themselves as practically living hand to mouth or *coyol quebrado*, *coyol comido*<sup>3</sup>, buying food on a daily basis. Most people's salaries do not correspond to the cost of living and small price increases in the price of fuel, bread or eggs can have a devastating impact on the household economy. Azucena Mejía had a salaried position at the Women's Collective in Matagalpa but described the cost of living in these terms, as did other participants.

Comparado con otros trabajos, con otros salarios tenemos un buen salario. No lo que necesitamos porque con lo que ganamos no cubrimos con nuestras necesidades, vamos como decimos en Nicaragua: "coyol quebrado, coyol comido". Agarrás tu salario y pagás un montón de deudas y te queda un poquitito para poder respirar.

In comparison with other jobs and other salaries, we have a good salary. Not as much as we need, because with what we earn we do not cover our needs, we live, as we say in Nicaragua, hand to mouth. You get your salary, you pay a load of debts and you have a tiny bit left to be able to breathe.  
Azucena Mejía, 16 August 1999

[En los 80], era más fácil y se ganaba más. Ahora no se gana casi nada. A veces no hay ni para el jabón.

[In the 1980s] it was easier and you earned more. Now you hardly earn anything. Sometimes we don't even have enough money for soap.  
Marcia Picado, 31 August 1999

No hay salarios, o un salario digno pues. Porque hay que ver que aquí un salario digno no es de 300 pesos, aunque el promedio, son los salarios promedios, 300, 500 córdobas de la mayoría de empleadas domésticas y maestras, porque aquí una maestra oficialmente está por los C\$500, ya años de servicio, títulos y no sé

cuánto, tal vez llegan a ganar 700. Pero eso es una vergüenza, porque aquí la canasta básica está alrededor de C\$1500, una canasta básica limitada.

There are no salaries, well no decent salaries. Because here a decent salary is not 300 pesos, although average salaries are around 300. Most teachers and domestic servants earn about 500, because a teacher here officially earns C\$500. If they have many years of service, qualifications and whatever else, they might manage to earn C\$700. But that is a disgrace because here the *canasta básica* (basic market basket of goods) costs about C\$1500, and that is for a limited *canasta básica*.

Carla Martínez, 4 December 1999

With financial crises in many parts of the world and growing global opposition to neoliberal economic policies, faith in the power of the market began to be eroded over the course of the 1990s (Benería et al. 2000). Nicaragua began to implement such policies at a time when increasingly they were perceived to have failed. In the Central American context, there is a general awareness of the failure of such measures to bring about prosperity or well-being. As Robinson (1998: 492) states, “the globalization of Central America has not resolved the social contradictions that gave rise to the conflict in the first place [...] [T]he very contradictions that gave rise to the conflict are still present and have, in fact, been aggravated in recent years”. Nicaraguans are aware of the way in which such policies have impacted disproportionately both on women and the poor.

Es verdad que la economía es pareja para todo el mundo, pero quienes asumimos mayor responsabilidad en la casa somos las mujeres, quienes vemos como ajustamos con los cuatro centavos que ganamos somos las mujeres. Entonces los compañeros ...hay situaciones donde la que trabaja fuera y dentro de la casa es la mujer, porque es soltera, y hay un buen porcentaje. En otros casos el hombre, aunque gane, somos nosotras las que velamos por la salud de nuestros hijos, o sea, nos perjudica más a las mujeres, porque somos nosotras las que siempre estamos pendientes de la salud de los hijos, al igual que la educación. Si se privatiza la educación, que aunque no es la gran cosa, diríamos, verdad, porque a veces lo que te piden son diez córdobas de colaboración, pero además de eso te piden que llevés una mecha de lampazo, que colaborés con la pintura, con una chuchada para alisar los asientos. [...] Sin un proyecto de agua por ejemplo, si no hay agua, ¿quién jala el agua? Las mujeres. Los hombres no la jala, porque como ellos dicen que es trabajo nuestro y si no hay agua en un barrio, no es porque no queremos que haya agua, es porque quienes están en el gobierno, quien manda son los hombres, y ellos no se preocupan.

It is true that the economy is the same for everyone but it is women who have most responsibility at home and it is women who try to make ends meet with hardly any money. In many cases the person who works both inside and outside the household is the woman because she is single and there is a high percentage of those. In other cases, even if she has a working partner, it is women who look after our children's health. We are affected more because it is us who are interested in our children's health, just the same with education. If education is privatised, and even if it not too expensive, because sometimes all you are asked for is to contribute C\$10 or to provide a new mop, or some paint, or something to sand down the chairs. [...] Without a water project for example, if there is no water, who fetches water? Women do. Men don't because they see it as women's work and if there is no water in the *barrio*, it is not because we don't want water but because the government and those in power are men and they are not concerned about it.

Clara Blandón, 26 October 1999

Claro que [la situación] se empeora. Si antes compraba yo diez libras de arroz, ahora sólo compro cinco, porque ya no ajusto. Imagínese el transporte, el transporte es carísimo. [...] Entonces la vida de los pobres va empeorando. Va empeorando. Hay gente que ya no tiene ni para comer, que se comen tortillas con sal. [...] Y compramos comida para el mes, y nos dura sólo 20 días. [...] Ahora el obrero del campo gana 10 córdobas el día, 300 pesos el mes. Imagine como vive esa gente. Ni para la leche ni la carne.

Of course [the situation] is getting worse. I used to buy ten pounds of rice, now I only buy five because I don't have enough money. Look at public transport, it's so expensive. [...] Poor people's living standards are getting worse. They are getting worse. There are people who can't afford to eat, all they eat is *tortillas* with salt. [...] We buy food for the month and it only lasts us 20 days. [...] A rural labourer now earns 10 córdobas a day, 300 a month. Imagine how these people live. They could never have milk or meat.

Lydia Sánchez, 18 September 1999

My participants saw ongoing violence and rising crime in Nicaragua as resulting directly from the economic model.

Mientras aquí en Nicaragua no se desarrolle una buena industria, una buena caficultura, mientras no haiga un buen plan de una buena economía, vamos a seguir pobres, y vamos a seguir con guerras, y vamos a seguir con rearmados y vamos a seguir con secuestros.

As long as Nicaragua doesn't have good industry, good coffee production, a good economic plan, we are still going to be poor, and we are still going to have wars, people rearming themselves and kidnappings.

Lydia Sánchez, 23 October 1999

Undoubtedly Nicaragua is experiencing a profound economic crisis. This crisis results in inadequate employment opportunities and escalating living costs and creates a whole series of material and spatial constraints. However, its effects are contradictory and the state of flux generated by restructuring creates spaces in which changes in gender relations and identities can occur. As stated in Chapter 4, these economic changes are taking place in a political climate which is attempting to recover more traditional identities for women.

As previously discussed, women in Latin America have had to develop a complex range of strategies to cope with the economic difficulties created by structural adjustment and scarce resources, time and labour must be stretched further and further to make ends meet. The problem with this approach is that it tends to celebrate women's resourcefulness (Moser 1993) and to assume that because these strategies are survival strategies, they are neither serious nor long-term (Hays-Mitchell 1999). However, there is clear evidence which suggests that structural adjustment in Nicaragua has been gendered with respect to its impact on the labour market. It is important to acknowledge that structural adjustment is also working in parallel with dominant ideologies of gender to restrict labour market access to women.

The combination of these factors means that the labour market in Nicaragua displays a significant degree of gender segregation. On average, Nicaraguan women earn less than men and tend to dominate in the informal and more precarious formal sectors of the economy. A survey conducted by Managua research institute FIDEG in 1995-1996 found that average monthly salaries for women were C\$651 compared with C\$883 for men and that 75 per cent of working women were employed in the informal sector, compared with 63 per cent of men (Renzi and Agurto 1997). According to Renzi and Agurto (1997), the number of women with salaries fell by 18 per cent between 1985 and 1995, while the number of men with salaries fell by 10 per cent in the same period. The doors of Nicaraguan homes are covered in hastily handmade signs *se vende hielo, hay cuajada, hay posicles, se venden frijoles cocidos*, announcing the sale of ice, curd, popsicles, cooked beans amongst other things, evidence of the extent to which women are selling goods from their own homes to generate income. Many women consequently deploy



multiple income-generating strategies. Children are pulled out of school and sent to earn money as economic needs dictate.

In an attempt to rectify the neglect of the non-market sector of the economy, Renzi and Agurto (1997) have also calculated the economic value of the unpaid work women do in the home on the basis of its replacement cost at current market rates. This work was estimated to be worth \$500 million in 1995. This was equivalent to 80 per cent of Nicaragua's exports, 85 per cent of its international aid, more than the Ministry of Finance collected in taxes and more than all public and private investment in Nicaragua in that year.

At first sight, it might appear that women in Matagalpa are excluded from the global economy, unlike the women workers who are employed in the Taiwanese, Korean and US factories operating out of Las Mercedes Free Trade Zone in Managua. They are however very much implicated in it even if the work that they do seems increasingly irrelevant in an international context. It is crucial that we consider the way in which people, regardless of the work that they do, are positioned within processes of globalisation rather than just the ways in which they excluded from it. As Kobayashi et al. (1994:xxxiv) have stated:

Abstract social processes, often international in scope, are always *placed*, lived and given specific meaning by specific people in landscapes that are constructed in relation to the world at large.

Under structural adjustment, the nature of women's work and the balance between paid and unpaid work often changes. These changes, which often occur as a result of women attempting to comply with their responsibilities as mothers, are in themselves dynamic processes which sometimes also bring about shifts and renegotiations of maternal and domestic identities.

## Maternal identities and work

### *Deviating from dominant discourses*

In the same way that neoliberalism does not constitute a total break with previous development objectives in Latin America (L. Phillips 1998), the massive integration of Nicaraguan women in the labour market, their concentration in informalised sectors of the economy and family dependency on women's multiple income generating strategies are not specifically features of the neoliberal economy. They have been a feature of women's lives for some time and many women described their mothers as combining various kinds of work simultaneously during the Somoza dictatorship to support their families.

Por temporadas también trabajaba en el campo, y por temporadas trabajaba en la casa, haciendo pan y haciendo nacatamales, matando puercos, ella hacía de todo para no dejarnos morir de hambre.

At times she also worked out in the fields, and at times she worked at home, making bread and *nacatamales*, slaughtering pigs, she used to do all sorts of things so that we didn't die of hunger.

Claudia Moreno, 9 November 1999

Creo que mi mamá fue una mami admirable porque a pesar de tantos hijos, toditos nosotros, todicitos, todicitos, si no estudiamos muy pequeños, toditos logramos aprender a leer muy pequeños, ella nos enseñó. Y luego siempre estuvo muy emprendedora, un espíritu de lucha. Ella hacía de todo, mi mami era costurera y también hacía pan. Entonces ella trabajaba haciendo costuras y haciendo pan para vender. Como mi papi tomaba demasiado mi mamá era como la jefa de la casa. Era la responsable de la casa, la que administraba el dinero, porque el dinero que mi papi recibía lo gastaba en licor. Mi mami entonces manejaba el dinero.

I think that my mum was an admirable mum because in spite of having so many children and although we couldn't go to school when we were small, every single one of us learnt to read when we were very small because she taught us. And she was also very enterprising, she had a fighting spirit. She used to do everything, my mum was a seamstress and she also used to make bread. So she used to work sewing and making bread to sell. As my dad used to drink too much, my mum was like the head of the household. She was in charge of the house, the one who looked after the money, because the money that my dad got, he used to spend on alcohol. So my mum managed the money.

Carla Martínez, 14 August 1999

Even in plantation labour, motherhood was not seen as incompatible with waged labour. Women have often worked as labourers and cooks on large estates, usually accompanied by their children. Both Claudia Moreno and Ramona Dávila spent the early years of their lives on estates with their parents.

Despite the historical consolidation of women's work in Nicaragua, the *machismo/marianismo* polarity creates a close discursive relationship between work, marriage and motherhood which separates paid work from marriage and motherhood in both social and spatial terms. While this dichotomy has little to do with the materialities of mothers' working lives, a dominant discourse, which suggests mothers should not work outside the home, persists. When Azucena Mejía discovered she was pregnant and decided to marry the father of her child, her parents insisted it meant she would no longer continue to work.

Así que mi padre y mi madre me dijeron: “Bueno, te querés casar, entonces dejá el trabajo, dejá el estudio, y vení a la casa, para que te preparés y aprendás a ser una buena mujer, porque ya vas a tener marido.” Claro que no quería, pero no tenía otra alternativa, o hacía eso o no me casaba.

So my father and my mother said to me: “So you want to get married. Well leave your job, leave your studies and come home, to prepare yourself and learn to be a good wife, because you're soon going to have a husband.” Of course I didn't want to, but I had no alternative. Either I did this or I couldn't get married.

Azucena Mejía, 16 August 1999

When she did return to work when her son was eight months old, her partner constructed her as a bad mother for doing so.

Entonces el pleito con mi compañero era por mi trabajo. Vos abandonás al niño, lo dejás botado para poder trabajar, etc, etc. Pero yo no le hice caso. Y dije: “Este trabajo yo lo agarro y no lo suelto”, porque era también el símbolo de mi independencia con él, con mi hijo era darle un futuro mejor al niño, en fin, tenía un montón de cosas en la cabeza, que yo sabía que no podía dejar este trabajo.

So the argument with my partner was about my work. You abandon your child, you dump him so you can go to work, etc etc. But I took no notice. And I said: “I am going to take this job and I am not going to give it up”, because it was also the symbol of my independence from him and the chance to give my child a better

future. All sorts of things were going through my mind which made me realise I could not give up this job.

Azucena Mejía, 16 August 1999

Many Nicaraguan men are opposed to their wives or partners working because it is seen to publicly compromise their masculinity by suggesting that they are incapable of earning enough to support a family. There is however considerable variation in the extent to which the dominant ideology is subscribed to. While Ramona Dávila's first partner (and the father of her children) was both drunk and abusive towards her, he depended on her economically and on the money she earned selling lottery tickets to finance his drinking (See Chapter 3). Her new partner, on the other hand, forbade her to work outside of the home, and this was in spite of the fact that he was, according to Ramona, still supporting his previous partner and their children. While his income covered their food costs, there was not enough to buy any shoes or clothes for her children or to pay for school fees so they could attend school. While she was selling lottery tickets, she would often earn C\$30 a day with which some of her children's needs could have been resolved.

Most Nicaraguan women, however, diverge significantly from *marianista* ideologies in terms of their attitudes. As has been noted in other Latin American contexts (McClenaghan 1997, Hays-Mitchell 1999, Lawson 1999) and with respect to racialised women within the United States (Thornton Dill 1988, Hill Collins 1994), women renegotiate their understandings of motherhood so that it comes to encompass not only the emotional care of children but also the economic care. When male partners are absent, women's roles as working mothers are largely uncontested within the household. Discourses which suggest that motherhood and paid work are incompatible are weak in Nicaragua not just because of the abundance of single mothers, but also because childrearing is rarely concentrated into a short period during which women can put wage-earning on hold. Early pregnancy and childbirth and high fertility rates mean that childrearing can sometimes span two or three decades of a woman's life. Even when children have grown and become independent, women's caregiving responsibilities often extend to their grandchildren or elderly parents. It would therefore be impossible to find a time in which paid work could be suspended even if it were economically possible. Rosario Peña's youngest child (of 14) was 14 in 2001 but she had taken on full time care

of six grandchildren of pre-school age as their mothers had left them there so they could take on work in Managua. All of Milagros Herrera's children had grown up and left home but she was caring for her mother, who was no longer able to walk.

The situation in Nicaragua differs in this respect from that of other Latin American countries. Both Benería and Roldán (1987) and Tiano and Ladino (1999) report women in Mexico taking breaks from paid work while they had small children. Likewise, Lagarde (1990), also with reference to Mexico, has identified what she sees as a split identity in women who are both mothers/wives (*madresposas*) and workers. She states that even when women have been integrated in the labour market for many years, the hope persists that their situation will improve and they will be able to return home. Consequently, they fail to conceive of themselves as workers. McClenaghan's (1997) work on the Dominican Republic suggests that the constitution of an alternative worker identity was hindered by the conflation of worker identities with motherhood identities. Such discontinuities in working lives are rare in Nicaragua and identities as workers seem to be more coherent than has been suggested in other Latin American contexts. Carla Martínez described returning to work just two days after her daughter was born.

Yo también tenía que trabajar, nació mi hija, fue más duro para mí porque yo tenía que trabajar y no tenía horario de trabajo. Prácticamente yo trabajé el día anterior, el día siguiente tuve mi hija y yo a los dos días estaba trabajando de nuevo [...] Entonces yo tenía un hermano menor, mi hermano, dicho sea de paso que este muchacho, bueno en ese entonces tenía como 12 años, que después murió en el 86 cuando estaba en el servicio militar. Pero mi hermano menor era el que me la cuidada, verdad, porque era él que estaba en la casa.

I also had to work when my daughter was born. It was harder for me because I had to work and I didn't have set working hours. Practically I was working the day before, the following day my daughter was born and two days later I was working again. [...] I had a younger brother, who was 12 years old at the time, who died in 1986 when he was doing his military service. But it was my little brother who looked after her for me, because he was at home.  
Carla Martínez, 23 October 1999

Indeed, given that many Nicaragua women become pregnant before they leave their parents' home, work sometimes becomes a priority for the first time when they become mothers. Clara Blandón had been supported by her parents but when she had a child, she

was expected to find work so she could support her child herself. Likewise, for women who find themselves alone without male support, income earning becomes paramount.

Only one of my participants, Olga Jarquín, reported taking a break from paid work after the birth of her child. But she stated that she was able to do this, not because she ever received any form of support from the child's father, but because she had been working and had been able to save.

Wilson (1993), writing on Mexico, suggests that women's entry into waged work has to conform to existing moral codes to be socially acceptable. This overlooks the way in which the gendered attributes given to work can be renegotiated and transformed. In Nicaragua, dominant discourses which suggest that motherhood and employment are incompatible are resisted by reconceptualising motherhood as an economic activity as well as an emotional one. Resolving economic needs successfully or even partially, particularly in a harsh economic climate, can bring about a sense of achievement or even pride. This pride not only provides resistance to constructions of motherhood which suggest they are bad mothers because they have deviated from a cultural norm, but can also increase acceptability of women in masculinised occupations and spaces as part of good mothering. After three failed marriages, which left Marta Navarro alone with eight children, her brother-in-law taught her how to make shoes. For 20 years, she ran her own shoe factory in Matagalpa, with a staff of ten all male labourers and this was how she managed to bring up her children. Subsequently, she also opened two billiard halls and a small shop from her home. Rather than feeling guilty or regretful that she had to work so much when her children were young, she was proud she was able to raise them so successfully and that they all turned out so well.

Aprendí la zapatería, verdad, alistadora, montadora, todos los oficios. Y así crié a mis hijos. Pero a los veinte años de estar en la zapatería, yo me aburría, tanto trabajo, estar lidiando con tantos hombres, todos son hombres los zapateros. Entonces dejé la zapatería. [...] La zapatería era mía. Era una fábrica de diez trabajadores y yo la manejaba. Después dejé la zapatería y me puse a poner un salón de billar, que todavía lo tengo. [...] Y puse una ventecita y así los fui criando a todos con dificultad, pero a todos los puse a estudiar, no tengo hijos malos, gracias a Dios (risas). Cinco varones y tres mujeres y hasta la vez se han portado bien conmigo todos. Sigo trabajando, me gusta trabajar, hasta que ya no

puedo. Todos estudiaron, carrera estudió Carlos y la que tengo en Estados Unidos, estudió carrera, una enfermera, y tiene tres títulos de ahí. Tengo otra que también tiene dos títulos, y otro varón que tengo en Estados Unidos, también estudió. [...] Me gustaba trabajar bastante para que a ellos no les faltara nada.

I learned shoemaking, cutting, fitting, all the skills. And that was how I raised my children. After 20 years of working in shoemaking, I was getting bored of so much work, of battling with so many men, because shoemakers are all men. So I left shoemaking. [...] The shoe factory was mine. It was a factory that had ten workers and I ran it. After I left shoemaking and I opened a billiard hall, which I still have. [...] And I opened a little shop and that was how I raised them all with difficulty. But I sent all of them to school and I don't have bad children, thank God (laughter). I have five sons and three daughters and they have all turned out well for me. I am still working, I like working, I'll work for as long as I can. They all studied, Carlos got a degree, and the one who is in the United States, she got a nursing qualification, and has three qualifications from there. Another daughter has two qualifications and another son in the United States also studied. [...] I liked working so that I could give them everything they needed.

Marta Navarro, 19 October 1999

To attain *marianista* ideals of self-sacrifice, Marta knew she had to simultaneously subvert them. This differs from some of the Mexican women in Tiano and Ladino's (1999) study who attribute their successful mothering to their avoidance of full time formal sector employment. Lagarde (1990:124) has indicated how positive validation of women's work sometimes occurs over a long period of time and when it has a positive effect on others, when a women "sacó sus hijos adelante", "gave her children a good start in life".

### *Maternal guilt*

Maternal guilt, expressed in terms of time spent in paid work and not with one's children, is common in US culture (Berg 1986) and is replicated in certain parts of Latin America (Chant 1997a). However, maternal guilt is not a universal phenomenon but is, like other aspects of motherhood, culturally constructed. Segura (1994) interviewed both Mexican and Chicana employed mothers in the United States and unexpectedly found that it was the Mexican immigrant women who experienced the least conflict and saw paid work as an integral part of mothering. The Chicana women on the other hand were more likely to have absorbed white middle class normative constructions of motherhood which see it as incompatible with paid work.

My data suggest that once motherhood is renegotiated to include the economic care of children, women do not express maternal guilt about the time not spent with their children. Maternal guilt results not so much from actual harm done to children but more, as Segura (1994: 211) points out, from the discomfort women feel in “deviating from a socially constructed “idealized mother” who stays at home to care for her family”. Notions of good mothering are shifting in the face of difficult economic conditions and the financial irresponsibility of men towards their children. Good mothers are increasingly constructed as women able to provide economically for their children. Maternal guilt does exist in Nicaragua, but comes from not being able to provide for your children adequately, and not from time spent away from them. Moreover, if women perceive themselves to be juggling, it is in terms of what they prioritise, what they buy and what they do not, which children continue to study and which ones do not, described by Marcia Picado as *bringueando*, rather than in terms of juggling a conflicting home/work dualism. Marcia told me with tears in her eyes about her inability to find school fees or buy shoes for her daughter.

Como estoy sola, tengo que ir a trabajar, para mantenerlos. [...] Ahora me encuentro en una situación más problemática, porque ahorita no estoy trabajando. Ahora me siento más triste, tuve que sacar la niña del colegio, como no tenía cómo pagarle los estudios. Sin zapatos. Esta niña la tengo sin zapatos. Y es un problema pues ver uno a sus hijos así. La vida es muy dura. Sólo por los cuadernos pues me cobraban 300 córdobas, por los libros. La matrícula, 50 córdobas, la mensualidad 20 córdobas. Entonces no tenía para pagarlos. Antes el dinero que yo agarraba era para ellos, pero ahora que no estoy ganando, la tuve que sacar del colegio. [...] Antes ganaba al mes 500 córdobas, 600 córdobas, ahora me siento afligida, no tengo cómo comprar a mis hijos las cosas que necesitan.

As I am alone, I have to work to support them. [...] Now I am in a more difficult situation because I am not working at the moment. I feel sadder, I had to pull my daughter out of school, because I couldn't afford to pay for her studies. And she has no shoes. I haven't got any shoes for this girl. And it is hard to see your children like this. Life is very hard. Just for the exercise books, they charged me C\$300. The enrolment fee is C\$50, the monthly fee is C\$20. So I didn't have enough to pay for that. Before the money that I earned was for them, but now I am no longer earning, I had to pull her out of school. [...] Before I used to earn C\$500 or C\$600 a month, but now I feel sad, I don't have the money to buy my children the things that they need.

Marcia Picado, 27 July 1999



In the present economic climate, children are seen to need shoes and schooling more than they need quality time with their parents. Just as full-time motherhood is not seen as being central to raising decent children, delinquency amongst children is attributed not to bad mothering but to the economic situation.

Porque es triste el desempleo, yo sé porque mis varones están jóvenes y aquí la juventud desempleada que anda en las fiestas, se mete a las drogas, se mete a las pandillas de ladrones, y es un sufrimiento a causa del desempleo. A causa de que estos hijos no se prepararon en ningún oficio para que fueran unos profesores, algunos técnicos, el hijo con una preparación que tiene empleo no va a pertenecer a una pandilla de gente vaga. Entonces esto nos perjudica también a nosotras el desempleo de nuestros hijos.

Unemployment is sad. I know because my sons are young and here the unemployed young people who go to parties, they start taking drugs, they get involved in gangs that go stealing, and it is suffering which is caused by unemployment. It is caused by children who weren't able to learn a profession, to be teachers or technicians. An educated son who has a job isn't going to join a gang of layabouts. So we are also negatively affected by the unemployment of our children.

Isabel Quezada, 21 November 1999

### *Spatial separation of women and children*

As stated in Chapter 1, Nicaraguan children do not always live with their biological parents. Some children are raised by grandparents or other relatives, some children are simply given away. Sadie had taken in a niece and a nephew so they could attend school in Matagalpa, and the house I moved to after Sadie's death also included a live-in niece who lived there because she got on better with her aunt than she did with her mother. Just as motherhood is renegotiated to encompass breadwinning without resulting in a sense of maternal guilt, motherhood is also renegotiated when mothers are spatially separated from their children out of choice or necessity. The idea that marriage and motherhood mean an end to paid work is identifiable as a discourse but is rarely subscribed to. Likewise, the notion that biological mothers should raise their children is also widely held and widely broken.

Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila (1997) conducted a study on Central American and Mexican women who migrate to the United States in search of work and suggest that

these women accommodate spatial and temporal separations from their children by rearranging the meanings of motherhood. In this rearrangement breadwinning is seen as the best way to fulfil traditional obligations to children back home. Likewise, my participants negotiated often lengthy separations from their children, which highlighted the cultural constructedness of my own decision *not* to leave my children behind while I did my fieldwork because I felt such a long separation would not have been tolerable for me or them.

One of my participants, Marianela Tablada, was a single mother who had three children by three different fathers. She lived in Matagalpa and had a full time job as a nurse in the army. She had no extended family in Matagalpa and no home of her own. She was renting a room in a house and only one of her children, the youngest, was living with her and attended a CDI during the day. Her two daughters lived with their respective paternal grandmothers, one in Managua and one in Jinotega. She missed her children and tried to visit them every two or three weeks if she could but she was in no doubt that given her circumstances this was the best option for her and her children. Milagros Herrera told me how she left Sébaco for a couple of years to work in Managua and her cousin insisted she left her child with her.

Yo trabajando en Managua, dejo a mi niño, mi prima me lo cria. Me dice ‘mirá, si vas a ir a Managua con el niño, sufre el hijo y sufre la madre’.

When I was working in Managua, I left my son and my cousin brought him up. She said to me: “Look if you take your child to Managua, the child will suffer and the mother will suffer.”

Milagros Herrera, 10 October 1999

Sometimes children are separated from their parents because they themselves leave to find work. Claudia Moreno left home at age 11, worked as a domestic, a nanny and a shop assistant, and had supported herself ever since. As discussed in Chapter 5, Mercedes Hierro left home at age seven to work for a school teacher in another part of the country in exchange for tuition. Similarly, she told me in 1999 how her own 11-year-old daughter was working in Managua, baking for an evangelical churchwoman and attending school

in the evenings. Elsa Jirón's 12-year-old daughter was also working full-time as a live-in nanny for which she only received board, clothes and shoes.

Marcia told me she was contemplating emigrating to another country to find work as the situation in Nicaragua was so difficult and she said she would leave her children there being cared for by her 12-year-old daughter. I asked her if she would find it difficult to leave her children. She saw the most complicated aspect sorting out *los papeles*, the documents she would need to do this. As for the children:

Como tengo la chavala que me los cuide, ya estarían tranquilos. Y con lo que yo gano, les estaría mandando. Tranquila pues.

As I have a daughter who looks after them for me, they would be fine. And I would send them money from my earnings. I would be relaxed about it.

Marcia Picado, 31 August 1999

However, not all mothers feel that living separately from their children is appropriate or desirable. Olga Jarquín was still living with her own parents in Tipitapa, near Managua, when she gave birth to her son and her mother and brother played important roles in his care. When he was six months old, she managed to get a job in Matagalpa and had great difficulty in taking her son with her. For some time she had to endure being separated from him because her family in Tipitapa felt he belonged more with them than with her. She told her family she had got a job in Matagalpa and she was taking her son with her.

[Mi madre] estaba en desacuerdo total, que no. Que el niño se quede aquí. Entonces me vine, lo dejé a los seis meses con ella. Me vine a trabajar aquí y viajaba todos los fines de semana, los viernes iba volando de aquí a ver a mi hijo. Bueno, entonces, de ahí pasé la prueba, 'ya me voy a quedar y me voy a llevar a mi hijo'. 'No, esperate a que tenga un año.' Bueno, después 'esperate a que camine' (risas) Ya tenía una situación cómo arrancárselo, lo sentía más de ella que mío. Bueno, ya pasó el año, y estaba aquí trabajando, pasó el segundo año y yo no podía traer a mi hijo. [...] Creo que ... cuando yo me lo traigo, mi familia duda que yo vaya a cuidar bien al niño, que el niño vaya a estar bien.

My mother was in total disagreement, no way. The child stays here. So I left him with her, he was six months old. I came to work here and went to visit at the weekend, I would fly out of here on a Friday to go and visit my son. I finished my probationary period and I said "I am going to stay and I am going to take my son". "No, wait until he is a year old." After "wait until he can walk" (laughter). I

had trouble taking him off her, she felt he was more hers than mine. The year went by, I was here working, the second year passed, and I couldn't bring my child. [...] I think my family doubted that I was going to look after him properly, that the child was going to be all right.

Olga Jarquín, 15 October 1999

It took Olga several years before she was able to permanently live with her son in Matagalpa and she resented quite strongly the idea that her family would provide the emotional care and she would provide the money.

Entonces como que ellos ... yo estaba pendiente del dinero, de llevarle la leche, o sea, de todo lo material, y ellos se encargaban de todo lo demás. Si estaba enfermo, llevarlo al médico, que no le falte esto, lo otro. Pero yo quise tener un hijo pero no para estar así, yo quise tener un hijo para que estuviera conmigo para criarlo, para educarlo yo, pero no para tenerlo lejos de mí, de eso estaba clara yo.

It was as if ... I was in charge of the money, of taking his milk, and all the stuff he needed, and they were in charge of all the rest. If he was sick, they would take him to the doctor, and made sure he had everything he needed. But I didn't want a child like this, I wanted a child who was going to be with me, to bring him up myself, not to have him far away from me, I was clear about that.

Olga Jarquín, 11 November 1999

The variations in maternal identities among Nicaraguan women are indications of how expressions of masculinity and femininity are not only constantly in flux but are also a tenuous basis for these identities. These variations are part of the process in which gender identities and subjectivities are constructed through work and demonstrates the mutual constitution of maternal and working identities.

### **Men's work, women's work and gendered subjectivities**

#### *Gender-typing*

One of the criticisms that has been made of the gender and work literature is that it takes occupational gender-typing for granted and does not evaluate the processes by which both jobs and workers become gendered (McDowell 1999, M. W. Phillips 1998). It is clear that in Nicaragua and other parts of the world, certain jobs are seen as more appropriate for women. Although it seems that these ideas are natural and unchanging, economic and political circumstances mean that individuals are forced to constantly

undermine or reproduce these norms (Sweetman 1997b). However, the construction of gendered subjectivity at work is not a matter of free choice but results from power relations and societal expectations about gender (McDowell 1999, M. W. Phillips 1998).

The labour market in Nicaragua shows a high degree of gender segregation and many of my participants were engaged in what could be considered feminised occupations. In their study of the informal sector in Central America, Pérez Sáinz and Menjívar Larín (1994) hypothesised that men would be more likely to work in more dynamic economic units while women would tend towards more subsistence activities, presumably because these are seen as more compatible with women's childrearing or domestic responsibilities.

It could therefore be assumed that in "choosing" to work in feminised or subsistence activities, prevailing norms of masculinity and femininity are reinforced. However, appropriate femininities and masculinities at work are reconstructed as their relationship to the household or family is redefined. When work is understood in the context of the household and reproductive responsibilities, it becomes clear that there are more complex processes in place and that there is a discontinuity between gender-typing at work and the subjectivities of the workers who do the gender-typed jobs. The masculine and the feminine at work are much more mutable than often appears.

Along with assumptions that women are more likely than men to engage in subsistence activities, women's status in the work force is often constructed as that of secondary wage earner. Gender ideologies in Nicaragua and elsewhere in Latin America, which on the one hand suggest that motherhood and employment are incompatible, also have the effect of cheapening women's labour in relation to men's. In Latin America, women often refer to the jobs that they do or the income that they earn as "ayuda", literally help, which reflects this notion of their work as supplementary. According to Lagarde (1990), the concept of 'ayuda' is internalised by women workers who see it as opposed to the concept 'trabajo' or work and consequently tend to deny their definitions as workers. In this construction, it is assumed that women's income merely supplements the income of the main breadwinner in the household who is male. Among single mothers in Nicaragua

who do not have a male income-earner in the household, there is an interesting evolution of the term 'ayuda'. Both Lucía Espinoza and Marcia Picado were each paid C\$400 a month by the Communal Movement to run the *comedor* at El Mirador. Given that this income was insufficient to support a family, they both referred to it as nothing more than an 'ayuda'. However, it was an 'ayuda' not to a male income but to their other productive activities. It reflects an awareness of the cheapness of their labour as well as an understanding of themselves as main rather than secondary wage earners.

### *Working children*

Radcliffe (1990) has noted with respect to Peru, that the gender segregation of the labour market in Latin America is a consequence of the gender socialisation which children are subject to in the home. Girls and boys are often engaged in gender-specific tasks which precedes their entry to the labour market. The work that my participants were expected to do as children is likely to have impacted on their gendered subjectivities at work as adults. In Nicaragua, working lives tend to start early and while domestic responsibilities often have a negative impact on a child's education, they can also facilitate it. For many Nicaraguan girls and women, working and studying at the same time become a part of life. This combination can lead to an awareness at an early age of the potential of work for self-improvement as well as survival. Some become substitute mothers caring for their younger siblings in the absence of their mothers. Often long before they have children of their own, Nicaraguan girls have had significant household responsibilities and sometimes a degree of financial independence.

¡Cómo estudié! [Mi hermana mayor] se dedicaba entonces a aprender ella clases de costura, y yo como era la mayor, me tocaba cuidar a todos los demás. Yo tenía que levantarme a las tres de la mañana, a hacer las tortillas, a hacerles la comida, a lavarles, plancharles, despacharles a la escuela toditos. Servirle a mi hermana, yo a ella le servía en la mesa, yo tenía que hacer todo y además ir a la escuela. Sí. Me tocó a hacer como la responsable de todos, en cuanto a mantenerlos, a organizarlos, a obrar por ellos, una carga bastante grande. [...] Era terrible, el sentido de responsabilidad que tenía yo porque la entrada a la escuela era a las siete de la mañana, y yo no podía llegar después de las siete de la mañana, corría entonces ya amanecida haciendo todas las cosas de tal manera que yo pudiera estar en clase, y no faltar a ni una sola clase.

How I studied! [My older sister] dedicated herself to learning to sew, and as I was the oldest, I had to look after all the others. I had to get up at three in the morning, to make the *tortillas*, to make the food, to wash and iron everyone's clothes and send them all off to school. I had to serve my sister, I had to serve her food to her at the table, I had to do everything and then go off to school myself. I was in charge of all of them, I had to look after them, organise them, sort out their lives, it was quite a big responsibility. [...] The weight of responsibility that I felt was terrible, because school started at seven in the morning and I could not arrive later than seven in the morning. From when I got up, I rushed through all my jobs so that I could get to school on time and not miss a single class.

Margarita Muñoz, 30 October 1999

Desde pequeña, por ejemplo en mi casa me tocaba trabajar mucho, levantarme a las tres de la mañana, dejar maíz repasado, ir a entregar carne, ir a vender y todo eso, y después venir e ir a la escuela. Siempre desde muy chiquita. En mi casa todo el mundo ha trabajado desde muy pequeña. Y dentro de ese periodo, hice diferentes cosas, que de trabajar de empleada doméstica hasta qué sé yo, lavar y planchar ajeno, y con eso me mantenía. Empecé a trabajar desde muy pequeña pero a devengar dinero también a partir de los 16 años. A agarrarme los reales, o sea, o mi mantención con mi trabajo.

From a young age I had to work very hard at home, I had to get up at three in the morning, leave the corn in soak, go and deliver meat, and go out selling and all that, and then come back and go to school. I always did this since I was very small. In my house everyone did this. And during this time, I did different things, I worked as a domestic, I did washing and ironing, and that was how I supported myself. I started working when I was very young and from the age of 16 I also began to earn my own money. To earn cash, or rather, to support myself through my work.

Graciela Blanco, 13 October 1999

Claudia Moreno believed that the responsibilities she had had as a child and her early independence from her parents had clearly led to her sense of independence, which was one of the factors that made her relationship with her husband so difficult. This was how she explained the reasons for their separation.

Bueno, en primer lugar porque yo creo por haber cuidado a mis hermanos y todo eso, yo había creado como un poco de responsabilidad y un poco de ..¿cómo lo diría yo? ...más bien de defenderme por mí misma, y también de toma de decisión. Al tener responsabilidad desde pequeña, yo había aprendido a tomar decisiones propias y todo eso. Y eso fue lo que más dañó a la pareja, no, porque yo era totalmente contraria. Yo tenía esa forma de pensar y también esa forma de ser por ser la niña mayor. Yo era la mayor y cuando yo estaba ahí, yo mandaba en la casa, verdad.

Well, firstly I think it was because I had looked after my brothers and sisters and all that, and this had given me a bit of responsibility and a bit of ... How can I put it? A way of standing up for myself, and making decisions. By having responsibility from such a young age, I had learned to make my own decisions and all that. And it was that which most harmed my relationship because I was totally contrary. I had that way of thinking and I was also like that because I was the oldest child. I was the oldest and when I was there, I was in charge of the house.

Claudia Moreno, 9 November 1999

### *Seamstressing*

Many Nicaraguan women support themselves by seamstressing. In many ways, the concentration of women in this form of economic activity combines the worst aspects of a feminised occupation which continues to exist because of the cheapness of female labour. At present, it is still cheaper in Nicaragua to have your clothes made to measure by a seamstress than it is to buy off the peg, just as it is far cheaper to pay someone to handwash your clothes than it is to buy and run a washing machine. The demand for these services would disappear if women were to earn a decent income from it. However, women still continue to attend courses to learn dressmaking to give themselves a source of income. The Movement of Single and Unemployed Mothers formed after Hurricane Mitch had for example managed to secure funding for a number of women to attend a residential dressmaking course in Darío. I wondered about the relevance of this in the context of the global economy. Since 1990 imports of second-hand clothing from the United States have led to bankruptcies among small producers of clothing (Dijkstra 1999). Matagalpa has filled with a number of shops selling second hand clothing from the United States and for many low- and middle-income families this form of clothing is becoming increasingly acceptable. However, being able to sew is still seen as a desirable skill. In the case of Carla Martínez, it was her ability to sew that enabled her to engage in unpaid political work. As was the case with Marcia Picado and Lucía Espinoza, sewing for Carla was just one of a number of income-earning schemes. In 1990 she was busy working on the creation of the SIC as discussed in Chapter 4. Her family was critical of the way in which she spent hours and hours working in a job for which she did not get paid. But nonetheless, she managed to generate enough income to survive, through sewing and other sources.



Mirá, yo he tenido en ese particular ...bueno, algo de suerte, no. En principio yo soy costurera. A la par de que yo ... o sea, los sábados y los domingos que yo no trabajaba en el centro, yo cosía por un lado. Tenía una pequeña microempresa en mi casa que era venta de carne, verdad, entonces con eso lograba pagar la luz, el agua. [...] Bueno, a la par que yo tenía esa microempresa en mi casa, también hacía costura, y que, bueno, he tenido esta ventaja pues de fabricarles la ropa a mis hijos, nunca andaba así comprando ropa, verdad, y la mía propia.

Look, I have been a bit lucky in that respect. I am a seamstress. So at the same time ... the Saturdays and Sundays when I wasn't working in the centre, I was sewing on the side. I had a small microenterprise in my house selling meat, and with that I could pay for electricity and water. [...] Apart from having this microenterprise in my house, I also used to sew, and I have had the advantage of being able to make all my children's clothes and my own. I never had to buy any clothes.

Carla Martínez, 4 December 1999

Similarly, María Dolores Gallegos stated that it was by spending the weekends making clothes for local people, that she could afford to pay her bills and spend the week doing unpaid work for the Movement of Single and Unemployed Mothers.

### *Patio economy*

In El Hatillo, the women were engaged primarily in unremunerated work in the community or in subsistence agriculture, while the more profitable work of the community such as the production of *chayotes* was entirely controlled by men. Laurie (1999) has pointed out how the GAD paradigm has tended to relegate these kinds of activities which are carried out by women to the realm of the feminine and the traditional and assumes therefore they cannot be empowering. When I visited El Hatillo in 1999, the women had been seeking funding from a Spanish aid agency to provide every woman in the village with her own cow which would provide milk and curd primarily for family consumption. Feminists working in Nicaragua have criticised the way in which NGOs working in rural communities tend to promote these type of subsistence activities, known as *economía de patio* (literally patio economy) for women, rather than promoting more large scale and profitable agriculture such as cattle-ranching or coffee production (Haydee Castillo on Esta Semana 2001). When I returned to El Hatillo in 2001, the first phase of the programme was underway and 20 women now had their own cows with a revolving credit fund of C\$20,000. I had not expected such an excited response, but

Silvia Montiel told me happily how she had a cow that gave up to six litres of milk a day in winter.

In many ways, the cows enabled women to better fulfil their maternal roles and obligations in providing food and improving family nutrition. Such a scheme does not challenge the gender division of labour in the community and is not disruptive to gender relations. According to Silvia, the men in the community had been very supportive of the project. From a development perspective, it is easy to see the way in which traditional gender roles are being perpetuated. But in terms of gendered subjectivities, it would be misleading to suggest that the cows were not empowering for a number of reasons. Firstly, the successful implementation of an aid programme attests to the power of community based struggles and leads women to believe that their problems are not insuperable. A *vaca parida* will not end gender inequality but the resolution of a practical need and being able to produce something that would otherwise have to be purchased can in itself be empowering. Finding a way out of poverty is empowering even if existing gender relations are barely challenged. Secondly, it was clear to me that such programmes were seen as part of a process and not as an end in themselves. In many ways, it seemed that the women in El Hatillo were strategically working towards greater gender equality in a way which was *seen* as less disruptive to gender relations and was therefore less likely to bring about conflict in the community. These women could be seen as implementing what Vargas (1991a:29) calls "an intuitive sort of political calculation". Vargas' work on Peru has highlighted what she sees as the contradictory nature of emancipation. She demonstrates how women can simultaneously occupy different subject positions and gender awareness can in itself bring about democratic change in other subject positions. However, in some areas, traditional behaviour is maintained and sometimes even reinforced. This can be attributed to the ambiguous and painful nature of liberation. Women often recognise the presence of discrimination but might find comfort in it because it provides a sense of continuity and prevents the uncertainty of new positions and subjectivities being overwhelming. As Sweetman (1997b:3) has indicated, "women as well as men might have a vested interest in keeping up the illusion that gender ideology is being adhered to".

*Temporary masculinities and femininities*

Marcia Picado was almost nostalgic about the days in which she was still with her husband and she did not have to carry out paid work to support the family. In many ways, she appeared resentful about her new identity as the main breadwinner in the household. In the context of economic restructuring, however, she believed that there were more jobs for women than men.

A veces también hay más trabajo para la mujer. A veces sólo hay trabajos para la mujer, porque una mujer puede siempre ir a lavar, mientras que el hombre no, sólo puede trabajar de albañil, de carpintero.

Sometimes there are more jobs for women. Sometimes there are only jobs for women, because a woman can always do washing, but a man can't. He can only work as a labourer or a carpenter.

Marcia Picado, 31 August 1999

In some ways, Marcia is reinforcing essentialist stereotypes which see women as more naturally suited to certain jobs and women's work as more unskilled. In further discussion with her, however, she revealed that her husband did not want her to work but she would have preferred to. Furthermore, she also liked the ways in which he sometimes did jobs which could be more readily associated with the feminine. Cameron (1998) has suggested that an understanding of the masculine and the feminine as blurred and muddled enables a politics of gender that is based on shifting and temporary identifications rather than opposed gender groups. Often what is seen as straightforward and oppressive masks more complex underlying processes.

Trabajaba él, porque no le gustaba que yo trabajara. Decía que no, que para eso él ganaba para mantenernos, no era necesario que anduviera trabajando.

*Y ¿quería trabajar o no?*

Sí, claro que sí. Siempre me ha gustado trabajar, porque cuando uno trabaja, uno no está pues esperando a que le estén dando, o estar uno pidiendo o cosas así. Y entonces, a mí me gusta trabajar.

He used to work, because he didn't like me to work. He said I couldn't, because he earned enough to keep us, it wasn't necessary for me to be out working.

*And did you want to work or not?*

Of course I did. I have always liked to work, because when you work, you're not always hoping that someone else is going to give you some money, and you don't have to be always asking for money and things like that. So I like working.

Marcia Picado, 4 November 1999

Cuando yo estaba con él, sí, me ayudaba. Cuando salíamos, me peinaba las niñas. Me miraba las niñas. A veces yo salía y él se quedaba en la casa. Y cuando venía, tenía el café hecho.

When I was with him, he used to help me. When we went out, he used to comb the girls' hair for me. Sometimes I would go out and he would stay home. And when I got back, he would have the coffee ready.

Marcia Picado, 31 August 1999

Conversations such as these reveal the lack of fixed gender identities. The shifting and often temporary nature of constructions of masculinity and femininity explain why the subject positions adopted by Marcia appear so contradictory and why she can simultaneously reinforce and undermine normative masculinities and femininities. These temporary identifications illustrate the sometimes painful nature of transformations in gender identities and the comfort that more familiar schemas provide, even as the transformations are partially acceptable.

### *Renegotiating the double burden*

As noted in Nicaragua and elsewhere, neoliberal restructuring has had a negative impact on the labour market in general and has increased the burdens of low-income women in particular. This crisis is seen to have increased women's labour market participation and it is therefore assumed that women have to do a double shift of paid and domestic work. In addition, it is often assumed that women enter the informal sector of the economy because it is easier to combine informal productive activities with domestic work and childcare (See, for example, Pérez-Alemán 1992).

By focusing on the domestic workplace as well as the site of waged work, however, it becomes evident that housework is not simply added on to paid work but is often renegotiated in creative ways. Recent studies by Dyck (1990) on Canada, Phua and Yeoh (1998) on Singapore and Cameron (1998) on Australia have highlighted the importance of such a focus in terms of understanding these renegotitations. While some GAD

analyses have alluded to the fact that for some working women in Latin America the double burden is lessened by a live-in grandmother (Pérez-Alemán 1992) or by daughters taking on household work (Moser 1993, González de la Rocha 1994), these studies have not considered the impact of the renegotiation of domestic work on identity and the constitution of gendered subjectivity. Dyck's (1990) work has demonstrated how the conditions in which women carry out mothering work are determined by the social relations of the communities in which they live. However, mothering practices are constantly renegotiated through the recurrent practices of their everyday lives. While their behaviour relates to their identities as mothers, these identities shift as a result of daily interactions. Phua and Yeoh (1998) also focus on the everyday and argue that while the public housing landscape in Singapore reinforces and legitimises gender inequalities, women develop a range of strategies to negotiate these inequalities. These strategies include nagging, crying, long telephone calls, informal conversations with neighbours and involvement in community activities. Cameron (1998) has also demonstrated the ways in which domestic practices and subjectivities are constantly transformed. She argues that even in households where domestic gender identities seem entrenched, the domestic sphere is a site where these are precariously constituted. These kinds of processes are crucial features of the changing labour market under restructuring but they have largely gone unrecognised in GAD analyses.

These processes are particularly crucial in Nicaragua where, despite the persistence of both ideological and practical barriers to full labour market participation by women, childbirth seems to have little impact on this participation. Most women can usually mobilise childcare strategies of some kind and furthermore, involvement in other productive activities enables women to renegotiate some of the reproductive work that they do. Even if women have internalised dominant gender discourses which see domestic work as primarily a woman's responsibility, individual women do not necessarily see all of this work within the household as their responsibility. By becoming involved in activities outside of the household, they are frequently able to relieve themselves of some of these tasks. If some of their unpaid work can be renegotiated,

women then might feel differently about the paid work they do and see potential for change which might not have been apparent on entering the labour market.

This is not to suggest that the renegotiations of housework and childcare that take place are always developmental. In many cases, burdens are lessened in ways which would constitute neglect, at least from a New Zealand perspective. Some Nicaraguan women give up the struggle of attempting to provide for their children in economically desperate circumstances. Newborn babies are sometimes abandoned and many Nicaraguan children are left to fend for themselves on the streets, spending the day begging for food or money. Many other children are left alone locked in houses while their mothers work, sometimes around open fires. El Mirador and El Tambor abound with children who display signs of neglect. Some have no clothes to wear, others have advanced dental decay, headlice or untreated parasites, others show evidence of mental retardation as a result of prolonged periods of malnutrition, while older children can often be seen sniffing glue to ward off hunger pains.

However, other women renegotiate their domestic and childcare burdens in ways which are compatible with good mothering and do not constitute neglect. The survey conducted by Pérez Sáinz and Menjívar Larín (1994) amongst informal sector workers in Managua revealed that one fifth of women do not participate in domestic activities at all, a finding which has significant implications for understandings of the double burden.

Some of my participants devoted most of their time to paid work and political activism outside the home and as a result did very limited amounts of domestic work or childcare. Many single mothers rely on female kin to relieve themselves of domestic work. While Clara Blandón could rely on her mother to look after her children on a regular basis, most of the domestic chores in her household were done by her sister who lived with them.

Tengo ....bueno, en mi casa, vive mi hermana y es ella que nos apoya, yo le pago a ella, porque es la cumiche, tiene una niña, está separada de tu compañero porque tampoco tiene dónde vivir. Su compañero vive con una tía y ella vive en la casa, y se encuentran los fines de semana. Entonces ella me apoya con la comida, o sea, con la comida y lavar la ropa. Y yo le ayudo a ella económicamente.

My sister lives in my house and she helps us and I pay her. She is the youngest one and she has a daughter, she's separated from her partner because they have nowhere to live. Her partner lives with an aunt and she lives in my house and they meet up at weekends. So she helps me with the cooking and washing clothes. And I support her financially.

Clara Blandón, 26 October 1999

Even the women who are doing the domestic work and childcare, as was the case of Clara's younger sister, might also be rewarded economically for this work. Rosario Peña, who was looking after six of her grandchildren, also saw this work as economically viable and not as a burden. When I asked her if it was hard to bring up six grandchildren after raising 14 children of her own, she described her grandchildren in both religious and economic terms.

Los hijos son un regalo de Dios. De estos niños también comemos porque las mamás mandan.

Children are a gift from God. And we also eat from these children because their mums send money.

Rosario Peña, 16 May 2001

In households where women do not have male partners and female kin take over domestic chores and childcare, income-earning women take on more masculine roles and subject positions, in the sense that they come to see domestic work as someone else's responsibility. Breadwinning single mothers are not, however, defining themselves in relation to a heterosexual family unit.

Carla Martínez saw her parents as traditional and conservative in many ways, particularly the drunk and abusive nature of her father and the self-sacrificing nature of her mother. However, she also observed the way in which her mother renegotiated "women's work" which suggests that the power relations within the household were more complex and dynamic than they appeared.

Creo que a mi mami no le gustaba mucho hacer las cosas de la casa porque no era, desde que yo recuerdo, no era una mujer a que le gustaba echar tortillas, hacer cosas, sólo coser, haciendo pan y llevando sus cuentas en sus cuadernos. Pero a mí me llamaba mucho la atención eso porque no era tampoco una ama de casa muy tradicional, sino que ella siempre iba al campo para ver como estaba

trabajando la gente, siempre estaba como una jefa, pero nunca hacía ...bueno nosotros trabajábamos desde muy pequeños, y ella nos enseñaba como hacer las cosas, pero no era la responsable de hacer las cosas, sino que éramos nosotros. Nos asignaba a cada quien algo que hacer, hombres y mujeres, tanto dentro de la casa como fuera de la casa. Entonces, en ese particular, verdaderamente yo no sé de dónde mi mami hubiera aprendido este tipo de manera de ser, pero ella era muy diferente al resto ..., bueno no muy diferente en el aspecto del trabajo, porque mi mami hacía costura y hacía pan que es lo tradicional de las mujeres. Pero el mando era de mi mamá, ahí no se hacía nada si mi madre no lo determinaba. No como es lo normal aquí, que es el hombre que determina las cosas. Mi mami nunca pidió permiso a mi papi por lo que iba a hacer. Sino que ella determinaba lo que iba a hacer, ya.

I don't think my mum really liked doing housework, because as far as I can remember, she wasn't a woman who liked making *tortillas*, she only liked sewing, making bread and keeping her accounts in her notebooks. I was always struck by this because she wasn't a traditional housewife, she was always going out into the fields to see how people were working, she was always like a boss, but she never ... Well we used to all work from when we were very little, and she showed us how to do things, and it was us rather than her who were responsible for getting things done. She used to give us all a job, the boys and the girls, both inside and outside the house. I don't really know where my mum acquired that way of being, she was very different from the rest ... Not different in the sort of work she did, because she used to sew and make bread, which are traditional for women. But my mum was in charge, nothing was done unless my mum said so. Which is not the norm here, as men usually make the decisions. My mum never asked my dad for permission to do anything. She decided what she was going to do and that was that.

Carla Martínez, 14 August 1999

Despite having brought up five children on her own, Carla had always been active outside of the household, although not always for pay, and always managed to renegotiate the domestic work in the household. Despite her negative relationship with her father (See Chapter 3), she accepted him as part of her household because of his advancing years and possibly because as a good daughter she felt a responsibility towards his care and well-being. While she described the opposition to her extensive extra-domestic activities from male members of her family, her brothers as well as from the father of her children, her father seemed to have gradually become more accepting and respectful of her paid and unpaid work outside the household. Much to her surprise, he even adopted a more feminine subject position and began to show concern about her well-being.



Pero hoy en día pues mi relación con él, nunca peleamos, ya es un señor mayor que es un poco incómodo estar con él, porque siempre está poniendo quejas de las niñas que oyen mucha música, que se acuestan noche, que llegan chavalos a platicar con ellas, que yo no paso en la casa. Pero es algo curioso, cuando él tiene algo, él siempre me dice: “Carla, creo que estás sin comer, te dejé un poco de leche.” Hoy lo hace. El siempre me dice: “Mirá Carla, compré bananos, comé”. Yo, eso, me pone un poco ...porque yo siento que él ... o sea... no sé, siente algún cariño para conmigo.

Well my relationship with him today, we never fight, he is an elderly man now and it's a bit awkward to have him around. He's always complaining about the girls listening to music, going to bed late, about boys coming to talk to them, about me never being at home. But it's strange, when he has something, he always says to me: “Carla, I don't think you've eaten, I left you a bit of milk.” He does that today. He always says to me: “Look, Carla, I bought some bananas, eat up.” And that makes me feel a bit ... I feel that he ... I don't know, feels some affection towards me.

Carla Martínez, 14 August 1999

There are often contradictory processes in operation in terms of the replication of the norms of femininity. This was particularly evident in the household in which I was living. In some ways, Erica played the role of a conventional wife who did not compromise her husband's masculinity. She always made sure she was at home at lunchtime to serve her husband's lunch to him at the table (although also frequently joked to me about Orlando's antiquated and somewhat ridiculous desire to have his wife serve him). Her own income-generating strategies, while crucial to family survival, were also largely confined to the home from where she sold milk, curd and popsicles. However, she paid someone else to do all her washing and ironing. Her husband told me once that it was inappropriate for a man to wash clothes and he would be ridiculed by his friends if he was caught doing such a job. Erica decided that such an onerous and time-consuming chore was also inappropriate for her. She renegotiated some of her domestic burden without coming into conflict with her husband.

Even in households where women do not have male partners, gender relations are not absent. One of the evident ways in which women are attempting to relieve themselves of household chores and at the same time bring about shifts in gender relations is by encouraging or forcing boys and not just girls to engage in feminised activities. Some of my participants talked about the importance of this despite resistance.

Más el varón, con las chavalas no hay problema, pero con el varón sí. Le cuesta muchísimo. Dice que eso es lo que dice el Colectivo de Mujeres, me va recriminando que yo protego más a las chavalas, que les apaño, que les consiento todo, y que a él lo obligo, y esas cosas de sentirse discriminado. [...] El sabe que a sus compañeritos lo alcahuetean en todo, que no hacen nada, entonces él no quiere hacer nada. Entonces se siente mal por ejemplo que mi hermana no le lava los calzoncillos, no le lava los calcetines, y él tiene que lavarlos, tiene que alistar su uniforme. Entonces él quiere que le sirvan todo, que hasta la comida se la llevan ahí, a dejar el plato y que se lo llevan, y claro eso no se lo permito. Ni mi hermana se lo permite y entonces ... él siempre vive reclamando.

The boy more, with the girls there is no problem, but there is with the boy. It's really hard for him. He says that this is what the Women's Collective says, he accuses me of protecting the girls more, of favouring them, of letting them do what they like, but I tell him what to do and he feels discriminated. [...] He knows that his friends are allowed to get away with everything, that they don't do anything and so he doesn't want to do anything. So he feels bad when my sister won't wash his underpants or his socks, and he has to wash them and he has to get his school uniform ready. He even wants his food served to him, for someone to bring his plate and take it away and of course I don't allow that. My sister doesn't either, so ... he's always complaining.

Clara Blandón, 26 October 1999

Y a mis hijos les he enseñado otras cosas. En mi familia yo era la mayor, y era responsable de mis hermanos, sobre todo los varones. Entonces mis hijos ya no. Ellos tienen que hacer sus cosas, tienen que hacerse cargo de sus cosas. Lavan su ropa, planchan su ropa, arreglan su ropa. Los tres más pequeños son varones, mi hija es la mayor, entonces, si yo hubiera seguido la tradición, mi hija se tendría que ocupar de tres hijos varones. Y tampoco iba a permitir que mi hija hiciera eso.

I have taught my children other things. In my family I was the oldest, and I was in charge of my brothers and sisters, especially my brothers. But that's not the case with my sons. They have to do things themselves, they have to take charge of their things. They wash their clothes, they iron their clothes, they sort out their clothes. The three youngest are boys, my daughter is the oldest, so if I had followed the tradition, my daughter would have to look after three boys. And I wasn't going to allow my daughter to do that.

Claudia Moreno, 24 August 1999

Claudia discovered that resistance to such work diminished as the boys grew older. At a certain age they were embarrassed to be seen washing clothes by their friends, but when they got a bit older, being able to make food for a visiting girlfriend, for example, was an asset.

Muchas veces me dice mi hijo menor “yo no sé porque vos me ponés a lavar a mí, todas las mamás les lavan la ropa a los hijos, y vos no nos lavás a nosotros”. Verdad, hay bastante resistencia del niño que ya tiene 11 años. Ese niño ya tiene responsabilidad en la casa, no, pero cuando a él le toca lavar, lo mismo, no, es terrible, no tengo por qué lavar, y además sus amigos se van a burlar de él porque es el único que lava y los otros no. Entonces a él le cuesta, hay bastante resistencia. Por lo menos con los dos varones grandes, que ya están grandes, no tengo esos problemas. Si llevan a una amiga a la casa, y si no hay que comer, ellos se ponen a cocinar a sus amigas, y también es una forma de demostrar a los otros que vienen que los hombres también pueden hacer algo en la casa. Es algo muy importante. Y yo creo que esto ha funcionado muy bien en mi casa.

Many times my youngest son says to me “I don’t know why you make me wash clothes, all mums wash their children’s clothes, and you won’t wash ours”. There’s quite a lot of resistance from the 11-year-old. This boy has responsibility at home, but when it comes to washing, it’s terrible, he doesn’t want to and besides his friends are going to make fun of him because he’s the only one who washes clothes and the others don’t. It’s hard for him, there’s quite a lot of resistance. At least with the two older boys, I don’t have these problems. If they take a girlfriend home and there is no food, they cook for their girlfriends and this is a way of showing others who visit that men can also do things around the house. It’s very important. And I think it has worked very well in my house.

Claudia Moreno, 9 November 1999

### **Labour of love**

Randall (1999) noted how the Nicaraguan revolution and AMNLAE in particular took advantage of women’s “willingness” to do unpaid work. In Nicaragua, women continue to do a significant amount of unremunerated work, not just in the household, but also in the political sphere. Much of this work, despite its political focus, is also feminised because it results from care and concern for others. After Hurricane Mitch, the women of El Hatillo began to work in a highly organised fashion but without pay to promote the well-being of the community as a whole (See Chapter 7). Some of my participants were also to some extent accepting of the low wages that they earned because they cared about the work that they did and saw it as politically important.

There is therefore no clear division between the political work women do for pay and the political work they do for free. A number of participants, such as Lucía Espinoza, Carla Martínez and Ana González combined paid and unpaid work within the same organisation. It was Lucía’s unpaid work as a health *brigadista* which was most

important to her and most central to her identity. In many ways, the informal income-earning activities she ran from her home were merely a means to an end, so that she could continue to do her unpaid work in various communities. Her experience and commitment meant that at times the Communal Movement paid her as they did for running the *comedor* at El Mirador. In addition, she sometimes received one-off payments for health-related activities such as running latrine workshops.

The political nature of much unpaid work means that women often value what they do in non-monetary terms, although it is also the case that the greater experience and self-esteem women gain through political mobilisation do sometimes lead to paid work. In 1999, Carla Martínez received a salary for her work with the SIC, work which in the early 1990s she did voluntarily. It is significant in terms of gender equality that some women are now doing for pay what they previously did for free. The increased professionalisation of NGO work in Nicaragua throughout the 1990s is to a significant extent an important recognition of the skills and experience gained by women during the 1980s. Similarly, Juana Granada and María Dolores Gallegos, the leaders of the Movement of Single and Unemployed Mothers, were unpaid. But they hoped that eventually their efforts would result in a salaried position.

Bueno, lo que nosotras pretendemos, verdad, no exactamente independizarnos y buscar un empleo fijo, sino más bien seguir atendiendo este sector, de madres solteras y desempleadas. Y de esta manera nosotras a lo mejor llegamos a tener un salario como directiva y poder trabajar mejor para el Movimiento. No exactamente buscar un trabajo independiente, sino más bien queremos seguir trabajando con el Movimiento.

What we want is not exactly to become independent and look for a permanent job, but we want to continue attending to this sector, of single and unemployed mothers. And in this way hopefully we can earn a salary for working as a committee so we can work better for the Movement. We don't exactly want an independent job, but rather we want to carry on working with the Movement.

Juana Granada, 18 October 1999

Ana González worked as a pre-school educator, an *educadora* in one of the CDIs run by the Communal Movement. I had discovered that while the (female) *educadoras* were only paid C\$300 a month to work in the CDIs, the (male) drivers were paid C\$1000.

While Communal Movement leaders attempted to account for this gender discrepancy in terms of funding and budget allocations, Ana explained it to me more in terms of her work being a labour of love.

Realmente esto ha sido una lucha grandísima, grande, grande, grande. [...] Cuando nosotras iniciamos con Sadie, era algo así bien voluntario, pero realmente era voluntario, como yo inicié voluntaria, pero al menos éramos reconocidas con otras cosas. En ese tiempo decidíamos una ayuda que nosotras mismas reproducíamos ese fondo, porque no había ningún proyecto que nos financiara a nosotros, incluso, ahorita, no tenemos ningún proyecto, la verdad es que se han montado microempresas y de eso sobrevivimos. Cuando nosotras iniciamos antes, fue una iniciación con amor, con cariño, con esa gran iniciativa buena, que todavía siento que la tengo.

This has been a massive struggle. [...] When we started out with Sadie, it was something voluntary, it was really voluntary, I started out working voluntarily but at least our work was recognised in other ways. At that time we created an *ayuda* which we funded ourselves, because we didn't have a project to finance us, even now we don't have a project, but we set up some microenterprises and we live off them. When we started out, it was a thing that started with love, with affection, with great initiative which I still feel I have.

Ana González, 21 September 1999

The non-monetary value of their work, while leading to lower wages than those male drivers, was what also distinguished these women from ordinary workers.

Yo lo que veo, como ellos son conductores ellos lo toman como el trabajo de una institución, pero cuando nosotras trabajamos, lo tomamos de un trabajo para la comunidad, en bienestar de la comunidad. Entonces esa persona, independientemente de que sea conductor, no es lo que nosotras somos, Movimiento Comunal, que nos sentimos de que estamos metidas dentro de una organización y que estamos en la lucha por la niñez. Pero mientras ese conductor sabe que está aquí por un salario, verdad, pero realmente ellos son reconocidos y nosotras pensamos que ellos son reconocidos porque es un trabajo y hay una ley que dice que menos de tal cantidad no pueden ganar. [...] Lo que nos importa es lo que nosotras sabemos, lo podemos transmitir a otras personas. No estamos en proyectos privados, pues.

The way I see it is that they as drivers see it as a job in an organisation, but when we work, we see it as working for the community, for the well-being of the community. So that person, regardless of the fact that he's a driver, he is not what we are, Communal Movement, we feel we are involved in an organisation and we are in a struggle for children. But the driver is only here for a salary, and they are paid for their work, and we think that are paid what they are because it is a job

and the law says you can't pay someone less than a certain amount. [...] But what matters to us is being able to pass on what we know to others. We are not in private projects.

Ana González, 21 September 1999

Carla Martínez clearly viewed the work of the SIC in the same way and emphasised the non-commercial nature of their work.

Y es una especialidad no vista desde el punto de vista mercantil, sino que desde el punto de vista de una necesidad y afecto que requieren los niños. Entonces esto tiene un valor diferente a que yo me vaya preparada, qué sé yo, a un instituto donde voy a estar pensando que algún día me van a pagar, y que voy a ganar un montón. Y entre nosotras, hemos aprendido hasta cierto punto a ser especialistas, de un sacrificio pero no pensando en el aspecto mercantil, no pensando en cuánto voy a ganar, sino que pensando en la necesidad que se tiene de tener conocimientos para poder rendir mejor, para poder dar un mejor servicio, y sobre todo para que los niños y las niñas estén más satisfechos con nosotras. Entonces, eso verdaderamente ha tenido un valor, y algunas compañeras que aunque ya no trabajan con nosotros, pues también lo han valorado, y eso es algo que nosotros potenciamos.

It is a specialism but not from a commercial point of view but from the point of view of the needs and affection that children require. So this has a different value from me thinking that I'm going to work in an organisation and they're going to pay me a load of money. Amongst ourselves, we have learnt to be specialists to some extent, making a sacrifice without thinking about the commercial aspect, without thinking about how much I am going to earn, but thinking about the need to gain more knowledge to be more useful, to be able to give a better service, and especially so that the boys and girls are more satisfied with us. So this has been really valuable, and some colleagues, even though they no longer work with us, have valued this and it is something that we encourage.

Carla Martínez, 4 December 1999

The Movement of Single and Unemployed Mothers was formed with the explicit aim of seeking sustainable sources of employment for single mothers based on the understanding that this was their most pressing need. Despite the emphasis on the need for pay, one of the members of the movement also expressed their commitment to the organisation in non-monetary ways, as work which comes from the heart.

Desde que inicié a este Movimiento, me agrado mucho pues, porque lo conozco, que ha tenido progreso a nivel de Managua y aquí en Matagalpa, que ha surgido de un desastre natural y del interés que han tenido todas las mujeres, la participación. Es un trabajo pues de corazón, que digamos, que hay personas que

trabajan sólo por salario, y nosotras no pensamos en eso. Ahí andamos de cerros, en lugares pantanosos, en el monte, en todos lados por el bienestar de nuestras mujeres, a ver qué les damos.

Since I started working with this Movement, I like it a lot, it has made progress in Managua and here in Matagalpa. It came from a natural disaster and from the interest shown by all the women, their participation. It is work which comes from the heart. There are people who only work for money but we don't think about that. We walk up hills, in swampy areas, in the countryside, everywhere, for the good of our women, to see what we can do for them.

Carolina Segovia, 22 October 1999

The work of the *educadoras* can be compared to the work women do as *parteras* or community midwives. Silvia Montiel, Rosario Peña and María Julieta Vega all worked as *parteras*. It is also work which emerges from care and concern for others, and has no fixed salary. Mothers sometimes paid them for their help during delivery but because amounts reflected families' abilities to pay, remuneration tended to be very low. As I demonstrated in Chapter 5, María Julieta valued her work not in terms of how much she earned, but in terms of how many lives she had managed to save. While this sort of work reinforces feminine norms in many ways, it is also crucial in terms of self-esteem.

Women are simultaneously lobbying for decent wages while creating an environment where non-commercial values are also promoted. There is evidence that, despite the individualism generated by structural adjustment policies and the emphasis on survival, some Nicaraguan women are working in ways which counter the market logic of such policies. Paradoxically, it is within the crisis caused by neoliberalism and the formulation of responses to it that this kind of work has come to be valued.

### **Work and personal empowerment**

As a result of research conducted in the Dominican Republic, McClenaghan (1997) is critical of what she sees as a romanticisation of the reality of women's work in Latin America. She believes that women in the Dominican Republic enter the labour market out of economic desperation and see work as an issue of survival rather than as a means of self-improvement.

My data suggest that while work is economically necessary and central to family survival in Nicaragua, it is also a very important source of identity and self-esteem. Many of my participants talked very positively about how their work made them feel and some stressed that they would continue to do their work even if they no longer got paid for it and even if they no longer needed the money. Ana González told me that she had a dream in which she had won the lottery.

Una vez soñé de que yo me sacaba la lotería, y mis amigas y mis compañeras me decían “ya no vas a trabajar, porque tenés dinero”. “No, lo contrario, yo voy a trabajar.” “Pero tenés reales.” “Bueno, voy a abrir una cuenta de ahorro por el futuro de mis hijas, pero sí voy a trabajar porque me gusta el trabajo.” Incluso yo he tenido otras oportunidades de poder trabajar en otras áreas, pero siempre me ha gustado estar trabajando así en el SIC.

Once I dreamed that I had won the lottery, and my friends and colleagues said to me, “You don’t have to work now, because you’ve got money”. “No, on the contrary, I am going to work”. “But you’ve got money.” “Well, I’m going to open a savings account for my daughters’ future, but I am going to work, because I like my job.” I have had the chance to work in other areas, but I have always liked working with the SIC.

Ana González, 21 September 1999

Likewise, other women stressed to me the positive aspects of their working lives and how work had brought them a significant degree of personal improvement.

Prácticamente el colectivo me ha capacitado. En todo, en todo, en todo. Y después continué mis estudios, ahorita estoy en la universidad. Estoy sacando el tercer año de periodismo, porque bueno prácticamente tengo casi nueve años, casi diez años de experiencia, digamos, en todo el trabajo que he realizado. [...] Creo que el camino que he recorrido ha sido muy lindo, me ha dado mucha experiencia y sólo en el espacio en que estoy me lo ha permitido pues. [...] Cuando yo entré, ni siquiera sabía cómo manejar una grabadora, ahora manejo todos los equipos, sé producir, locutar, todo, incluso hablar. Porque era demasiado tímida y me costaba expresarme y sin embargo ya he aprendido a desenvolverme e incluso capacitar, no me imaginé dando un taller, y ahora son muchos los que doy.

The collective has practically trained me. In everything. And I continued studying, and I’m at university now. I’m in my third year of a journalism degree, and I have nine, nearly ten, years of experience in all the work that I do. [...] I think that the path I have taken has been very lovely, it has given me lots of experience, which I only could have had in the space that I am in. [...] When I started I didn’t even know how to use a tape recorder, now I use all the



equipment, I can produce, present, everything, even speak. Because I used to be too shy, and I found it hard to express myself but I have learnt to develop and even train people. I never imagined myself leading a workshop and now I run many.

Clara Blandón, 22 September 1999

Si no sucede nada, yo pienso que voy a continuar, de alguna manera, valga que me gusta el trabajo, y me siento realizada con el trabajo que hago, me gusta lo que hago. [...] Siento que aquí pues he tenido oportunidades pues que yo estoy segura de que si estuviera en mi casa no las hubiera tenido, eso me halaga, me estimula, y me siento bien pues, tranquila.

All being well, I want to carry on working here, I like my job and I feel good about the work that I do, I like what I do. [...] I feel that I have had opportunities here that I am sure I would never have had if I stayed at home. That encourages me, it stimulates me and I feel good, you know, relaxed.

Carla Martínez, 4 December 1999

Sí, me gusta porque en el trabajo uno se supera, uno aprende, uno está en todo, uno se va adaptando al tema, incluso ahí mismo he aprendido de computación, releendo, practicando, he aprendido muchas cosas, uno trabajando aprende muchas cosas, aunque no tenga un título pero las aprende.

I like it because at work you better yourself, you learn, you are into everything, you get used to something. I have even learnt some computing skills, by revising, practising, I have learnt many things. When you work, you learn many things, even if you don't have any qualifications, you still learn them.

Lydia Sánchez, 21 August 1999

It is difficult to assess the extent to which positive affirmations about work are a revolutionary legacy which could account for the huge differences between my findings in Nicaragua and McClenaghan's in the Dominican Republic. In this respect, it is also important to acknowledge that many of the women who expressed positive attitudes to their work were fortunate enough to work with NGOs and not in export processing. Despite this, there seems to be a more generalised desire to seek self-improvement through work and a more consolidated reconciliation between maternal and working identities than in other parts of Latin America. Women are not seeking ways to "return" to the home and be full-time mothers and for many the importance of work to them is a deterrent to finding a partner or husband because of the ways in which this could prove restrictive.

Pero muchas veces me pongo a pensar en lo que me dice mi mamá: “Acordate también que teniendo a alguien en tu casa, no va a ser igual, no vas a poder trabajar”. Incluso en eso me pongo a pensar yo. Yo digo que si me dice la Alejandra Ortiz o la Carla Martínez que haga una capacitación una semana, pienso que con un marido en la casa, y como son estos maridos, machistas, no podría yo.

I often think about what my mum says to me: “Remember that having someone in your house, it’s not going to be the same, you’re not going to be able to work.” I often think about that. And I think that if Alejandra Ortiz or Carla Martínez send me on a course, I think that with a husband in the house I wouldn’t be able to go, especially with what husbands are like here, *machistas*.

Ana González, 25 August 1999

Work is much more than a strategy for survival but as Azucena Mejía said in an earlier quote (pages 236-237), it is also a symbol of independence. Economic and cultural circumstances in Nicaragua mean that it is not possible to assume that economic well-being will come through marriage or that it is possible to sustain a family on unskilled labour. Therefore women are investing a lot of time and energy in education and upskilling, both as a form of personal self-advancement and as a means to increase one’s income-earning potential. As the following quote from Lydia Sánchez demonstrates, these are also values that mothers are passing onto their children.

A ver si [mi hija] avanza y después dejarla a ella que avance, porque ahorita, bachillerarse, un bachiller no es nada, una persona que estudia más que computación; es lo que más piden, y sabe computación y si uno dice que no sabe, entonces le dan la escoba y el lampazo, entonces yo no quiero eso para ella, que trabajen con una escoba y un lampazo, yo quiero que sean personas preparadas, que sepan defenderse en la vida, que no pasen las dificultades que yo pasé.

I hope [my daughter] can make progress, that I can leave her to make progress, because here completing secondary school is nothing, a person needs to be able to use computers, which is what they most ask for. If you say you don’t know how to use computers, they pass you the broom and the mop. I don’t want that for her, I don’t want her to work with a broom and a mop, I want them to be well-trained people, that know how to stand up for themselves, and don’t have to go through what I went through.

Lydia Sánchez, 21 August 1999

For many of my participants it was part-time study rather than domestic work which was added on to paid work. Women do not only want their children to have the things that they missed out on when they were young, they also want to have now the things that

they could not have when they were children. Many of my participants had completed school and some gained professional or tertiary qualifications while they also maintained their families through other activities. Lucía Espinoza, for example, finished her secondary education when she was 36.

Con mis niñas pequeñas vendía pan en el barrio para subsistir, me levantaba a las cuatro de la mañana para hacer pan. Y aún así, empecé a estudiar de noche. Estudié la primaria y el bachillerato.

When my children were little, I sold bread in the *barrio* to survive, I used to get up at four in the morning to make bread. And still I started studying at night. I studied primary and secondary.

Lucía Espinoza, 11 August 1999

Azucena Mejía, who worked as an actor with a women's theatre group, saw her work as giving her an opportunity to say and do things that are controversial which she did by literally departing from the script.

Una cosa que yo disfruto mucho con el teatro es que tengo la posibilidad de decir lo que yo quiero. Es un poder, que también es peligroso, y hay que saberlo utilizar. Pero siento que en ese momento tengo como el permiso, no, me da permiso a mí la gente. Claro que lo tengo que respetar, pero me da permiso de poder jugar, me da permiso de poder hablar, me da permiso de poder decir a cualquier persona del público o a cualquier persona del gobierno lo que pienso, lo que siento. Puedo salir del guión y es lo que más me gusta, improvisar. No me salgo porque a mí me da la gana, me salgo porque el teatro lo permite, el teatro te permite improvisar, te permite jugar, siempre y cuando tenga que ver con lo que está haciendo. Entonces a mí me gusta muchísimo retomar cuestiones coyunturales. Cuestiones del gobierno, situaciones que están pasando en este momento. [...] Entonces me estoy saliendo de un guión, es verdad, pero me estoy metiendo en la vida real de la gente, que es lo más me importa.

One of the things that I really enjoy about the theatre is that I have the chance to say what I want. It is a power, that is also dangerous and you have to know how to use it. But I feel that at times I have permission, that the audience gives me permission. Of course I have to respect it, but they give me permission to play around, they give me permission to speak, they give me permission to say to anyone in the audience or the government what I think, what I feel. I can depart from the script and improvising is what I like most. I don't depart from the script because I feel like it, I depart from it because the theatre permits it, theatre allows you to improvise, it allows you to play around, as long as it is related to what you are doing. I really like taking up current topics. Things to do with the government,

situations that are happening at the the moment. [...] I am leaving the script, it's true but I am entering people's real lives which is the most important thing to me.  
Azucena Mejía, 27 October 1999

This is possibly the potential that lies in women's work in a more metaphorical sense, that through work not only are they able to resolve some of their economic needs, they are also able to leave the ideological script which prescribes certain ways of being mothers and by so doing can deviate widely from dominant discourses of motherhood. By improvising in their daily lives and rewriting the script in the way that Azucena does within the context of a play, gender ideologies and their concomitant spatial arrangements can be significantly renegotiated.

### **Conclusions**

Women's participation in the labour market, while necessary for family survival, is not devoid of personal ambitions or aspirations. While women's lives are constrained by the economic model and by dominant constructions of gender which both question women's right to work and see certain kinds of work as more appropriate for women, employment is now clearly articulated as a central gender-specific demand in women's lives. Paid work is also important in terms of being able to leave a violent relationship, as discussed in Chapter 3. The following chapter considers the importance of employment as the most effective means of disaster mitigation. Working identities are often defined in relation to responsibilities to families, but they also represent independence from men and a means to personal self-improvement. It demonstrates the contradictory processes through which gendered subjectivities at work are constituted. Women might enter the labour force or take on a job because of their family obligations, but over time that job can come to represent more than an income and bring about shifts in understandings of family and motherhood. In this respect it appears that identity is more coherently constructed away from homespace. During this process ideologies of domesticity and intensive mothering are often simultaneously absorbed and overturned. This is because women might be confined to a limited number of feminised occupations which reinforce norms of femininity. However, because home and the site of waged work are not separate entities but are mutually constituted (and in some cases are the same physical space), by

renegotiating domestic work and childcare at home, women might also be disrupting spatialised understandings of home as based on a heterosexual normativity.

In Nicaragua, the gender composition of the labour market is not changing as rapidly as the ideological formulation of work and motherhood and as the transformation of people's gendered subjectivities through work. Women are struggling to make ends meet in an economic sense and there is no doubt that structural adjustment is causing widespread hardship which disproportionately affects women. However, in comparison with some other parts of the world, women are not struggling so hard to reconcile their identities as mothers and workers. The working lives of many Nicaraguan women, in particular of those without male partners, have done much to consolidate the economic character of motherhood.

However, discourses which separate wage work from motherhood persist and are closely tied in to men's understandings of their masculinity. This is partly because breadwinning mothers, despite their abundance, tend to displace notions of good and bad mothering rather than undermining them entirely. Consequently, for many women, like my friend Conchita, bad mothers are those who do not work and provide for their children. Dualisms persist in Nicaragua even when there is little coherence about what a good mother does and what a bad mother does.

The multiplicity of ways in which women adopt, adapt and resist dominant ideologies of domesticity and notions of motherhood and paid work as incompatible attest to the extent to which caregiving roles and other reproductive functions can be renegotiated. They provide clear evidence of the flexibility of motherhood as a discursive site in the face of rapid economic and political change.

Other than perhaps giving birth, there is little that is universal about mothering work. Mothering can encompass varying degrees of intensity and emotional and economic commitment. In the Nicaraguan context, motherhood can continue to be central to a woman's identity even if intensive mothering in accordance with a dominant or Eurocentric ideal never takes place. I would argue that it is through the exploration of

women's working lives in Nicaragua that the cultural specificity of motherhood is seen at its most apparent.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Substantial literature reviews on gender and work in Latin America can also be found in Tiano 1987, Ward 1988, Babb 1990, Acevedo 1995, Ward and Pyle 1995, Radcliffe 1999a.

<sup>2</sup> The others were Venezuela, Colombia and Paraguay.

<sup>3</sup> This expression literally translates as "as soon as the macaw palm is picked, it is eaten". The macaw palm has a number of uses. Its nuts can be eaten roasted. Its pulp is fermented to produce liquor and cooking oil is extracted from both the pulp and the nut.

## Responding to Hurricane Mitch: Disasters, gender inequalities and the abnormality of everyday life

### **Nicaragua's hazard susceptibility**

Nicaragua, largely absent from mainstream news since the days of the Contra war, once again attracted international media attention in October 1998 when Hurricane Mitch caused widespread devastation in Central America. Authors writing on Nicaragua often point to its hazard susceptibility as a defining feature of the country, along with its political instability. Nicaragua is frequently defined as a disaster-prone area, with authors sometimes citing the long list of earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, forest fires, tsunami and hurricanes that it has had to endure. Climatological and geological conditions in Nicaragua do mean that it is prone to extreme events as are many countries in the developed world including New Zealand, Japan and parts of the United States. This construction of Nicaragua tends to be done in a way that dramatises the region with tones of inevitability and fatalism but does not really examine or problematise what it means to live in a disaster prone area. Neither does it begin to acknowledge the multiple and complex human and environmental factors which turn hazards with destructive potential into disasters often involving massive loss of life and livelihoods.

The discursive construction of Nicaragua as a disaster-prone area, in which the people of Nicaragua are painted as hapless victims, conceals the social realities of disaster in Nicaragua and the inequalities which determine levels of vulnerability and resilience. The framing of Nicaragua in this way can be interpreted in terms of what Button (1999) has called "hegemonic framing strategies" which are ideological in their representations. Such strategies prevent a detailed understanding not only of why and how people suffer when hit by a natural phenomenon, but also of the significance to people's lives of "lesser" disruptions or "smaller" crises. Furthermore, this framing can be seen as part of the structural-functionalist approach to disaster, identified by Anderson (1973:203), where the physical environment is the "gross natural setting" of the socio-cultural

investigation and is presented as a “backdrop, discretely separated from the primary components of the study” (quoted in Watts 1983). Before Hurricane Mitch, Nicaragua was classified by the British Red Cross as a country in permanent emergency, having suffered 11 ‘natural’ disasters between 1972 and 1996 which affected 77 per cent of the population (Equipo Nitlapán-Envío 1999d). Most humanitarian attention channelled to Central America comes as a response to these high-impact ‘natural’ disasters (Lavell 1994).

The framing of Nicaragua as a disaster-prone area in which disasters are viewed as one-off, unfortunate and natural events can be contrasted with the framing of Miami, which is part of the same hurricane belt but located in the first world. It is, in contrast, portrayed as a relaxed and scenic beach resort. For disaster scholars working on this region, these characteristics are, as Solecki (1999) has argued, also misleading. However, the contrasts between the way in which two hazard-prone areas are constructed, indicate that there is more to the simplification and dramatisation of Nicaragua’s hazard susceptibility than merely what Oliver-Smith (1986) sees as a human fascination with catastrophe. First world disaster is not treated with the same sense of inevitability as third world disaster. To some extent, this framing absolves the first world of responsibility for what happens in places like Nicaragua.

None of this is to deny Nicaragua’s tectonic, volcanic and cyclonic condition but to suggest that there are more complex social processes which underlie disasters in Nicaragua, of which the absence of a culture of prevention (Téfel 1999) is just one. Part of the problem is the way in which disasters have been approached by academics, engineers, planners and civil defence and emergency services; something which recent disaster scholarship has begun to challenge.

Hurricane Mitch hit Nicaragua in October 1998 shortly after my research proposal had been completed and approved. Until then, I had not intended to engage with the question of disaster in Nicaragua in any meaningful way and had not reviewed any literature concerning hazards or disasters. The magnitude of Mitch and its impact on my field site made me realise it was something that had to be incorporated in my research project.



The purpose of this chapter is to examine disaster as a process which involves the combination of socially produced conditions and extreme events. After reviewing the recent challenges to mainstream disaster scholarship and describing the devastation caused by Hurricane Mitch in 1998, I examine the gendered experience of disaster from the perspective of my participants in affected communities. Data from these women and these communities provide illuminating insights into responses to the disaster and the complexities of aid. By examining both gendered vulnerabilities and gendered capacities, I provide an insight into the impact of disaster on both gender relations and gender identities and the possibilities which exist for their renegotiation. To examine these aspects of the disaster process, I will explore questions of housing, employment and production, aid distribution and degrees of social mobilisation and female empowerment. Finally I will consider the degree to which disaster-related suffering in Nicaragua can be seen in terms of extensions of daily suffering and to which disaster vulnerability arises from the abnormality of everyday life. Given that I “discovered” disaster within the framework of a qualitative, ethnographic and feminist study which has as its starting point the destabilisation of commonly held assumptions of motherhood, it is my intention to contribute to filling some of the absences identified in existing disaster research.

### **Challenges to disaster research**

Mainstream disaster management, planning and research has been dominated by a belief that disasters are created by extreme geophysical processes and can be solved by a technocratic approach and the implementation of engineering knowledge. Within this paradigm there has been little regard paid to the social construction of disaster and the way in which disasters are generated by economic and political factors and by unequal exposure to risk (Cannon 1994). The 1990s were designated by the United Nations as the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction (IDNDR). Mitchell (1988) predicted the failure of the IDNDR because of its reductionist emphasis on technological and structural disaster mitigation knowledge, such as satellite based warning systems or massive engineering works, and on sudden onset hazards such as earthquakes and volcanic eruptions rather than slow-developing hazards such as drought or desertification. According to Lean (1999) the decade was “a complete catastrophe”. The number of

disasters increased three fold and their cost by nine times. Although the emphasis on external agents and natural forces continues to dominate disaster discourse (Hewitt 1995), a number of authors, especially anthropologists and cultural geographers, have since the late 1970s begun to challenge the dominant paradigm because of its lack of social understanding.

Part of this challenge has been an attempt to take the naturalness out of 'natural disaster', asserting that the term itself is a misnomer (O'Keefe et al. 1976, Hewitt 1983). Cannon (1994) has suggested that the emphasis on the impact of nature can cause potentially dangerous interventions and argues that for a natural phenomenon to become a disaster, it has to affect vulnerable people. There is increasing evidence that costly technological approaches to hazard management and the ways in which they undermine local and indigenous knowledge in how to live with hazards have had harmful consequences in some areas. This has been documented in relation to flood control in Bangladesh (Haque and Zaman 1994, Zaman 1999), to famine reduction in Ethiopia (Fitzgerald 1994) and to relocation housing built after the 1993 earthquake in Maharashtra, India (Salazar 1999). In addition, these strategies have been criticised for the way in which, by concentrating on physical measures and not on social conditions, they merely address the symptoms of the disaster rather than the causes (Maskrey 1989). Increased awareness of the role played by social conditions in creating disasters, that disasters do not happen but are created (Oliver-Smith 1994), has led to rising ambivalence about the effectiveness of hazard management and the value of scientific and technological knowledge in hazard mitigation (Maskrey 1994, Mitchell 1999b), particularly as the number of people suffering in disasters on a global scale is on the rise.

Given that disasters occur because of a combination of extreme physical events with social conditions, Hewitt (1983, 1992, 1995) has been arguing for emphasis in disaster research to be placed on social understanding. Puente (1999) has stressed that for hazard risk mapping to have any positive effects, it must incorporate the socio-economic heterogeneity of a location and the populations at risk. At present, disasters such as earthquakes are usually understood in terms of quantitative measurements such as loss of life, damage to property or points on the Richter Scale. These statistics do not measure

the complexity of human suffering and other socio-cultural effects (Doughty 1999). A number of scholars have therefore been attempting to provide greater social understandings of disasters, by focusing on social problems and inequalities rather than on the environment as the disaster agent (Hewitt 1983, Oliver-Smith 1986, Varley 1994a, Blaikie et al. 1994, Bolin et al. 1998, Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 1999). Researchers working in this vein, have been challenging contemporary understandings of disaster and consequently disasters are increasingly viewed in terms of a process which involves both a natural phenomenon and a population in a “socially produced condition of vulnerability” (Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 1999:4).

### **Theoretical reorientations in disaster research**

#### *Vulnerability analysis*

The concept of vulnerability has been used by some of these researchers as a way of explaining why similar hazards could have different impacts in different locations depending on socio-economic conditions. These varying conditions mean that people have different degrees of physical and economic vulnerability and resilience. Essentially, this approach views most disasters as unnatural (Zaman 1999). Vulnerability can be understood as the propensity to incur loss (Puente 1999) and it is vulnerability, rather than susceptibility to hazard, that will determine whether lives are lost or damage occurs (Handmer 1999). At present, particularly as far as hazard-prone mega-cities are concerned, very little is known about socio-spatial patterns of vulnerability, even in more developed countries (Mitchell 1999d). Inequalities of class, gender, age and ethnicity contribute to an individual’s vulnerability and will determine how people respond to a disaster and their ability to recover (Blaikie et al. 1994). It is therefore crucial when assessing vulnerability to pay attention both to the specificities of local conditions and how these local cultural variations can be destabilised during the disaster process (Maskrey 1994). A vulnerability approach means addressing socio-economic and cultural inequalities rather than seeking technological solutions to natural phenomena. If people can be made less vulnerable, then a hazard might not turn out to be a disaster (Cannon 1994).

Despite its usefulness in determining who is most at risk in a disaster, vulnerability analysis has also been critiqued for its tendency to construct people at risk as passive and weak victims who need protection (Hewitt 1995, Mitchell 1999c). Consequently, vulnerability is often used alongside the concept of resilience in an attempt to acknowledge people's capabilities in recovering from a disaster. As Hoffman (1999) has stated, disasters tend to lead to high levels of activity rather than passivity. Vulnerability is also dynamic and should not be treated as fixed. When assessing levels of vulnerability in a risk prone community, it is important therefore to acknowledge the dynamics of social heterogeneity (Solecki 1999). Despite the existence of a growing literature, vulnerability is still marginalised by dominant disaster paradigms by practitioners and academics (Varley 1994b). Most aid delivered in the wake of a disaster tends to be of a short-term nature and often does not make survivors less vulnerable to future hazards (Allen 1994).

### *Gender analysis*

Proponents of vulnerability analysis have identified gender as an important component of vulnerability, along with ethnicity, class and age. This is not to suggest that women per se are more vulnerable in a disaster (Byrne and Baden 1995) but that gender is an important factor determining the degree to which individuals are affected by the disaster as well as the nature and strength of people's coping strategies. Despite this, gender has been a neglected focus in much disaster research, planning and response, something which has only recently begun to be rectified particularly as a result of the work of Enarson and Morrow (1997, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c, 1998d) in the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew in Miami. They have critiqued the way in which much disaster research overlooks gender, despite the recognition within social sciences generally that there exists a gendered dimension to the responses to any social event.

According to Bolin et al. (1998), neither the United States disaster literature nor the federal emergency management agencies incorporate any form of gender analysis. In contrast, they believe that the third world literature, particularly studies on famine in Africa, has been much better at highlighting the importance of gender inequality. When

gender is taken into account following a disaster it is generally in terms of background quantitative characteristics which differentiate men and women (Bolin et al. 1998) or of women's needs as mothers rather than in terms of the way in which unequal gender relations generate certain vulnerabilities (Byrne and Baden 1995). If women are more vulnerable, it is because of their caregiving roles (Enarson and Morrow 1998b), because of a disaster-related increase in domestic violence (Wilson et al. 1998) or because they are more likely than men to stay behind in the disaster area to attempt reconstruction (Wiest 1998).

These gender-specific vulnerabilities need to be taken into account in both disaster prevention and response strategies. Female-headed households might also be more at risk, particularly if emergency committees make assumptions about the gender composition of households. Committees in Honduras after Hurricane Mitch ordered men to protect assets and women to protect children and go to the shelters. Consequently, female heads of households were forced to choose between their children and their assets and their household losses were much greater (Delaney and Schrader 2000). In addition, application of gender sensitivity means challenging male privilege (Enarson and Morrow 1998d) and not simply responding in the short term to the different needs of men and women. Studies which call attention to women's experiences of disaster often do so in a way which acknowledges their short-term needs after a disaster but not the gender inequalities which make them more vulnerable (See for example Dobson 1994, Honeycombe 1994).

When women are acknowledged, they are often constructed as victims who passively await rescue, rather than as possessing capabilities which can assist recovery (Enarson and Morrow 1998b, Finlay 1998). Finlay (1998) has reported how women in Queensland, Australia, in the aftermath of flooding performed many activities such as killing snakes or patrolling for stranded motorists. Similarly, after the Loma Prieta earthquake in northern California, O'Brien and Atchison (1998) state that women displayed high degrees of gender fluidity in their responses and reactions. It is therefore important to acknowledge the ways in which the disaster process makes women more vulnerable without resorting to stereotypical or deterministic notions of women's needs and behaviours (Fordham and

Ketteridge 1998). Enarson and Morrow (1998d) stress the importance of a gender-sensitive lens so that women's capabilities can be utilised and their vulnerabilities can be addressed.

### *Disaster and development*

The fact that the scale of disasters in terms of loss of life and damages to property and infrastructure is greater in the third world than the first world is some indication of the links which exist between disaster and development. The UN estimates that 90 per cent of disaster-related deaths occur in developing countries (Riley 1999). The 1972 earthquake in Managua killed 10,000 people, while a larger earthquake in 1992 in California killed one person (Bendaña 1999). The significance of these links however is overlooked because of the persistence of ideas of disasters as extreme and external physical events. Susman et al. (1983) argue that critiques of the disaster paradigm are closely related to the reconceptualisation of the development process in their focus on the ways in which the world economy is perpetuating marginalisation and technological dependency in the South.

Oliver-Smith (1986, 1994) attributes the devastation caused by the 1970 Peruvian earthquake and associated avalanches which buried the city of Yungay to the processes of rapid social change and marginalisation, including that of indigenous anti-seismic practices, which began with the conquest and colonisation of the region by Spain. He also asserts that the majority of disasters which occur in Peru today are the result of socio-economic inequalities (Oliver-Smith 1999a). In more recent times, rapid population growth and the implementation of structural adjustment policies in much of the third world have accelerated rural-urban migration patterns, forcing people to occupy more marginal land and settle in areas which are particularly susceptible to geomorphic hazards. These processes are creating new patterns of risk and exposure and increasing the vulnerability of low-income groups, as the most disadvantaged people are forced to occupy the most marginal land (Cannon 1994, Mitchell 1999c). In Brazil, the floods of 1988 demonstrated the way in which urban development and deforestation have made the urban poor vulnerable to disasters (Allen 1994).

Many researchers who have been exploring the political and social processes which create disasters are working within a political ecology framework (Hoffman and Oliver Smith 1999), an approach which has dominated understandings of Hurricane Mitch in Nicaragua from the media, the civil society and the academic community. Analysts within these communities widely understand the devastation caused by Mitch as resulting from the relationship between neoliberalism, poverty and environmental degradation. Rather than being seen as an extreme and inevitable natural phenomenon, it is viewed as the outcome of the cultivation of marginal land and deforestation without soil conservation measures and adequate watershed management, a process which is fuelled by the growing marginalisation and poverty of the Nicaraguan population. Poverty and marginalisation are perceived as direct consequences of transnational practices, where transnationals tend to take up the most fertile land while *campesino* farmers are pushed to more marginal land on the slopes of hills and volcanoes, often deforesting in order to plant and build (Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign 1999). This situation is compounded by other aspects of neoliberal structural adjustment policies, such as the cuts in health and education spending and the lack of access to credit schemes for small-scale agricultural producers, leading to deepening inequalities and consequently growing vulnerabilities to disaster (Bendaña 1999, CCER 1999, Vargas 1999a).

Maskrey (1989) believes that people decide to settle on hazardous land, such as on the slopes of mountains or volcanoes, not because of a lack of knowledge but because of social and economic constraints which often mean that they have nowhere else to go. The massive increase in disaster-related deaths in recent years can only be attributed to the growing vulnerability of the global population (Susman et al. 1983).

Despite the links between disaster and development, and the fact that authors have been arguing for the need to incorporate disaster planning into development planning since the early 1980s (Susman et al. 1983), developmental goals are often suspended by aid agencies when dealing with an emergency (Anderson and Woodrow 1989). Since Hurricane Mitch, however, owing to the scale of devastation caused, there is a growing acceptance within national governments and organisations such as the World Bank, that good development is the most effective prevention strategy (Delaney and Schrader 2000).

The political ecology approach is undoubtedly crucial in terms of understanding how political processes are contributing to environmental degradation and valuable in terms of developing more sustainable visions for the future. However, it is of little value in helping us to understand the recovery process as it is lived and experienced by survivors over an extended period of time.

### *Disasters as process*

Considering patterns and shifts in development and their effects on people's vulnerability to disasters enables us to conceptualise disasters as a process rather than as extreme and unexpected events in which normal life is suspended and recovery means getting back to normal. This means viewing disasters not as events which disrupt normality but as "an extension of everyday life" (Susman et al. 1983:263).

Oliver-Smith's (1986) work on Yungay cited earlier attributes the destruction caused by the 1970 earthquake to a process which began 500 years ago. Similarly, Maskrey (1989) sees the vulnerability of the Rimac Valley, Peru as a result of socio-economic, political and territorial changes which have been taking place since the 16th century. A long-term perspective can contribute to understanding disaster as part of more ongoing hardship to which people are subjected, while vulnerability analysis questions the value of attempts to get back to normality after a disaster and instead stresses the importance of focusing on reducing people's vulnerabilities which place them at risk (Anderson and Woodrow 1989).

A conceptualisation of disaster as process can also assist in understanding how trends such as urbanisation and the emergence of mega-cities are placing more people at risk. As Lavell (1994) argues, the high incidence of more 'minor' disruptions to life, which receive no international media attention, yet appear to be on the increase, are brought about by the same economic and political structures that cause the large-scale disasters.

A number of authors have expressed the need for qualitative, ethnographic and feminist research on disasters to fill many of the gaps of conventional research. Both Hewitt (1995) and Hoffman and Oliver-Smith (1999) have stressed the importance of



ethnographic fieldwork and the need to include voices from the field. In a similar vein, Bolin et al. (1998:43) have argued that “qualitative and ethnographic approaches that pursue a feminist research agenda focusing on gender inequalities in disaster will add explanatory depth to the quantitative survey approach frequently followed”. Fothergill (1998) in the same volume believes that quantitative approaches to disaster are inadequate because of the way in which people’s experiences of disaster become divorced from their everyday lives.

My participants talked very little about Mitch as an event and focused far more on the socio-economic conditions which made the disaster and which also make daily life precarious. These conditions include the lack of access to affordable health care, the frustrations at the prohibitive cost of education which meant they could not afford to send children to school, the lack of employment, water shortages and quality, the state of the Nicaraguan economy, rather than the fact that they live in an environmentally hazardous country. Given the extreme scale of Mitch’s destruction, this is significant.

### **Hurricane Mitch**

On the 20<sup>th</sup> October 1998, meteorologists reported that a hurricane was forming in the Atlantic which was likely to affect Nicaragua. Despite warnings on the size and destructive potential of the hurricane, the Nicaraguan government failed to warn people living in its path or evacuate high-risk areas. The hurricane brought continuous torrential rain for five days over the Nicaraguan-Honduran border as it met with a strong anti-cyclone which prevented it from advancing. Hurricane Mitch was ranked category five, the highest on the Saffir-Simpson scale, and brought winds of up to 300 km/h. However, most of the damage came from unprecedented levels of precipitation causing massive flooding and landslides. In two days Mitch dumped three-quarters of the rainfall that normally falls in a year (Pearce 1999). It left 11,000 people dead in Central America, 3,000 in Nicaragua. The areas most affected in Nicaragua were the northern departments close to the Honduran border – León, Chinandega, Estelí, Madriz, Nueva Segovia, Jinotega and Matagalpa (See Figure 1.1 for the location of these departments), with most of the deaths occurring in León and Chinandega. The worst damage occurred on the

slopes of the Casitas volcano in Posoltega, Chinandega. Heavy rain filled the cone of the volcano which burst on October 30 sending a 80km<sup>2</sup> mudslide down the slopes, burying thousands of people and homes, and killing 2000.

In total in Nicaragua, there were 865,700 *damnificados*, or people directly affected by the hurricane, which amounts to 20 per cent of the total population. The majority of these were left homeless, their houses, livestock, agricultural machinery and crops destroyed. Mitch washed away topsoil and dumped sand and rocks in other areas with the result that crop losses were considerable. According to the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Mitch destroyed 23 per cent of rice production, 55 per cent of beans, 45 per cent of corn and 30 per cent of coffee (Vargas 1999a) and killed 12,000 head of cattle (CCER 1999). Small and medium producers were worst affected, 200,000 lost their harvests (Vargas 1998). Although most of the crop losses corresponded to crops grown for domestic consumption, after Mitch the value of Nicaragua's exports fell from US\$842 million to \$612 million (Vargas 1999a). In addition, 1800 km of road were destroyed or severely damaged, 42 bridges were completely destroyed, another 29 were partially destroyed, schools and health centres were damaged, power lines brought down and water and sewage systems demolished. The cost of reconstruction and rehabilitation was estimated by the government to be in the order of US\$1.4 billion.

Disease spread in the days after the hurricane owing to the contamination of the water supply by pesticides and chemical waste, by the decomposition of human and animal corpses and by the hundreds of latrines that had overflowed during flooding. Consequently, survivors were not only having to deal with widespread diarrhoea and respiratory infections, but also outbreaks of malaria, dengue, leptospirosis, cholera, conjunctivitis and tetanus, a situation which caused the Ministry of Health to declare an epidemic emergency. In addition, Mitch altered the geography of thousands of anti-personnel and anti-tank mines placed by both sides during the Contra war. Before Mitch, their locations had been mapped and their removal planned, but now their locations are uncertain. A number of farmers were killed and injured in the days following the hurricane by mines that had moved during flooding and two boys were killed by anti-

personnel mines while swimming in rivers in Waslala and Puerto Viejo (Ecocentral 1998, Canales 1999).

As stated, a political ecology framework has largely informed understanding of Mitch. The hurricane clearly revealed both the extent of socioeconomic vulnerabilities and environmental degradation (Bendaña 1999, Delaney and Schrader 2000). A publication by the CCER (Civil Coalition for Emergency and Reconstruction), a coalition of 320 NGOs created in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch to coordinate and evaluate the reconstruction process, saw Mitch from that perspective.

El huracán Mitch viene a significar el colofón de una larga cadena de empobrecimiento y deterioro de los recursos naturales, de la calidad y condiciones de vida de la población. Los efectos devastadores originados por el huracán Mitch en Centroamérica están en íntima relación con las secuelas originadas por el modelo de desarrollo histórico y el modelo económico neoliberal imperante.

Hurricane Mitch is the culmination of a long chain of impoverishment and deterioration of natural resources, of the quality and standard of living of the population. The devastating effects brought about by Mitch are closely related to the consequences of the historical model of development and the prevailing neoliberal economic model (CCER 1999: 18-19).

Similarly, Mowforth (1999) has argued that it is the unsustainable nature of the operations of transnational companies in Central America – the logging concessions which are causing deforestation to advance at a rapid rate, the mining which removes topsoils to extract minerals, the rivers that are diverted to irrigate huge banana plantations and the use of chemical pesticides on cotton plantations which has rendered those lands now unusable – which turned Mitch into a large-scale disaster. It is estimated that 80 per cent of all corn and 90 per cent of beans are grown on slopes (CCER 1999), evidence of the extent to which *campesino* farmers are pushed onto marginal land. It is these economic conditions which are seen to have created such a large-scale disaster and which make recovery so difficult.

There is some concern within Nicaragua, however, that the emphasis placed on vulnerability and the development process is in itself becoming a new paradigm. Although most damage was to people and homes in risky environments, some well

capitalised and irrigated lands in Matagalpa and Jinotega were also affected. Researchers working out of the Central American University (UCA) in Managua believe that proposing “development” as the total solution is hindering other potential disaster prevention and mitigation strategies such as the implementation of potentially beneficial agro-ecological practices (Equipo Nitlapán-Envío 1999e, Rocha and Christoplos 2001).

### **Survivors of Mitch in Matagalpa**

I interviewed a number of women who were Mitch survivors in different locations of the department of Matagalpa. These participants had varying experiences of disaster, aid and the recovery process. The majority were part of Communal Movement housing projects, one urban, in El Mirador, Matagalpa and one rural, in El Hatillo in Sébaco. Others were affiliated to an organisation called the Movement for Single and Unemployed Mothers (Movimiento de Mujeres Madres Solteras y Desempleadas) formed after the hurricane. One participant, Lydia Sánchez, living in Barrio Richardson, close to central Matagalpa, was not connected to any post-hurricane aid or organisational project.

#### *El Mirador*

Three of my participants were beneficiaries of a Communal Movement housing project in El Mirador (Figure 7.1), to the north of the city of Matagalpa, in an area known as La Chispa. These were people living on the banks of the Río Grande, who were displaced by the hurricane. Their houses were destroyed and all their possessions were lost. Immediately after the hurricane, they took refuge in local schools which were being used as evacuation centres. When I first met them, they were still living in makeshift dwellings, *champas* (Figure 7.4), and were contributing to the construction of their new houses (Figures 7.5 and 7.6). The Communal Movement had opened a *comedor infantil*, a collective children’s kitchen to provide all the children with a nutritionally balanced hot meal and a drink each lunchtime. It is clear that the high levels of child malnutrition are related to broader socioeconomic deprivation and did not come about as a result of the hurricane. Some of the children displayed degrees of physical and mental retardation as a result of having tolerated sustained periods of malnutrition. There was no electricity or

piped water when I first arrived. Not long after they moved into their houses, electricity was obtained by tapping illegally into the electricity supply.

Most of the houses being built were part of the Communal Movement project. However, there were two other housing projects in the same location, one for women belonging to the *Resistencia* (demobilised Contra and their families) and another funded by the local Lions Club. So a diverse group of people ended up living in the same community. The Communal Movement opened the *comedor* to all the children in the community and none were excluded on political grounds or because they were part of a separate project.



Figure 7.1  
The settlement at El Mirador  
Source: Julie Cupples

### *El Hatillo*

In addition, I interviewed four rural hurricane survivors, living in a village called El Hatillo in the Sébaco valley. Two of these women had partners at the time of the hurricane. Like the women of El Mirador, these women too had lost their possessions and seen their homes destroyed. In addition, household livelihoods were undermined by the loss of their agricultural production, including chickens and rabbits kept for consumption, and 35,000 seedlings recently planted by the community in a reforestation project were washed away. The community was also forced to close the *comedor infantil* it had been running until the hurricane for all children under 12. The area had been particularly badly affected, the deep sides of the valley leading to El Hatillo had filled with water, drowning people who had hung onto trees for survival and the road connecting El Hatillo and Sébaco had gone. Vehicular access could only be gained by driving through the river. This community also had Communal Movement and other NGO funding for housing, reforestation work and agricultural rehabilitation.

### *Movement of Single and Unemployed Mothers*

This movement was formed after Hurricane Mitch by a group of single mothers out of concern about the number of women affected by the hurricane who were not receiving any institutional response. At the time of my research, it had an affiliation of around 150 low-income women from various *barrios* in and around Matagalpa. I attended various meetings and interviewed the leaders of the group and two of the members, one in a *barrio* on the edge of Matagalpa known as El Tambor and another in a more isolated community, a 45 minute walk from Matagalpa known as Apantillo Siales. El Tambor (See Figures 7.2 and 7.3) is now a sprawling *barrio* on the periphery of Matagalpa which resulted from a land invasion (*toma*) four years previously. The land belongs to Calley Dagnal, an adjacent coffee processing plant (*beneficio*). Attempted evictions had been unsuccessful but the settlement, while tolerated to some extent by the authorities, had still not been legalised. Elsa Jirón's house was still unfinished when it filled with water during the hurricane but she had been able to return and complete building. There was some NGO presence in El Tambor, but most inhabitants lived permanently in makeshift homes with dirt floors. There was some electrification but no piped water. In Apantillo Siales,

the family I interviewed had lost both their house and their crops in the hurricane and the road to Matagalpa was destroyed and had not been rebuilt. The community had no electricity, no piped water, no latrines, no school and no health centre.

### **Housing**

Houses are easily destroyed in disasters in Nicaragua because they are often made without foundations, of unplastered adobe dirt bricks or flimsy materials and built in precarious locations such as hillsides, slopes of volcanoes and next to lakes and rivers. This was the case with many of the homes in El Hatillo and the houses of the people who ended up in El Mirador. But housing is precarious in Nicaragua even in the absence of a disaster and much confusion surrounds the question of property and ownership. Many Nicaraguans were left homeless by Hurricane Mitch but for many others housing insecurity is not a one-off situation caused by a hurricane or earthquake. Living without secure housing is a constant feature of many people's lives in Nicaragua.

Under the Sandinistas, land on which to farm and to build a home was widely distributed through both the revolutionary government's agrarian reform programme and its government aided squatter settlements. However, many people did not possess legal titles to the land they were occupying. Since the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in 1990, much confusion has surrounded the issue of ownership, with former owners returning out of exile to reclaim land, and the United States attempting to make aid conditional on land being returned to its former owners (Jones 1994). During the transition period after the electoral defeat, the FSLN passed laws 85 and 86 in an attempt to give occupants the legal guarantees they needed, a process which became known as the "*piñata*"<sup>1</sup>.

For Ramona Dávila, in her mid-thirties, this was the first time in her life that there was a degree of stability with regard to her housing situation. She was the oldest of 12 children and her family lived on an *hacienda*, a large estate, where her father was employed as foreman. In 1976, when Ramona was ten years old, he was killed by Somoza's guard when his boss denounced him for collaborating with the Sandinistas. After his death, the entire family was thrown off the *hacienda* and had nowhere to go. Ramona described





Figure 7.2  
El Tambor  
Source: Julie Cupples





Figure 7.3  
El Tambor  
Source: Julie Cupples

those difficult years when they were effectively homeless, moving about in search of employment and somewhere to live. In that period, all the children contracted measles, from which two of her siblings died. After the triumph of the revolution in 1979, the Sandinistas offered her mother a house in return for her husband's sacrifice, which out of pride she turned down, because it would be "like consuming her husband's blood." Instead her mother worked as a cook on a farm and then they got enough money together to buy a small plot of land in Pantasma and build a house, where they made a living making and selling *nacatamales*.

Pantasma was a dangerous place to live during the war and was the site of a massive Contra massacre in 1982. Her brother was kidnapped and tortured by the Contra and then released. Ramona, a teenager at the time, spent more than 24 hours hiding under the floorboards of a neighbour's house to avoid being discovered by the Contra. When the war ended in 1990, by which time Ramona had a partner and three children, returning Nicaraguans evicted them from the land on which they were living, claiming it was 'tierra confiscada' (confiscated land). Ramona and her partner were then involved in the illegal seizure (*toma*) of land on the riverbank in Matagalpa, a *barrio* which became known as the 28 de Agosto, which over time became legalised with the help of Sandinista lawyers. Their original home in the 28 de Agosto was destroyed in 1997 in floods associated with El Niño. With help from the Red Cross, they managed to rebuild. Their second home was then washed away by the river during Hurricane Mitch, the family only just managing to get out in time. Ramona's experience of the hurricane was a deeply moving one which even had a sense of spiritual revitalisation.

Ramona's fifth child was a boy she had "adopted" just before the hurricane when a local woman she knew gave him away as a baby. Her husband was violently opposed to the idea, insisting she did not need any more children and this baby was likely to die anyway. When she took him in, he was in desperate need of medical attention as he had been badly beaten, his scalp was infected and he had ticks. After a period of hospitalisation, Orlando recovered and Ramona has cared for him since.

During Hurricane Mitch, the river flooded and filled their house with water in the middle of the night. Some of the houses in the *barrio* were made of brick and were more sturdy, but Ramona's house was made of boards and could not withstand the strong currents. All of her children managed to get out safely with their father except for Orlando, the *niño regalado*, the boy who had been given away. So Ramona stayed behind to look for the boy. At this point, the electricity failed and Ramona was plunged into darkness, with water up to her chest and her house by now being to move. She yelled for Orlando, while the neighbours outside were calling to her to get out, as the entire house was about to be swept away. "Leave him" they were shouting "he is the littlest and the others are all safe". Suddenly, as if it were a message from God, Ramona remembered that there was a pile of mango wood in the corner of the house. She felt around until she found the wood and the boy's legs were sticking out of the top, his face buried in the firewood and the water. She grabbed him by the legs and pulled him out and got out of the house with seconds to spare before the entire thing disappeared with the river. She thought he had died. He was badly injured but survived.

After Mitch, Ramona was left homeless once again, now with five children to support. Her partner of 16 years who had been both drunk and violent (See Chapter 3) left them at this stage and never returned. By the end of 1999, Ramona had legal titles to a house in the El Mirador settlement, which despite her ongoing difficulties was a source of great satisfaction.

Shurmer-Smith and Hannan (1994) have written about how the often private nature of the home endows it with a semi-mystical force. The ideological nature of this force allows the drudgery of domestic work or issues like domestic violence to escape public scrutiny. However, this is undermined by a home which has a precarious existence. A house that is washed away in minutes or reclaimed by a previous owner is in a sense politicised and very much opened up to public scrutiny. It cannot remain a private refuge separate from the public or political domain. Furthermore, the process of becoming homeless and the condition of homelessness impact on individuals' understandings of identity and identities can as a result become fragmented or fractured or they can shift in more positive ways. According to Hoffman and Oliver-Smith (1999), when people lose homes,





Figure 7.4  
The *champas* at El Mirador  
Source: Julie Cupples





Figure 7.5  
The new houses at El Mirador  
Source: Julie Cupples

it raises issues related to place-attachment, self and social definition. For Ramona, her new home with its legal title and the end of the violence she suffered prior to the hurricane, as well as having rescued Orlando a second time, appeared to have brought about a more positive sense of self.

Not all those made homeless by the hurricane received aid to rebuild homes. One year after Mitch, 40 per cent of those made homeless by Mitch were still living in plastic shelters or in evacuation centres (Solís 1999). Only 37 per cent received help to rebuild (Sánchez Rizo 1999). Many people therefore rebuilt by themselves, often getting into debt to do so. Lydia Sánchez's home was destroyed by a falling tree but she was not able to join an aid project.

Yo como damnificada del Mitch a mí no me metieron, no sé porque no me metieron y así nos pasó a muchos que también nos perjudicó.

I was made homeless by Mitch but was not included [in a housing project], I don't know why I wasn't included, this happened to lots of us who were also harmed.  
Lydia Sánchez, 21 August 1999

She had begun to rebuild her home by herself with a loan from her employer. Despite the shiny new piece of zinc purchased for the roof, the house was still very makeshift, had only one room, no kitchen and a dirt floor. When she had finished paying off this loan, she planned to take out another in order to make further improvements.

Sí, no, estábamos aquí, o sea todo el huracán, nos pasamos adentro de la casa aunque sea en el lodasal y entonces nos cayó el palo y ahí fue donde yo decidí pues, donde no vi quien me ayudara, decidí mejor esforzarme por mí misma ... gracias a Dios pues, con el esfuerzo mío, he podido hacer este pedacito.

Well, we were here, throughout the hurricane, inside the house, we were in the mud, and then a tree fell on us, and it was then that I decided, as there was no-one to help me, I had to try for myself ... with God's help, and with my own effort, I have been able to build this little room.  
Lydia Sánchez, 21 August 1999

Patricia Cedeño and her family in Apantillo Siales also had to rebuild their home after Hurricane Mitch. In the absence of NGO support, they managed this by borrowing some money from a friend which they were repaying in lettuces. Despite managing to rebuild

with their own efforts, their housing situation was still very insecure. They bought the land four years previously for C\$300 but had no legal documents to prove it was theirs. They were under constant pressure from the former owner who was attempting to recover the land, claiming it was “tierra piñateada” (land distributed during the *piñata*).

The need for adequate housing is clear, although even when money is available, housing aid is fraught with complexities. The Communal Movement decided that they were not going to build any more houses at El Tambor, because there was evidence of people who were not really homeless moving there to get a house which they subsequently put up for sale (Zoila Hernández, personal communication). One local NGO (Fundación Rubén Darío para el Desarrollo Humano Sostenible) which built 81 houses after the hurricane in Ciudad Darío, established a legal stipulation that the houses could not be sold (legally) for a period of 100 years (Equipo Nitlapán-Envío 1999c). Lydia Sánchez also perceived that some people who possibly were not so needy, were taking advantage of housing schemes.

Sí, hay injusticia, porque tal vez beneficien a las personas que tal vez tienen su casa y no tienen la misma necesidad, que tienen casa en otro lado, y las condiciones de la vivienda son mucho mejores y le dan prioridad, pues, no sé como... Y eso fue lo que pasó, no se le ayudó efectivamente a la gente con mayor necesidad.

Yes, there is injustice, because they might benefit people who might already have a house and don't have the same need. They have a house somewhere else and their living conditions are much better, yet they get priority, I don't know how ... And that was what happened, aid did not reach the people with greatest need.  
Lydia Sánchez, 23 October 1999

Although their situation continued to be desperate in 1999, Lydia and Patricia managed to get through the worst of the hurricane damage through their own efforts and resources, while Ramona's experience demonstrates the multiple and sometimes unpredictable outcomes that accompany a disaster and disaster-related homelessness. Homelessness does of course bring material deprivation but can also bring about positive shifts in identity and sense of self. Disasters are often seen as bringing about increases in domestic violence and indeed, after Hurricane Mitch, civil society organisations did report higher incidences (Puntos de Encuentro 1999, Delaney and Schrader 2000). But in Ramona's

case, the hurricane brought an end to a long-term violent relationship. A report given by Enrique Gomáriz to an Inter-American Development Bank conference on Mitch held in Managua in February 1999, indicated that the hurricane had caused a huge increase in female household headship based on the fact that these families were over-represented in the evacuation shelters. A number of possible explanations were given for this in the report. Female-headed households were seen as having fewer resources and were therefore more vulnerable. Men might have died in the hurricane, emigrated or left to join other partners in parts of the country which were less affected. It was also possible that women were falsely declaring themselves as female heads of households in order to obtain more resources (Delaney and Schrader 2000). Housing aid is part of the wider picture of aid distribution, which, like housing, can generate both unexpected and contradictory outcomes.

### **Aid distribution**

The pledges of international aid to Nicaragua and other parts of Central America after Mitch were substantial. However, of the US\$2500 million pledged from individual and institutional donors, \$1100 million had already been earmarked in Geneva the previous year (Brown 2000). It has been suggested that aid pledged by the United States was not out of humanitarian concern but out of fear that thousands of desperate and unemployed Central Americans would migrate to the US (Kettle 1998). Actual delivery of the aid promised has been painfully slow (Fonseca y Orozco 1999, Mairena Martínez 1999, Majano 1999). The US aid package stalled in lengthy conflicts over the federal budget (Brown 2000), while the *Guardian Weekly* reported in May 2000 that 18 months after Mitch, not a single penny of the US\$180 million promised by the European Union had been spent (Black 2000). In addition, local NGOs complained at the way in which the Nicaraguan government centralised and politicised the distribution of aid (Sergio Sáenz, personal communication, Vargas 1999a) and the way in which it put emphasis on public infrastructure, particularly road building, rather than on social needs (Delaney and Schrader 2000).



There is no doubt that the aid distribution was irregular and did not take into account the social heterogeneity of parts of the country (Equipo Nitlapán-Envío 1999a). A survey conducted by the CCER one year after Mitch indicated that 60 per cent of those asked believed that the government had done nothing to help survivors and more than 70 per cent of those who did receive help had received it from an NGO, while only nine per cent received help from the central government (Sánchez Rizo 1999). The participants who were not part of the more formalised aid projects in El Mirador and El Hatillo perceived a great deal of injustice in terms of the way aid was distributed and did not receive some of the aid they expected or had been promised. One member of the Movement for Single and Unemployed Mothers told me:

Y las donaciones que ahí llegaron a dejar a esa escuela, las fueron a dejar a la alcaldía, unos zapatos, a nadie se los dieron, una ropa que recogieron los hermanos evangélicos, también ... o sea, iba un paquete, y salieron otras cosas y las fueron a meter a la alcaldía y ahí están las cosas estancadas y no se las dan a nadie. ...Y unas donaciones que dieron en Guanuca las sacaron, lo que son sardinas, espaguetis, y el aceite. Ahí son otras raciones, unos frijoles durísimos que no se cocen ni con diez muños de leña, y un arroz, que son cuatro libras de arroz, cuatro de frijoles, y tres tacos de jabón y les sacaron los espaguetis, el aceite y las sardinas. No hay alivio pues para la gente damnificada.

And the donations that they brought to the school [evacuation centre], they took them to the town hall, pairs of shoes, that they didn't give to anyone, clothes too collected by the evangelical priests, also ... there was a package and they took things out and took them to the town hall and the things are there stagnating and they are not giving them to anybody. ... And some of the donations that they gave to Guanuca, they took things out, they took out the sardines, the spaghetti and the oil. And they gave out other things, some beans that were so hard that they never cooked even using heaps of firewood, and some rice. They gave out four pounds of rice, four pounds of beans and three bars of soap, but they took out the spaghetti, the oil and the sardines. There is no relief for the hurricane victims.  
Carolina Segovia, 22 October 1999

Likewise, Lydia Sánchez complained at the inadequacy of aid. She believed that the donations given to Nicaragua by international agencies were sufficient, but rather than being donated, they found their way into the markets for sale. She told me that parents were informed at her son's school that all primary school children were to be issued with a backpack containing exercise books and pencils, with a uniform, in time for the new

school year, but it never arrived. She was also given a ticket in her *barrio* by the Red Cross to receive items of clothing:

Yo no fui, mandé a mi hermano, y a mi hermano lo que le dieron fue un montón de trapos, de ropa vieja, que no servía.

I didn't go, I sent my brother, and all they gave him was a heap of rags, of old clothes that were no use.

Lydia Sánchez, 23 October 1999

While both the quantity of aid pledged and the way it is distributed are crucial aspects of any disaster process, it is also important to consider the complex way in which aid impacts on beneficiaries. A number of authors have suggested that the arrival of aid in a disaster stricken area can have potentially harmful effects, replacing solidarity with self-interest or generating dependencies which reduce people's abilities to cope with future emergencies (Morren 1983, Oliver-Smith 1986, 1999b, Maskrey 1989, Hoffman 1999, Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 1999).

In 1999, the inhabitants of El Mirador were receiving food aid through the United Nations World Food Programme Protracted Relief and Recovery Operation (PRRO), which ended in July 2001 (WFP 1999). This operation supplied sugar, rice, pulses and oil periodically to each household as well as some of the staples for the *comedor*. Approximately half (about 400,000) of the Nicaraguans affected by Mitch received food aid through the WFP (Sánchez 1999). Food aid is also a controversial issue for a number of reasons. It has a tendency to generate dependency unless it is followed by a clear alternative income generating strategy aimed at reducing that dependency. Imported food parcels can depress local agricultural production (Morren 1983) and are sometimes culturally insensitive. One WFP package at El Mirador, for example, contained split peas which are not a Nicaraguan staple. Finally, food aid is sometimes seen as inappropriate under structural adjustment with its emphasis on market driven economies (Walker 1998). However, it is essential for people who have lost crops or the ability to earn cash incomes as a result of disaster. In Apantillo Siales, where they received no NGO or government aid at all, they told me there were days when they had nothing to eat, just

water. The absence of food or other aid in this community did not on the other hand generate a high level of self reliance.

Es que aquí no hay nada. Aquí como animales. No vino ninguna organización, sí, como en otras partes pues, que ponen, como lo dicen, directivas de algún cargo. Aquí no hay nada, aquí no hay nada que hacer.

There is nothing here. Here we are like animals. No organisation came here, like in other places, where they set up, what do they call them, committees which have a particular job to do. Here there is nothing, there is nothing to do here.  
Patricia Cedeño, 12 November 1999

Aid dependency was evident both in El Mirador and El Hatillo although it took different forms. In El Hatillo, aid was seen as crucial to survival but also as a good generator of community motivation and mobilisation. Silvia Montiel of El Hatillo often referred to the donors, who had brought much needed funding into the community and whom she called *hermanos donantes* (literally brother and sister donors).

... porque con tantos traumas que tenemos que vivir, las guerras, los huracanes y todo eso, como cuando me llevó todo. Era algo duro. Si no fuera por el Movimiento Comunal, si no fuera por los hermanos donantes que nos ayudan, no sé lo que nosotros hubiéramos hecho.

...because with so many traumas that we have to live through, wars, hurricanes and all that, just like when I lost everything. It was something hard. If it wasn't for the Communal Movement, if it wasn't for the donors (*hermanos donantes*) that help us, I don't know what we would have done.  
Silvia Montiel, 2 December 1999

However, while acknowledging dependency, she was also careful to stress that the people of El Hatillo were not passive recipients of aid, but rather that the high level of community organisation would ensure that aid was put to its most effective use.

... los hermanos donantes que están al otro lado de la frontera, ellos están y nosotros lo sentimos tan felices, porque ellos están luchando por nosotros. Si no fueran ellos, nosotros no estuviéramos vivos, y creo que es un gesto muy bueno, y yo le pido a mi Dios que ellos sigan dando ese grano de arena, que nosotros lo sabemos utilizar. No estamos sentados.

... the *hermanos donantes* from other countries, they are with us, and it makes us so happy, because they are struggling for us. If it wasn't for them, we wouldn't be

alive, and I think it is a very good gesture, and I ask my God for them to continue contributing that grain of sand, because we make good use of it. We are not sitting down doing nothing.

Silvia Montiel, 10 October 1999

In El Mirador, there was much greater uncertainty about the future. Unlike El Hatillo, there were no development plans which had been formulated from within the community. The beneficiaries in El Mirador demonstrated a more marked level of dependency, not just on aid itself but also on individuals within the Communal Movement. Despite the fact that these people were survivors of the hurricane, they did at times display an inability to act for themselves. Shortly after the latrines had been completed after months of having no sanitation, strong winds brought down some of the surrounding boards. Rather than attempting repairs at what was in the scheme of things a comparatively minor setback, many people were paralysed and saying they needed to call Jeaneth at the Communal Movement so she could organise to get the latrines fixed. Similarly, when one woman's son became very sick with diarrhoea, she waited for someone from the Communal Movement to come and decide what to do. It was four days before anyone arrived, but the mother did not take her son to the health centre. By the time someone came, the boy's health had deteriorated enormously and he was by then suffering dangerously high levels of dehydration.

It is important to say that the Communal Movement is attempting, amidst enormous constraints, to provide aid which is developmental and has a long term perspective. A report (Sáenz et al. 1998) published during the emergency phase after Mitch stressed the need for aid to be part of an integrated and sustainable development strategy with an emphasis on both rights and organised participation.

At this point, it is still too early to tell what effect the dependencies generated by post-Mitch NGO involvement will have on long-term self-reliance. The World Food Programme has withdrawn from El Mirador and the *comedor* closed at the end of 2000. One participant in El Mirador told me she would not like the *comedor* to be a permanent feature, as it is better for children to eat in their own homes. This suggests that some stigma might be attached to these kinds of initiatives. When I returned in 2001, the

Communal Movement had secured funding for a pre-school to be built at El Mirador, which is likely to have greater social acceptability, but will not necessarily provide families with means to generate livelihoods. Decent childcare like decent houses was seen as important, but did not generate income.

### **Employment and production**

Although needs for reconstruction and rehabilitation could in theory generate sources of employment such as road building, it emerged from my interview data that women's employment and production were negatively affected by the hurricane. For example, Lydia was paying C\$260 each month out of a total income of C\$900 to repay the loan to her employer. To make ends meet, she took on additional ironing work on Saturdays. Among the women of El Mirador, Marcia lost her job at a coffee processing plant (*beneficio*) during Mitch because the harvest was destroyed. When I met her, she had been employed by the Communal Movement to manage the *comedor* alongside a changing rota of unpaid volunteers. She was paid C\$400 a month, about half of what she would have earned working at the *beneficio*, but with shorter hours and no travelling. Ramona had always worked in the informal sector, making and selling *nacatamales* or more recently selling lottery tickets. The requirement that she contribute her labour to the construction project meant she was forced to temporarily suspend her lottery selling, and so she attempted to generate a small amount of cash income by making and selling *tortillas* from home. The situation was precarious in El Mirador, because while the residents had new homes, most families lacked stable means of earning a living. Employment is of course crucial to addressing the vulnerabilities that caused these women to become *damnificadas* and this point was made to me by Marcia.

Tanto sufrí para el huracán como estoy sufriendo ahora, porque si me imagino yo ... bueno, por una parte estamos mejor porque estamos en la casa, pero en otra parte no estamos tranquilos porque estamos desempleados. Usted sabe que vivir aquí en una pieza, para estar bien lo que uno necesita es un trabajo, no un pago porque lo que me daban ahí era sólo 400 pesos.

I suffered in the hurricane as I am suffering now, because if I imagine ... well, on the one hand we are better off because we are in the house, but on the other, we are not contented because we are unemployed. You know that to live here in one

room, to be all right what we need is a job, not just a payment, because all they gave me there [in the *comedor*] was 400 córdobas.  
Marcia Picado, 4 November 1999

In El Mirador, project beneficiaries were all required to provide 66 days of labour in return for a house. This meant that women and men were equally required to carry out construction work (See Figure 7.6). In addition, the Communal Movement employed skilled labourers (*albañiles*) to help build the houses and train the non-skilled beneficiaries. The presence of so many Nicaraguan women carrying out construction work on a building site could superficially be interpreted as a challenge to more traditional gender relations. However, closer examination revealed that within the construction work, a marked gendered division of labour existed, where women were primarily engaged in fetching and carrying sand, water and bricks and men were engaged in the erection of reinforcing rods, bricklaying and carpentry and woodwork. In terms of gender relations, despite their high visibility in the male space of the building site, women were actually further marginalised by their involvement in the project. The contribution of labour to the project meant that women were unable to engage in paid labour and the construction project failed to build on existing skills or provide them with new ones. Some of the male beneficiaries involved in construction would also have been forced to give it priority over paid employment but would at least have gained valuable skills in construction work which could gain them paid work. The majority of women learned no transferable skills which could be of use later. Similarly, Byrne and Baden's 1995 report on gender and emergencies highlights the lack of attention paid to gender relations in relief work which means that traditional views about men and women are more likely to be reinforced rather than challenged. In this case, a good opportunity to provide women with skills in carpentry and masonry was lost. Working on the construction site did not bring much in the way of satisfaction. I asked Marcia how she had found it and she said:

Duro, porque imagínese, para una persona que no está acostumbrada, es duro. Porque yo no estoy acostumbrada a esta clase de trabajo porque antes del huracán, trabajaba en cosas de negocio. Vendía joyas. Antes vivía más tranquilamente, no así.

It was hard, because just imagine, for someone who isn't used to it, it's hard. Because I am not used to that sort of work, before the hurricane I worked in business. I used to sell jewellery. Before, life for me was easier, not like this.  
Marcia Picado, 27 July 1999

As discussed in Chapter 6, there was very little in the way of formal or informal sector employment for women in El Hatillo and agricultural production in Sébaco displayed a marked gender division of labour with men and women growing different crops for different purposes. After the hurricane, with NGO funding for agricultural rehabilitation, a group of 18 men, organised into a co-operative, continued to grow *chayotes* which were destined for the Managua market. Women, on the other hand, ceased their own commercial agricultural production in order to concentrate on repair and reconstruction work. The year before the hurricane, the women's group had successfully produced and sold soya but more than one year after the hurricane they still had not been able to replant and were still working on post-hurricane reconstruction.



Figure 7.6  
Construction at El Mirador  
Source: Julie Cupples

Nosotras tenemos una parcela, pero lo que pasa es que como nos metimos en el rollo de las viviendas, el rollo de los gaviones, eso es todo tan difícil. Entonces nosotras también ya hemos levantado también la producción, tenemos experiencia en cuanto a la soya, la estuvimos vendiendo, ahora la primera experiencia nos fue tan bien, vendimos un montón de soya.

We have a plot of land but as we got involved in the business of the houses, the business of the gabions, that is all so difficult. But we have already produced too, we have experience in growing soya, we were selling it, our first experience went so well, we sold heaps of soya.

Silvia Montiel, 2 December 1999

So, although the women in El Hatillo, like the women in El Mirador, were visibly engaged in hard physical labour usually associated with men, this was done at the expense of other productive activities. The women's group had formulated a number of plans to increase their own production. These included the development of vegetable gardens (*huertos familiares*) and the *vaca parida* project discussed in Chapter 6. They were also trying to secure funding so they could re-open their *comedor*, which they would supplement with vegetables grown in the *huertos familiares*. Many of these initiatives, while significant to the nutritional level of the community, mean that women were focusing more on subsistence style agriculture while the men controlled the more lucrative commercial agriculture, as was the case with *chayote* production. The *chayote* co-operative had no women members. This suggests that NGOs working after a disaster need to look carefully at who is benefiting from agricultural rehabilitation in order to bring about more gender equity in this respect.

The notion that employment is the most effective form of disaster mitigation was not lost on the leaders and members of the Movement for Single and Unemployed Women. Bolin et al. (1998) have indicated the way in which gender based vulnerability is created by socio-cultural systems which privilege men for employment. According to one of the leaders, when it comes to employment, women are at a disadvantage with respect to men. María Dolores Gallegos told me that it was much easier for men to go and find a job after the hurricane, as they suffered less discrimination and were not restricted by caregiving responsibilities. Therefore, the focus of the movement's attention was on providing women with a source of employment which would provide them with a stable income



and they were looking for funding to set up projects. In 1999, they had 16 women working in a black pottery (*c eramica negra*) project and another 40 enrolled in a residential dressmaking and tailoring course in Dar o. As discussed in Chapter 6, while in many ways these forms of employment reinforce the gender division of labour, their impacts on constructions of femininity are not so straightforward.

Both the impact of aid and the possibilities for production or employment need to be seen in the context of the level of community organisation<sup>2</sup>. The resilience of a community after a disaster is often dependent on the levels of organisation within that community, both in terms of its ability to cope and its ability to attract funds from NGOs and aid agencies. There is a need to explore the extent to which both existing levels of community organisation as well as those which emerge as a consequence of the disaster process not only attract aid, but unleash potential for female empowerment and improvements in gender relations.

### **Social mobilisation, female empowerment and gender relations**

Disasters often provide opportunities for social mobilisation and the possibility to challenge local and national authorities on other aspects of the development process (Mitchell 1999b). Puente (1999) believes that the spontaneous solidarity which emerged in Mexico City after the 1985 earthquake empowered survivors to tackle the authorities on other issues. High degrees of social mobilisation were reported in the days following Mitch (Delaney and Schrader 2000) and the immediate needs of survivors became linked with protests over the absence of disaster relief from central or local government. In Ciudad Dar o, for example, emergency provisions, medicines and medical assistance were obtained when local residents, who were angry at the local mayor for doing absolutely nothing for six days after the tragedy, kidnapped him and negotiated the aid in return for his release (Equipo Nitlap an-Env o 1999b). The inhabitants of El Hatillo also found that neither the municipal nor the national government provided any form of disaster response and they quickly organised an emergency committee in order to bring food in and get the sick and injured out, in Silvia Montiel's words a "trabajo de

hormigas”, an ant-like operation, which continued until help came from NGOs such as CARE and the Communal Movement.

The rate at which individuals can participate in the reconstruction process can sometimes depend on the gender composition of the household and the division of labour within it. Fordham and Ketteridge (1998) have indicated how in a traditional nuclear family, men could carry on earning while women could clean up and repair, but female heads of households must manage all of these tasks. The single mothers in this study were forced in some ways to straddle both the public and private domains, in that they had to contribute to rebuilding their homes and lives and continue to generate some cash income. This can have contradictory outcomes in terms of gender relations. On the one hand, it makes women more visible often in male-dominated spaces, as it did in both El Hatillo and El Mirador, but it also increases their workload considerably and the associated stresses can delay recovery.

El Hatillo is an example of a well organised community which demonstrated a high degree of social mobilisation and cohesion. It seems to be the case from this study that the most organised communities with high levels of social mobilisation were more effective at attracting aid regardless of damages suffered. While Apantillo Siarez had received no aid whatsoever, El Hatillo was saturated with NGO signs (See Figure 7.7 and 7.8). The women interviewed in El Hatillo were organised into various women’s groups, *grupos de mujeres*, and were involved in a whole series of disaster mitigation and reconstruction measures. These included road clearance and gabion construction, reforestation projects and the development of vegetable gardens. Despite the high NGO presence, these groups emerged autonomously from within the community and were not promoted by any external organisation. People were willingly helping out in the construction of other people’s homes with the aim that at the end of the project, everyone would have “una casa bonita”, a nice house (Sergio Sáenz, personal communication). The mothers of El Hatillo extended their sense of sacrifice beyond their immediate families to the whole community and were carrying out vast amounts of unremunerated work on a rota basis.

Nosotros nos sacrificamos por el bien de la comunidad. ... Nosotros no recibimos ningún salario, sino que uno trabaja para toda la comunidad, sin ningún interés personal, sólo para mejorar la comunidad. Toda la comunidad está de acuerdo en trabajar así y así hay más avances.

We sacrifice ourselves for the good of the community ... We don't receive any salary, but work for the whole community, not for personal benefit, but to improve the community. The whole community has agreed to work like this, and this way there is more progress.

Rosa Laviana, 13 August 1999

Community organisation in El Hatillo did not emerge from the hurricane but went back many years to initiatives to improve the water situation, when they had to walk three kilometres for water and people drank and washed in the same water.

Resulta de que así fue sucediendo, verdad, hasta que nosotros empezamos a buscar cómo trabajar diferente y muy organizado donde está un grupo de mujeres. Un grupo de mujeres trabajando, verdad, y un grupo de hombres y niños... Y así pues fuimos haciendo gestiones a través de las grandes capacitaciones que nosotros teníamos e íbamos aprendiendo a hacer más gestiones, a no estar en un solo trabajo. Así fue que empezó el trabajo de la comunidad, y empezamos a ir a Managua para ver lo que podíamos hacer. No podíamos estar de brazos cruzados, adonde habían personas que podíamos trabajar.

It happened like this, that we began to try and find different ways of working, and to be very organised into a women's group. A group of women working, and a group of men and children ... And so we started to appeal to agencies, based on training we had received, and we were learning how to make appeals, and not to focus just on one thing. And that was how the community's work began, and we started to go to Managua, to see what we could do. We couldn't sit back with our arms folded when we had people who were able to work.

Silvia Montiel, 10 October 1999

Silvia was convinced of the value of organisation and that it was helping to generate improvements and reduce the community's vulnerability to disaster. It was this organisation that was creating vegetable gardens, reforesting the hillsides, keeping livestock, protecting the river banks and building a pre-school.

Tenemos un nivel de organización muy bueno y espero que no se caiga, porque en vez de caerse, se está levantando, hay personas que más se van motivando ... creo verdad de que estamos marchando bien. Gracias a Dios y a ese grupo de mujeres muy valiente que decimos nosotros. Ellas han sabido valorar este trabajo, y han



Figure 7.7  
 NGO saturation at El Hatillo  
 Source: Julie Cupples





Figure 7.8  
 NGO saturation at El Hatillo  
 Source: Julie Cupples

estado integradas mujeres, jóvenes y señoras adultas así como mi edad, ya viejas que ya estamos trabajando. Y tenemos tres directivas, una de jóvenes, una de señoras, y una de más viejas, que somos las que rectoreamos el trabajo para que vayan ... ya vamos como preparando como dije que sabemos si mañana nos morimos y va a quedar el trabajo y se va a caer... Que las manos y los pies, los sabemos utilizar, que sigamos luchando por el bienestar de la comunidad.

We have a very high level of organisation and I hope that it doesn't fall, but instead of falling, it is increasing, there are people who are becoming more motivated ... I really think we are doing well. Thanks to God, and that very brave women's group as we call them. They have learnt to value their work, and it involves both young women and adult women, like women of my age, some old already, we are all working, and we have three committees, one for young women, one for middle-aged women and one for the older women, and we are the ones who guide the work so that they ...we are making plans, just in case we die tomorrow and there is no-one to continue our work ... But we know how to use our hands and feet so we will continue struggling for the well-being of the community.

Silvia Montiel, 10 October 1999

Levels of solidarity and co-operation in El Mirador were at a much lower level and the amount of conflict was not insignificant. There can be no expectation that women will automatically show solidarity with other women in need (Serrat Viñas 1998), and the lack of solidarity in El Mirador also extended to physical assault by one woman on another. However, the situation was qualitatively different from that of El Hatillo, where support networks were well established and the community had a long history of organisation. In El Mirador, not only did the design of the location force a spatial realignment of political groupings, which in the long term might or might not prove to be significant, the people there were displaced by the hurricane. Consequently, they had to rebuild their lives and their support networks with people they did not know previously and at a time when the presence of aid and other associated benefits, such as the job of managing the *comedor*, can have a potentially divisive effect and create new forms of dependencies. As I indicated in Chapter 5, reconciliation between groups who took opposing sides during the war is fraught with difficulties. Marcia continually complained of the conflicts surrounding her work at the *comedor* and after a few months she resigned.

Bueno, para serle sincera, yo la disposición y la voluntad me sobran, como le digo, pero hay gente bien incomprensiva, tiran bola negra a uno, uno se saca el corazón, dicen cosas por detrás de uno, y no me gusta esto. Y bueno, yo estoy

dispuesta, yo soy la encargada, soy la responsable. Y me dijeron que en este comedor, nadie tiene que meterse, que usted es la responsable. Pero la gente es bien incomprensiva.

To tell you the truth, I am more than willing, but as I have said, there are people who are not at all understanding, they slag you off, you can give them your heart, but they talk about you behind your back and I don't like that. Well, I am willing, I am the one in charge. And they told me that in this *comedor*, nobody should interfere, because you are the one in charge. But people are not at all understanding.

Marcia Picado, 27 July 1999

### **The reconfiguration of gender identities during the disaster process**

The disaster process in El Mirador clearly differed from that of El Hatillo, where there was a much higher degree of co-operation and solidarity and more optimism about the future. However, within the same community, the response to the hurricane differed among women. It appeared that Marcia, unlike Ramona, did not experience positive shifts in her gender identity. While Ramona expressed much satisfaction about the positive changes in her life that had come about since the hurricane, Marcia could not be grateful and became nostalgic not about the time before the hurricane but about the time before her husband left them. While Marcia and Ramona superficially shared characteristics of gender, class, age, ethnicity, marital status, parenthood and temporary homelessness, they diverged in the construction of their subjectivities as these were reshaped through the processes of disaster and recovery.

Marcia's "crisis" really began not with the hurricane but when her husband left her four years previously for another woman when she was pregnant with their sixth child and suffering from dengue fever. Since then she had worked to support her family, taking in washing or ironing, buying and selling jewellery and taking on seasonal work in the *beneficios*. Her move to El Mirador not only provided her with a more solid house but also with possibilities of empowerment. Not only was she given the role of managing the *comedor* but was also elected treasurer of the community committee. However, rather than feeling more empowered, Marcia's condition as a *damnificada* provided her with the discursive facility to incorporate suffering into her gender identity, to see herself not as a survivor, but as a victim, as a long-suffering woman, or *mujer sufrida*<sup>3</sup>. This position of

suffering, while related to and a consequence of material deprivation, which in Marcia's case was real, was socially constructed, and came about as a result of discursive positioning facilitated by the disaster. Not all women in the aftermath of the disaster will adopt that position and this did not apply to Ramona who conceptualised material deprivation differently and displayed a much greater degree of optimism with respect to the future. Marcia's notion of being a *mujer sufrida* can be seen in terms of the way in which she evaluated both her life before the hurricane:

Me tocaba demasiado duro cuando estaba ahí. Todos los sábados, tenía un saco de ropa así que tenía que lavar. Y planchar. Pero cuando me separé de mi esposo, me tocaba lo mismo, trabajar duro. He sufrido bastante.

Life was too hard for me when I was there. Every Saturday I had to wash a huge sackful of clothes. And iron them. But when I separated from my husband, the same thing happened, I had to work hard. I have suffered a lot.  
Marcia Picado, 31 August 1999

and in the way she minimised her work as treasurer after the hurricane:

Lo único que hago es que soy tesorera. Tesorera. Si hay que pagar a alguien, o trasladar algún dinero, a mí me toca pagar. Eso es todo.

The only thing I do is act as treasurer. The treasurer. If we need to pay someone, or transfer some money, it is my job to pay. That is all.  
Marcia Picado, 31 August 1999

The danger of this kind of subject positioning is that it can generate new kinds of dependencies and make recovery more difficult. Furthermore, it demonstrates that when disaster comes into contact with a heterogeneously vulnerable population, not only does it have a differentiated effect on the members of that population depending on their pre-disaster vulnerabilities, it also puts in motion a process which can in itself generate new heterogeneities and lead to the emergence of new gender or other social identities. Hence the divergence of subjectivities among hurricane survivors as demonstrated by the differences between Marcia and Ramona. This would suggest that a gender sensitive disaster analysis has to go beyond generalised or generalisable notions of gendered vulnerabilities in order to explain and address the reconfigurations of self which emerge.



The women of El Hatillo, while deprived for the time being from full access to the means of production by both sociocultural norms and the aid distribution process, were nonetheless managing to negotiate considerable freedoms and respect from their menfolk, which suggests that gender relations and identities are often redefined in unexpected ways. While Marcia in El Mirador expressed desperation at her situation, the women of El Hatillo expressed both a sense of liberation and happiness in how they managed to negotiate the time and space to experience themselves positively, not only through social organisation but also through music and sport.

Ahora le doy gracias a Dios, que después de que sufrí tanto, ahora ya vivo una vida tan alegre, tranquila, tengo a mis hijos ... [mi esposo] ha visto que yo he sufrido, y no tenía derecho a salir, a divertirme, a vivir mi vida. Yo aprendí a tocar la guitarra, no la toco bien, pero más o menos sé y me divierto, salgo, yo canto canciones, bailo, tranquila pues. ... y actualmente yo le digo que tengo 38 años de edad, y yo me siento que tengo un espíritu como de niño, yo brinco, yo salto, esto y lo otro, me gusta pues divertirme. Yo les digo a las chavalas, a las mujeres de mi edad también de que se liberen, que se alegren, que brinquen, que salten, que para el cuerpo es buen ejercicio.

Now I give thanks to God, that after I suffered so much, now I have a happy life, relaxed, and I have my kids ...[my husband] has seen how much I've suffered, that I wasn't allowed to go out, to live my life. I learnt to play the guitar, I don't play well, but I have some idea and I enjoy myself. I go out, I sing songs, I dance, I'm relaxed ... and at the moment I am 38 years old and I feel like I have the spirit of a child, I skip, I jump, and so on, and I like enjoying myself. And I tell the young girls and women of my age too to liberate themselves, to be happy, to skip, to jump, because it is good exercise for the body.

Rosa Laviana, 2 December 1999

Yo he sabido utilizar mis buenas modales, gracias a mis padres, que ellos me supieron educar, y gracias a la organización del Movimiento Comunal que ellos me rectorearon, y las demás organizaciones que están apoyándome, tanto en capacitaciones y todo, verdad, para que yo cambie mi vida .... me he sabido meter a las 26 comunidades que atiendo. Ahora yo voy con confianza, como frijoles y juego con ellos, igual como si estuviera en mi comunidad. Me gusta el deporte, me gusta estar gritando, y creo que lo más me gusta, y atender mi hogar, amo a mis hijos, y creo que eso es algo bueno que Dios me ha dado.

I have learnt to use my manners, thanks to my parents, who brought me up this way, and thanks to the Communal Movement, who guided me, and all the other organisations that are supporting me, with training and all the rest, so I could change my life<sup>4</sup> ... I have learnt how to visit the communities I am responsible for. Now I go there with confidence, I eat beans with them and play with them, just

like I would if I was in my own community. I like sport<sup>5</sup>, I like to be shouting, I think it is what I enjoy most, and I look after my home, I love my children and I think that is something good that God has given to me.

Silvia Montiel, 10 October 1999

Happiness via social mobilisation was also expressed by a number of the women in the Movimiento. However, the ways in which gender identities are formulated and reformulated can also be profoundly contradictory. Elsa Jirón displayed both of the above discursive positions, aware of herself as a *mujer sufrida* and simultaneously happy about the 'liberation' brought by social mobilisation.

Yo realmente ... yo he sufrido, yo he sido sufrida. Con decirle pues que yo mejor dicho que yo no tengo cama donde dormir, yo duermo en el piso, sí en el piso duermo yo, yo duermo en el piso, en el piso duermo yo.

I really ... I have suffered, I am long-suffering. I can tell you for example that I don't have a bed to sleep in, I sleep on the ground, yes I sleep on the ground, I sleep on the ground, the ground is where I sleep.

Elsa Jirón, 8 November 1999

Yo me encuentro pues bien alegre, al venir yo aquí, yo no sabía ... en otras partes yo nunca supe lo que era una organización, de ninguna forma, hoy no. Hoy yo me encuentro aquí en la zona de Matagalpa, en esta ciudad de Matagalpa, bien alegre, me he despertado, me siento alegre, porque he aprendido un poco más, aunque no sé leer, pero he aprendido un poco. Gracias a Dios le doy al señor que he aprendido algo, y yo me siento bien alegre, porque yo estoy trabajando en este Movimiento de Mujeres Madres Solteras.

I feel really happy, when I first came here, I didn't know ... when I lived elsewhere, I didn't know what an organisation was at all, but not today. Today I am in the area of Matagalpa, in this town of Matagalpa, and I feel really happy, I have woken up, I feel happy, because I have learnt a bit more, although I don't know how to read, but I have learnt a bit. I give thanks to God that I have learnt something, and I feel really happy because I am working in this Movement of Single Mothers.

Elsa Jirón, 8 November 1999

### **The abnormality of everyday life**

Not long after the hurricane, the idea that Mitch should be seen as an opportunity and a force for change rather than a calamity became widespread. To some extent, this has reactivated rather than destroyed the hope of bringing about more sustainable models of

development (Vargas 1999a, CCER 1999, Cerda 1999, Delaney and Schrader 2000). Disasters in some locations, particularly in developed country situations, often lead to the desire to rebuild things as they were and this has been documented in relation to both Hurricane Andrew in Miami (Enarson and Morrow 1998c) and the Oakland firestorm in California (Hoffman 1999). This was not the case in much of Nicaragua and there was a clear sense that any rebuilding or reconstruction would have to be done differently to prevent further tragedies.

Whether widespread awareness of the fact that Mitch's devastation lies not in natural forces but in the complexity of the development process will lead to a reformulation of the development model remains to be seen. For the time being, despite small improvements across the country as a result of NGO work and people's own efforts, it is still not clear how jobs and homes can be found for a growing population without destroying the environment. After Mitch, the government announced that the programme of structural adjustment would continue. Cannon (1994) has argued that governments' abilities to provide forms of social protection from disaster are limited when they are pursuing an economic policy which is itself the cause of disaster vulnerability. Amidst all the aid and reconstruction efforts, there is overwhelming evidence of a whole series of ongoing vulnerabilities.

In response to these ongoing vulnerabilities, my participants had to formulate complex strategies regarding paid and unpaid work, nutrition, childcare, education, health, housing and transport. These strategies are intensifications of those that occur under structural adjustment and are not, as Byrne and Baden (1995) have indicated, always developmental. Taking children out of school in order to cope with inadequate incomes does of course increase the long-term vulnerability of those children. Strategic decisions involving schooling could mean one child in the family gets to attend school, while another does not. This was the case with Marcia, who sent her seven-year-old daughter to school, while the 12-year-old stayed home because of insufficient funds and because she was needed to look after the younger children so that her mother could go to work. None of Ramona's children, Paula included, had ever been able to attend school and none were able to read or write. As indicated in Chapter 6, Marcia was also considering emigrating,

possibly to Costa Rica where she could earn more money and in this case would leave the children alone, with the older siblings responsible for the younger ones.

Authors have pointed out how women's caregiving roles expose them to risk (Byrne and Baden 1995, Fothergill 1998). Men, who often do not take on responsibility for children, find therefore that they have other options in the aftermath of a disaster, which include abandoning the family, as was the case with Ramona's partner. Ramona's 14-year-old daughter, Paula, was particularly vulnerable, because she became pregnant just before the hurricane and then gave birth in the *champa* without any professional assistance, water or electricity, largely because she was too embarrassed to go to hospital. Her baby was very sick and was born with both a kidney and an intestinal infection which still required treatment. He was so weak that Paula failed to establish breastfeeding. The lack of electricity made caring for a newborn baby very difficult, especially making up formula feeds in the night. Accidents are more likely and one night Paula dropped a candle she was using and burnt her baby's head.

In El Hatillo, poverty, malnutrition and illness persist despite all the organisational efforts and the massive presence of NGOs. I asked Rosa what she thought was the biggest difficulty facing the community:

La pobreza, pues, sobre todo por los niños que no llevan una buena alimentación que les dé buena salud. Hay mucha desnutrición. En base a eso vienen las enfermedades, el tos, el catarro.

Poverty, especially for the children who do not have a healthy diet. There is a lot of malnutrition. And that is what causes illnesses, the coughs and colds.

Rosa Laviana, 13 August 1999

Sonia Aguirre's two-year-old son, who had repeated illnesses and was the only one of her three pregnancies to result in a live birth, had received neither breastmilk nor formula milk as a baby and was fed pure unpasteurised cow's milk from her father's cow. On a visit to El Hatillo in December 1999, a two-year-old girl in the village had died from malnutrition two days previously. This death was of grave concern to the members of the women's group, particularly as she was the second child to die from malnutrition in that family in less than a year.

It is clear from the persistence of ongoing vulnerabilities in both El Mirador and El Hatillo where aid and NGOs have been present that disaster mitigation is really about access to resources. In many ways, the maldistribution of resources is far more serious than an extreme event like a hurricane and can render both aid and organisation far less effective. Although the project beneficiaries in El Mirador were in many ways the “lucky” ones compared with other hurricane survivors because they have well built houses with latrines on less hazardous land, a sense of hopelessness prevailed because of the pressing lack of employment options.

Hoffman and Oliver-Smith (1999) have discussed the risk assessment strategies made by people who live in hazard prone environments. There are still many people living on the riverbank in Matagalpa, close to the market whose lives and homes are under threat of further flooding and the Communal Movement has been urging them to relocate somewhere else. However, they refuse to move having calculated their circumstances and assessed their risks. While living close to the river is dangerous, this proximity ensures their water supply for washing, cooking and drinking. Access to water is particularly crucial in Matagalpa, where the water supply is erratic and limited, even in middle class homes that in theory have piped water. In addition, their proximity to the market guarantees a potential source of income. Parents and children can engage in informal sector selling in a busy part of town without spending time and money on transport. The risk of living by the river is therefore perceived as less than the risk of not having sources of water and employment, both crucial to survival.

In El Mirador, the residents depended on water deliveries by truck which were rationed to the miniscule quantity of two buckets per household per day, reserved primarily for drinking and cooking. To wash clothes or bathe involved a 30-40 minute walk to the river. The absence of water increased the amount of time spent in reproductive tasks taking time away from productive tasks, which impacted on individual and family well-being enormously. To get to the market or centre of Matagalpa from El Mirador means a 15 minute walk to La Chispa, followed by a 20 minute bus ride, which incurred a fare of two córdobas each way. This fare was prohibitive in terms of engaging in street selling which is insecure at the best of times.

Despite Hurricane Mitch's intensity and the scale of its devastation, I got a sense that Mitch does not matter as much as the everyday crises. While disasters are extreme and tragic events in Nicaragua, everyday life too is often unbearably abnormal and is punctuated by a whole series of ongoing crises. These crises are of little interest to the international media and less effective in terms of attracting international aid. Both Hewitt (1983) and Cannon (1994) have raised this point in relation to third world disasters and suggest that disasters only intensify the everyday suffering. Mitchell's (1999a) volume on disasters in mega-cities also deals with this issue, albeit in a limited way, when he writes that "a focus on great catastrophes may be misplaced, because aggregate impacts of lesser events can be much larger" (Mitchell 1999c:25). Wisner (1999), writing on Greater Los Angeles, argues that the social forces which structure inequalities and make certain socio-economic and ethnic groups more vulnerable mean that there are worse things than earthquakes. Lavell (1994) too has argued that in the context of Central America, the smaller events often tend to be overlooked despite their impacts on people and livelihoods. This appears to be the case in Nicaragua because of the focus on large-scale events in an area seen to be prone to major disasters. However, my participants focused more on the socio-economic inequalities, which cause ongoing vulnerabilities, rather than on one massive disjunctive event which exposed those vulnerabilities.

An example of a 'minor' event came in October 1999 during my fieldwork period in Matagalpa. Heavy rains caused severe flooding in the centre of Matagalpa and in the *barrios* Cinco de Junio and Guanuca, where I was living (See Figure 7.9). A river channel known as El Chuisle (Figure 7.10) had overflowed, possibly as a result of the urbanisation of the hillsides and the indiscriminate deforestation in the eastern part of town (Martínez 1999) and the subsequent flooding was greater than the centre of Matagalpa had seen during Mitch. Despite incessant sweeping to keep the water at bay, the ground floor of our house was flooded, although not severely. A walk through town after the waters had subsided revealed that many homes had suffered significant damage and heavy deposits of mud and sediment. The following day and again on one day of the following week the same thing happened. The home of one of my participants, Carla Martínez, who was not affected by Mitch, was severely flooded. The water level reached



Figure 7.9  
Flooding in central Matagalpa, October 1999  
Source: Julie Cupples

two metres and she lost her beds, fridge, TV, stereo and clothes. The family had to spend the night sleeping in a nearby church. Afterwards, her children were terrified. Her nine-year-old daughter was unable to sleep, while her 14-year-old son had placed a ladder on the outside of the house to enable them to get onto the roof if necessary. Another woman I knew told me with tears in her eyes how the mud had ruined the couches and armchairs in her home. All this happened in a place where nobody except the very wealthy has any form of insurance. In total in these two *barrios*, one woman was drowned, three houses were destroyed (See Figure 7.11), 13 were severely damaged and 70 were flooded (Mendoza 1999).

In Apantillo Siares, the family who had lost their crops during Mitch and had barely begun to recover their production losses, once again lost beans, carrots and lettuces during the heavy rains in 1999. These rains also had a major impact on El Hatillo, cutting them off from both Matagalpa and Sébaco. The barely accessible road became totally impassable. For several weeks I was unable to get there for interviewing and when time became pressing, did so by a much longer, alternative and fairly precarious route. The rains severely tested the community's disaster mitigation measures, especially the gabions that they had been constructing since Mitch. Silvia described the situation to me:

Ahorita verdad nosotros nos sentimos tristes con estas grandes lluvias porque ya se nos perdió el camino, como puede ver que tenemos más de dos meses. ¿Que decía el alcalde municipal de Sébaco? Bueno, si eso no hay ningún problema, si sólo tenemos seis días de estar incomunicados. Si eso es negativo, adonde hay enfermedades, ya hay diarrea, hay este problema de las vías respiratorias, la comida se nos agotó. ¿Cómo vamos a trasladar comida aunque quisiéramos? Es difícil, pues. Ya tenemos flojos los gaviones, un trabajo muy bueno que hicimos con CARE, donde participamos mujeres, hombres, y niños y como decía Sadie, 'cuídenlos', pero desgraciadamente ya se les dio vuelta los de Las Pozas, ya hay varias que se les dio vuelta, y aquí en El Hatillo están unas para dárselas vueltas ... A mí me llena de nervios al ver que si se mete aquí el agua, perdemos otra vez las viviendas.

At the moment we feel sad about this heavy rain, but we have already lost the road, it has been like this for more than two months. What did the mayor of Sébaco say? That there was no problem, that we have only been cut off for six days. But that is not true, there are illnesses, there is diarrhoea, respiratory illnesses, our food has run out. How could we bring food in, even if we wanted





Figure 7.10  
El Chuisle  
Source: Julie Cupples



Figure 7.11  
A house destroyed by the 1999 rains  
Source: Julie Cupples

to? It is difficult. Our gabions are already loose, which was good work we did with CARE, which involved men, women and children, and Sadie told us to look after them. But unfortunately, those in Las Pozas have rolled over, there are several that have rolled over, and here in El Hatillo there are some that are about to roll over... It makes me really nervous, because if the water gets in here, we will lose our houses again.

Silvia Montiel, 2 December 1999

### **Conclusions: Disaster and its gender outcomes**

The failure of dominant disaster paradigms to explain the scale of third world disasters along with the ineffectiveness of state-sponsored relief and mitigation in Nicaragua are leading to diverse and multiple forms of disaster response. The outcomes of disaster for gender are multifaceted and reconstruction can often unleash a series of contradictory processes particularly in terms of the ways in which gender relations and identities are constructed. In Nicaragua, these processes are taking place against a backdrop of more constant upheaval brought about by structural adjustment, political instability, environmental degradation and socio-cultural norms which constrain women's behaviour or ability to make decisions. As Enarson and Morrow (1998b) have indicated, many women, by virtue of their lived experience, are specialised resource managers skilled in the art of survival. In Nicaragua, most women's lives involve dealing with a daily crisis, juggling scarce resources and providing for children in difficult economic conditions. In addition to that, many Nicaraguan women have politically motivated organisational experience gained during the revolution or subsequently, which could be invaluable during reconstruction and recovery. However, despite the feminist emphasis on not constructing women as victims and the importance of acknowledging their roles as agents of change, I am hesitant to glorify Nicaraguan women in this way. As hurricane survivors and low-income single mothers, there is no doubt that many women developed sophisticated survival strategies which enabled them to cope within a situation of disadvantage and this emerged from my data. However, there is also evidence of a lack of solidarity amongst beneficiaries despite their common experience and evidence of aid dependency which will not readily be replaced by self-reliance.

The value of qualitative data and ethnographically informed scholarship with regard to disaster is crucial not only in terms of undermining these dominant paradigms but also in

terms of preventing the critiques of those paradigms generating in themselves an alternative but nonetheless totalising disaster discourse. While certain conditions of life are common to many participants and these do generate identifiable gendered vulnerabilities, there are a number of other factors, such as the responses to aid and the level of social mobilisation, and in particular the way in which these practices contribute to the construction of meaning, which give rise to more complex and differentiated understandings of the disaster. The emphasis on the political ecology of the disaster and approaches which attempt to disaggregate variables of class, ethnicity, gender and age, while useful in determining vulnerabilities and capabilities and informing disaster response strategies, are limited in understanding the broader contingencies which shape and influence disaster-related subjectivities.

The post-hurricane recovery and reconstruction process and its interface with social conditions and lived experiences give rise to a context in which gender identities are renegotiated. By switching to a focus on gender identities, a more detailed understanding can be gained of the gendered dimensions of disaster.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> A *piñata* is a papier-mâché figure filled with sweets which is used at birthday parties and other celebrations. Blindfolded children take it in turns to hit the figure with a stick until it breaks and the sweets fall out. The Sandinistas failed to provide people with the legal guarantees and state property was rapidly distributed during this transition period not only to the people, but also to high ranking members of the FSLN, a move which did much to harm the credibility of the FSLN once they were in opposition.

<sup>2</sup> Sergio Sáenz told me in November 2001 that El Mirador had proved to be a significant learning experience for them as an NGO. In order to address the need for a source of income, the Communal Movement provided a number of women with sewing machines. However, rather than using them to generate a more sustainable source of income, all the beneficiaries had sold the machines in times of need. In the middle of 2001, international coffee prices slumped and caused great hardship in Matagalpa. Many of the inhabitants of El Mirador were directly affected by this. However, rather than providing food aid, the Communal Movement withdrew in an attempt to get the inhabitants of El Mirador to act independently and through organisation work out solutions to their problems themselves.

<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to Guadalupe Rosales for the conversations we had about the *mujer sufrida*.

<sup>4</sup> In the previous municipal elections, Silvia was elected as a councillor for the FSLN for the municipal council of Sébaco and was responsible for 26 communities, which she attended to all on foot despite considerable distances between them.

<sup>5</sup> On one of my visits, Silvia had to be fetched from a baseball game she was playing.

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## Single motherhood, cultural change and the politics of resistance and compliance

### **Introduction**

Heroic female guerrillas or patriotic bearers of children. Shock absorbers in times of crisis or more permanent breadwinners. Passive aid recipients or self-reliant community leaders. These are all competing versions of Nicaraguan womanhood which emerge from war and revolution, structural adjustment and disaster as sites of cultural struggle. It is within these sites that the daily practice of motherhood must be exercised and renegotiated. The renegotiations of everyday mothering practices which take place as a result of the change and uncertainty brought about by recent economic and political processes have the potential to create spaces in which dominant discourses can be disrupted and gender identities reformulated. While the sign mother is probably the most culturally salient signifier of Nicaraguan womanhood, its meanings are subject to constant renegotiation when gender identity is lived and constructed in times of hardship, political change or upheaval.

Change is not however guaranteed or straightforward. Sometimes women adopt more empowered subject positions which contest dominant discourses or they adopt positions of victimhood, suffering or poverty which inhere in hegemonic discourses. They frequently combine resistance with compliance appearing to position themselves in more contradictory ways, drawing on essentialising discourses of motherhood to bring about or cope with processes of cultural, political or economic change.

This chapter examines the subject positions adopted by women in Nicaragua in the current political and economic climate and considers the extent to which the sites of revolution and war, structural adjustment and disaster have provided space for resistance. Attempting to map the human subject, as Pile and Thrift (1995a) have indicated, is extremely difficult because it does not have precise boundaries, is a mass of difficult and sometimes conflicting subject positions and is always on the move. My focus on the

everyday also complicates my project. Valentine (1999) believes that the everyday is difficult to apprehend because of its very normality. However, much of what is 'normal' to Nicaraguan women is not 'normal' for me given my own culturally bound understandings of motherhood. This chapter intends to capture the fluidity and negotiation of identity and its spatial constitution. It considers the possibilities which exist in Nicaragua for the creation of new subjectivities and power relations given existing discourses of motherhood, femininity and sexuality.

As a number of geographers have indicated, it is crucial to avoid romanticising resistance and seeing the subversion of dominant power everywhere (Radcliffe 1999b, Cresswell 2000, Sharp et al. 2000). Therefore, this chapter also explains the ongoing pervasiveness and appeal of hegemonic discourses of motherhood in an attempt to understand why at many times cultural change does not appear to come about. As Cresswell (2000:259) has stated, "many of the choices we make are not resistant but merely reproduce existing forms of domination". While dominant discourses are disrupted in and by women's everyday lives, hegemonic discourses of motherhood continue to be just that - hegemonic - and have an ongoing appeal and pervasiveness which must be accounted for.

The first section outlines the pervasiveness of hegemonic discourses of motherhood in Nicaragua. It explores the ways in which cultural change is limited by discursive constraint, the power and normalising effect of myth and the role played by hegemonic discourses of motherhood and femininity in relationships with others and in satisfying a need for social legitimacy. The next section examines the validity of Foucauldian perspectives on power and their relevance to feminist practice in the Nicaraguan context as well as recent theoretical conceptualisations within cultural geography and cultural studies on the operation of power. These perspectives suggest that domination and resistance are not opposing entities but that each resides in the other. This theoretical perspective enables us to understand how discourses which constrain, also facilitate, thus providing the possibility of change. In the light of these understandings, the following section develops the qualitative analysis of preceding chapters to detect the resistances to, and slippages in, dominant discourses of motherhood, femininity and sexuality. With my participants' material as a backdrop, I end the chapter by looking at the question of

motherhood, femininity and sexuality in Nicaragua more broadly in an attempt to draw some conclusions about gendered relations of power and the politics of single motherhood in Nicaragua.

### **The pervasiveness of dominant discourses of motherhood**

#### *Discursive constraint*

If the Foucauldian perspective that nothing exists outside discourse is correct (Butler 1990, Hall 1997), it follows that mothers in Nicaragua cannot mother separately from discourses of motherhood. Individual subjectivity cannot exist prior to its discursive formulation which means that discourse determines how we make sense of ourselves or construct our subjectivities. Subject positions adopted only make sense in terms of the discourse which constructs them and extreme events must be committed to discourse before they can be said to make sense (Hall 1997). Discourses establish therefore “the grounds for identity and the frameworks within which identity becomes intelligible” (Moore 1994a:36-7). However, discourses only become socially and politically effective when individuals take up the forms of subjectivity proposed by them (Weedon 1987).

One of the features of dominant discourses on the self is that they are frequently detached from everyday life (Moore 1994a) and this thesis has set out to explore how women negotiate the gap which exists in Nicaragua between dominant discourses of motherhood and women’s experiences and practices of motherhood. However, when I suggest that the everyday social practices of motherhood in Nicaragua are at odds with dominant discourses of motherhood, I realise that it is also important to acknowledge that social practices can only be made sense of in discursive forms. Single mothers, teenage mothers, militarised mothers, mothers who do not bring up their own children and serial polygamy amongst women all contest in different ways the Eurocentric image of the self-sacrificing partnered woman who mothers within the context of the nuclear family. The women who disrupt this image do not exist in a discursive vacuum. Inevitably, they find ways to make sense of their situation by constructing particular subjectivities. However, the subjectivities available to women at any particular historical moment are those which have already come into being discursively. Consequently, there is a limited range of

subject positions available to women. Even if they contest many of the official images of the Mother in Nicaragua, through lack of discursive alternatives, they tend to continue to mobilise, for example, the good mother/bad mother dualism created by dominant discourses of motherhood. Even if mothers in their daily lives are engaging in resistance to dominant discourses of motherhood, there is, as Mitchell (1990 in Sharp et al. 2000) indicates, no consciousness which operates autonomously from hegemonic practices. Mothers might reject or subvert dominant discourses of motherhood, but do not act autonomously from them.

The inability to act autonomously from hegemonic discourses is an inherent part of belonging to a culture and a social system. Weedon (1987) has argued that women can never escape the implications of femininity and that everything we do constitutes either compliance or resistance to normative constructions of femininity. Women internalise and act according to dominant discourses of motherhood, even if it is not apparently in their interests to do so and they often reproduce hegemonic notions of motherhood and femininity because there are limited models from which to “choose”. Sometimes alternative subject positions are available in the sense that they are discursively present, and can therefore be adopted by women in opposition to hegemonic discourses.

The culturally and socially identified condition of being a mother will lead to certain practices and behaviours, some of which are strategic as well as practical and are contingent on local social and cultural conditions and spatialities. Therefore, strategic resistance to gendered norms of motherhood, which are often spatialised in their effects, creating particular relations of power in particular spaces, is interwoven with and often simultaneously complies with these gendered and spatialised understandings of, for example, what constitutes a good mother. Consequently, socially complex life decisions such as taking on a job, taking up arms or separating from the father of one’s children are often articulated in terms of good mothering. So while women might resist hegemonic constructions of bad mothers as women who ‘abandon’ their children to pursue other goals, they simultaneously reproduce the good mother/bad mother dualism, albeit while shifting its terms of reference.



Therefore, even when women as noted in the context of paid work, family maintenance or political struggle adopt what appear to be more masculine subject positions, they do so within a discourse of good mothering. Women who adopt these positions are ‘good mothers’ because they are providing economically for their children or are engaged in a political struggle to create a better world, unlike the ‘bad mothers’ who neglect their children, for example, by leaving them to fend for themselves on the streets.

### *The power of myth*

Dominant discourses are powerful because they are made up of codes which Nicaraguan women have learnt to internalise over time. Work such as Hall’s (1999) on the encoding and decoding of television messages has demonstrated how dominant codes become powerful as a consequence of their being “imprinted” by institutional power relations. In Nicaragua, institutions such as the family, the education system, the Church, the legal system and the media play a crucial role in the inculcation of attitudes and values and in the discursive maintenance of myths. Consequently, women in Nicaragua have usually been subject to years of gender-specific socialisation and as a result internalise from an early age that to be ‘normal’ is to be feminine. When certain values are so widely distributed both temporally and spatially, they take on naturalised dimensions which conceal the workings of ideology involved in their construction. Hall sees these naturalised discourses as preferred readings which gain their pervasive power through institutionalisation. Moreover, their power also resides in the fact that the interests served by a particular discourse are not always apparent (Weedon 1987). It is not always obvious who is benefiting from the maintenance of gender difference as a social marker. Women who became Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs during the Nicaraguan revolution, by drawing on the powerful symbols inherent in these identities, clearly felt empowered at the time. It was only when these discourses had outlived their political usefulness for dominant forces that women began to suffer the consequences of having assumed such reified maternal identities. The fact that a number of women a decade after the end of the war were still clinging onto these identities attests to the effective concealment of the ideological interests which underpin these identities. The essentialisation of motherhood through such discourses is attractive because it reveres as it degrades and at a time of

conflict and grief, being valued as a giver of life as well as a revolutionary became a particularly appealing coping mechanism for many women.

Moore (1994a:51) believes that discourses about gender are powerful not because they are accurate reflections of social reality, but because they “engender women and men as persons who are defined by difference”. These discourses then produce and reproduce gender difference itself because they are used by individuals to construct themselves.

Dominant discourses of motherhood are an important part of the knowledge/power nexus in Nicaraguan culture and as such are difficult to contest. While in many ways they are divorced from everyday life and function more as myths, their power lies precisely in their ability to appear as natural or as common-sense. Just as right wing ideologies are appealing because their foundational truths offer security at a time of uncertainty (Sharp et al. 2000), myths also tend to simplify and reify complex situations. As Barthes (1973:156) has written:

“Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact. [...] In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences...”

The essentialising discourses about women which have been mobilised by the FSLN, UNO and the PLC have all come in response to anxieties about perceived shifts in terms of how women practise motherhood and femininity. But because they recycle notions which have their origins in colonialism and Catholicism, they have a veneer of timelessness. It is this veneer which makes their irrelevance in the context of war, structural adjustment or disaster harder to identify.

The intensity of change means that the familiarity of simplified and reified masculinities and femininities continues to be used as a model by which to live, as to discard them completely would be too disorienting. In the face of political, economic and environmental uncertainty and family breakdown, and in the interests of achieving what Moore (1994a:55) calls “the historical continuity of the subject”, women might strive to

achieve some sense of 'normality' and this might be achieved by reproducing dominant constructions of gender. Normative discourses with their normalising tendencies can therefore prevent the sense of change from becoming overwhelming. In this sense the family as a cultural entity survives widespread social disintegration precisely because it is familiar and its constructs, however 'inappropriate' in the circumstances, can provide a sense of security. Likewise, espousing maternal values beyond the family in broader political spaces such as the community can create a sense of belonging, which can also be powerful at a time of uncertainty.

### *Social legitimacy and relationships with others*

When the risks of taking up alternative subject positions are too high, women are more likely to take up subject positions which are socially sanctioned according to the hierarchy of gender discourses. Compliance with the dominant gender order, in addition to a sense of security, also provides women with social acceptance and legitimacy and leads people to take up the modes of subjectivity offered by dominant discourses. Because they do so, the hegemony of these discourses is reproduced.

The relationships that women have with others are a crucial component of this phenomenon which is linked to the relational nature of identity formation. Women's identities are not constructed in isolation from those of men or children. To be positioned is always to be positioned in relation to others (Holloway 1984 in Moore 1994a) and many actions require co-operation or interaction with others to be completed (Pile and Thrift 1995b). According to Moore (1994a) subjectivity is constructed intersubjectively and so relationships and interactions with others influence the taking up of a subject position. This means that experience is not "individual and fixed, but irredeemably social and processual" (Moore 1994a:3). If my son interprets me as his mother, I must relate to him as mother, that is assume the identity of mother as well as a series of cultural understandings about mother-son relationships, for us to be able to communicate and have a degree of shared understanding. The nature of this relationship forces me in many ways to reproduce dominant cultural understandings of motherhood and through assuming the identity of mother, I am marking my body with gender difference. Men and

children are interpellated differently by discourse in the sense that they occupy different positions within a discursive field. Bondi and Domosh (1992:207) write that in a gender-divided society “women and men are differently located in relation to socially constructed meanings. We therefore experience, deal with and respond to dominant conceptions of the self in different ways”.

In this regard, there is a discursive pressure on women to tolerate the man who fathers their children. When I asked Ramona Dávila why she had tolerated such a violent man for 16 years, she said it was because he was “el papá de mis niños”, the father of my children. It seems that these pressures became overwhelming for the two teenage mothers in my study. In 1999 neither Paula Montecino nor Sonia Aguirre had ever lived as a couple or formed a family unit with the fathers of their children. When I returned to Nicaragua in 2001, however, both had gone to live with these men after they (the men) had created emotional scenes.

The father of Paula’s child had begun to turn up repeatedly at her home where she lived with Ramona, her mother, at times accompanied by his father. He begged her to return, sometimes crying to express his pain. Finally, Paula relented and Ramona did not try to stop her. Ramona admitted to me that Paula was not happy. I went to visit her and the atmosphere was strained and it was hard to talk to her. The precariousness of her situation was augmented by the fact that Paula, to be with her partner, had returned to 28 de Agosto, the *barrio* where their home was destroyed during Hurricane Mitch. Paula was now living right on the riverbank in one of the few houses that had survived the hurricane.

Sonia told me how the father of her child had turned up at her home drunk, he smashed up the house and then returned at midnight to “kidnap” her and her child. I am not sure whether she left with him out of love or out of fear. Eight days later his parents visited her parents to reassure them that “se iba a componer”, that he was going to sort himself out and become a “santo hombre”, a saintly man. When the women of El Hatillo recounted this story to me, they did so laughing, Sonia included, and with a sense that a wrong had been righted and Sonia was now better off. Similarly, Rosa Laviana, also from

El Hatillo, worked to reform her philandering husband with the help of the Catholic Church rather than leave him.

The common experience of motherhood as defined through dominant discourses could be expected to create shared affiliations between women as mothers. Nonetheless, relationships with other women are fraught with difficulties. This is because discourses of motherhood intersect with discourses of *machismo* and masculinity. The exercise by men of the cult of virility depends of course on the existence of sexually available women and, as stated in Chapter 2, even when women become mothers, they are still viewed by men as sexually available. Similarly, while virginity and sexual purity are constructed as cultural ideals, they are not seen as realistic goals for women or girls. Consequently, *machismo* encourages women to see each other as sexual rivals and leads to the tendency amongst women to blame the other woman rather than the man in situations of infidelity or separation. This tendency was most clearly evidenced by Marcia Picado. Similarly, walking through the streets of Waslala one day with Isabel Quezada, she pointed out a woman to me and said: “That woman took my daughter’s husband off her”. Lucía Espinoza, who managed to get her violent husband imprisoned after he attacked her with a machete, told me that the negative aspect of all of this was that many women in Solingalpa would no longer talk to her. While a few women had expressed their support, the overwhelming reaction from most women was negative. The owner of the store where she bought on credit also came round to tell her that from then on she was no longer entitled to credit.

The relationships that women have with others, with men, with children and with other women, are central to the construction of their subjectivity, and the data in this thesis demonstrate quite clearly that much of what women do, in both personal and political terms, is about others. Even when Azucena Mejía departs from the ideological script written for her by society to contest normative ideologies of gender, her focus remains on the lives of others (see quote on page 268-269). While lone motherhood might be a source of oppression and often a high price to pay for being in relationships with (irresponsible) men, in Nicaragua it is socially difficult to opt out of motherhood.

The need for social legitimacy explains why women in Nicaragua tend to recycle “mothers of the nation” discourses, aestheticise their suffering or reproduce good mother/bad mother dualisms. This process can be seen as a form of trade-off, where more feminist ontologies are rejected in the short term in the interests of retaining a measure of social acceptance. However, as I shall argue shortly, these processes do not merely constitute acts of repetition, the forms of subjectivity are not always lived and performed exactly. Slippages often occur and it is these slippages which provide resistances to dominant discourses and create spaces for new forms of subjectivity and for identity renegotiation.

### **The operation of power**

Hegemonic discourses of gender tend to define men and women in terms of naturalised and hierarchicised differences between them and consequently their bodies become marked by social difference. While it is important to focus on this aspect of discourse, it is also important to consider how hegemonic discourses also produce “subordinate and subversive variants” (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994b:18). Foucauldian perspectives on the diffuseness of power facilitate understanding of the production of such variants.

Discourses of gender become hegemonic in a given time and place as a result of the ideological work carried out by powerful systems. In Nicaragua, it is clear that a number of institutional forces in Nicaraguan society including the state, the Catholic Church and the media have the power to construct notions of motherhood and femininity through discourse and these institutions are engaged in a cultural struggle over the power to define meanings. However, as Thrift (2000:269) indicates, “power is undoubtedly present and hurts but it is neither everywhere nor all pervasive” and he states that the constant subversion of powerful systems is a condition of their existence. Power is never monopolised by one centre at the top of a social hierarchy but circulates and is therefore exercised by everyone at all levels of social life (Hall 1997, Cresswell 2000). Dominant meanings are not constituted by singular processes which determine how all events will be understood (Hall 1999).

There is not, on the one side, a discourse of power, and opposite another discourse that runs counter to it. Discourses are tactical elements or blocks operating in the field of force relations; there can run different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy to another, opposing strategy. (Foucault 1981:102 quoted in Weedon 1987:122)

This approach to discourse and power enables us to understand that discourses which constrain also facilitate and that power is always contaminated with resistance (Moore 1994a, Sharp et al. 2000). Compliance and resistance often co-exist and some resistances might extend rather than challenge dominating power just as some forms of compliance might contain elements of resistance.

... domination and resistance cannot exist independently of each other, but neither can they be reducible to one another, they are thoroughly hybrid phenomena, the one always containing seeds of the other, the one always bearing at least a trace of the other that contaminates or subverts it. (Sharp et al. 2000:20)

Hall's (1999) earlier cited work on the discursive codes which are constructed through television is helpful in terms of understanding how discourse operates more broadly. He has suggested that the production and reception of messages, a process he refers to as encoding and decoding, while clearly related are never identical or symmetrical. If these notions are extended to the production and reception of discourses of motherhood in Nicaragua, it is to be expected that at times, to borrow Hall's (1999:510) words, there will be a "lack of fit between the codes" resulting in misunderstanding or misrecognition on behalf of the subject and object (the mother) of a particular discourse in a given historical moment. At this point, what results is a negotiated position containing both adaptive and oppositional elements. Dominant and alternative discourses of motherhood are not therefore binary oppositions given that they articulate with one another to produce more fractured maternal identities. In this regard, Foucault's work has great potential for feminist practice because of this emphasis on the diffuseness of power which enables resistance and new discursive positions to be produced.

### **Resistances and slippages**

Naturalised discourses of motherhood, which are often Eurocentric in their content, continue to be pervasive and to operate across a wide range of texts and at different levels

of society. However, the reification or conventionalism of these discourses is beginning to be exposed as they come into contact with non-discursive conditions in sites of intense cultural struggle.

When researching other cultures, Moore (1994a) warns that cross-cultural variability is not only the only issue but that we should also focus on the existence of multiple models and discourses within cultures. Mothering in Nicaragua is not a singular experience but encompasses variability and difference within itself. Hegemonic discourses of motherhood are pervasive and wield power imprinted by institutional force, but they are no more able to create a coherent self than are other less pervasive cultural categories. As Hall (1999:509) has indicated, before a message can have an 'effect', it "must be first be appropriated as a meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded". If recognition does not take place, the messages within that discourse will be deemed unrealisable and women will therefore adopt alternative subject positions constructed within competing discourses as a means of retaining a sense of self or a measure of social legitimacy.

Competing and contradictory discourses exist simultaneously and hegemonic discourses are always therefore open to contestation. It is in the incoherences and contradictions of hegemonic discourses that resistances and slippages occur and permit gender identity to be renegotiated. Somewhat paradoxically, the rules of gender which limit and constrain us are also able to set us free (Butler 1990, Shurmer-Smith and Hannan 1994). Sometimes the resistances to hegemonic discourses are very subtle, what Guattari (1996) has referred to as 'soft subversions'. As Lagarde (1992) has argued, for some women in Nicaragua changing soap brand might constitute a revolutionary act and consequently overall patterns of gender inequality might not change very much. There are moments, however, when discourses reveal their own cultural constructedness, when the power which is within them, is temporarily or permanently unmasked. At these times, resistance can be more confrontational or decisive. These moments are what Cresswell (1996) terms transgression. Transgressive moments are marked by "the shift from the unspoken, unquestioned power of place over taken-for-granted behaviour to an official orthodoxy concerned with what is proper as opposed to what is not proper" (p.10). Culturally



constructed discourses of motherhood in Nicaragua usually appear natural and timeless but at certain moments it becomes apparent that they are being made and remade.

*Church, state and the remaking of femininity*

It could be said that women in Nicaragua are presently engaged in a struggle to define new forms of subjectivity which will reconcile discursive and non-discursive conditions and account for the spatial realignments that have been created by war, structural adjustment and disaster. In many ways, existing definitions are lagging behind the social and political changes that are taking place and hegemonic practices of motherhood are having to be reworked in favour of more suitable alternatives.

Both the Nicaraguan state, in the form of government ministries, and the Catholic Church intervene in this process in a number of ways, attempting to police the boundaries of appropriate femininities and fix the meaning of appropriate gendered behaviour. However, it appears that the ideological work in which these dominant social forces are engaged is no longer so unspoken or unquestioned.

The creation of the Ministry of the Family can be seen as part of the *revanchista* attempt to undermine Sandinista political culture and with that the gender regime of the revolution. *Revanchismo* does inevitably have an appeal to anti-Sandinista sectors of a polarised society. However, it simultaneously makes apparent that a number of common-sense assumptions about masculinity and femininity are in fact created and are therefore able to be changed. By suggesting that the revolution created cultural values (read models of femininity) which were immoral or inappropriate is a partial acknowledgement that femininity is made and now must be remade with the help of the Ministry of the Family and other institutions such as the education system and the Church.

Despite the fact that political forces on both the right and the left have constructed reified models of femininity and motherhood which are of little use to women, there are significant differences between the construction of femininity in the 1980s and that of the 1990s. During the revolutionary period of the 1980s, which was based on what many Nicaraguans saw as objective historical realities - primarily the overthrow of a brutal

dictatorship and the need to defend Nicaragua from US-sponsored aggression - models of femininity were constructed to meet the immediacies of the historical context. In the 1990s, however, motherhood and femininity are being reconstructed according to some lost vision, what Foucault would call the 'ideology of the return', when hatred of the present or the immediate past leads to the "tendency to invoke a completely mythical past" (Foucault 1999: 137-8).

These attempts are partially failing for a number of reasons. In the first place, they are failing because, as I indicated in Chapter 4, the legacy of the revolution continues to impact on individual subjectivity in significant ways. Any attempt by the state to construct a new gender regime is limited and contested by the historical memory of the previous gender regime. Given the *revanchismo* of the government and the polarisation of society, past subject positions generated by the revolution continue to overdetermine present ones. Family values rhetoric in both the United States and Britain tends to be based on the idealisation of the 1950s as a time of greater family stability (Stacey 1996, Silva and Smart 1999). In the Nicaraguan context, the ideology of the return in the form of family values discourse does not evoke some post-war suburban idyll. The pre-Sandinista period in Nicaragua was a time of dictatorship, brutality and widespread poverty. Not many Nicaraguans, not even many anti-Sandinista Nicaraguans, would express a desire to return to the days of the Somoza dictatorship<sup>1</sup>. For many Nicaraguans, anti-Sandinismo today is as much about neoliberalism and globalisation as it is about Somocismo.

The Minister of the Family, Max Padilla, made a distinction between the 1980s and the 1990s, constructing the 1980s as a period in which moral values were lost. What dominant forces in Nicaragua see as the loss of moral values represents anxieties about the existence of counter-hegemonic practices of motherhood. However, given that power is always contested, counter-hegemonic practices of motherhood predated the revolution and were an important part of political opposition to the Somoza dictatorship. Given the strength and in many cases the consolidation of revolutionary identities (Chapter 4), these identities are resilient and difficult to erase. As Pratt (1999:154) states, "identities emerge

from historical geographies of conflict and difference, and these geographies themselves work to stabilize identities”.

Secondly, attempts to control female sexuality within a discourse of family values are failing because they are seen as incompatible with Nicaragua’s current realities. The call for family values is absurd in Nicaragua when it is so clear that many parents are unable to meet their children’s physical needs for shelter, food, health or education in a country where paternal irresponsibility is so widespread (Cupples 1999). The promotion of marriage through state institutions is taking extreme forms. For example, Olga Jarquín told me in 2001 how her son returned home from school one day announcing that she could not possibly be his mother because they had been told at school that day that mothers are married and therefore his mother must be someone else. Although Olga had to deal with her son’s cultural confusion which resulted from the political irresponsibility of the present government, she did not feel she had to work too hard to convince him that she was indeed his mother. By refusing to represent real women and real families, the Ministry of Education, like the Ministry of the Family, subverts its own authority.

While anti-feminist sentiment in Nicaragua does not quite have the intensity of a moral panic as described by Sibley (1995), it does nonetheless bear important similarities in the sense that it represents an exercise in boundary enforcement and is clearly part of anti-Sandinista absolutism. It also takes on gendered dimensions in the sense that it deliberately demonises feminism, polices women’s sexuality and fails to address components of the economic model which make Nicaraguan families so unstable.

#### *Diversity in dogma*

While the government and the Catholic Church appear to represent a dogmatic position on ideologies of gender, these ideologies are built on competing discourses. Radcliffe (1999b:226) has described the way in which the “constant ordering work of nation, race and gender” which takes place in Latin American republics creates possibilities for alternative geographies to be imagined. Discourses of globalisation, modernisation and democratisation clash with the promotion of traditional gender ideologies, leading to contradictions with disruptive potential. Within discourses of democratisation, gender

relations based on the complementarity of men and women are seen as unfair because they grant men and women different rights on the basis of gender (Fuller 1995). Violeta Chamorro's government was marked by calls for women to return to the home to be good wives and mothers within a family values framework. At the same time, the government created a free trade zone in which to implement its *maquiladora* programme which depends largely on the employment of cheap female labour. This is despite the fact that factories have long been considered sexually promiscuous spaces in Latin America in which fathers and husbands lost control of their daughters and wives (French and James 1997).

Dominant political, cultural and economic forces in Nicaragua make up axes of power which at times compete with one another and work against one another. At times, these contradictions can lead to a sense of internal conflict within the subject. However, they can also be used productively as a means to adopting different subject positions or to reworking hegemonic notions of motherhood and femininity.

While masculinity and femininity and their cultural expressions in Latin America in the form of *machismo* and *marianismo* are supposed to be complementary, they often come into conflict because they are based on competing and contradictory discourses. While dominant constructions of femininity construct the ideal woman as chaste, maternal and self-sacrificing, masculinity in Nicaragua tends to be characterised by fear of sexual inadequacy and by notions of female sexuality as dangerous. These ideas are encapsulated in male anxieties that one's wife or partner will have sexual relations with another man. These anxieties have a fracturing impact on masculinity and as such provide a space for the renegotiation of femininity. Masculinity in *mestizo* Latin America is also based on a fundamental contradiction as discussed in Chapter 3. On the one hand it is characterised by breadwinning and household headship (father as authority figure) and on the other it is characterised by independence from the confines of the household (father as absence) (Bastos 1999). If the balance tips in favour of the latter, as it did with many of my participants' partners, women then have to renegotiate some of their femininity and take on masculine roles such as breadwinning and household headship themselves. The cultural struggles over motherhood and sexuality, which are taking place in Nicaragua at

the present time, are seeking to achieve cultural coherence out of fractured and shifting entities. The preferred readings of masculinity and femininity are therefore constantly threatened with disruption as a result of their multiplicity.

An example of this multiplicity is a popular song which was frequently played on the radio when I was in Nicaragua in May 2001. It tells the story of a man who phones home and speaks to his dog. The man questions the dog about what his wife is doing to which the dog barks affirmative answers. Through his barks the dog confirms that his wife has been listening to his CD and drinking his whisky. The man then asks the dog what his wife is doing now to which the dog through its bark reproduces the repetitive noise of sexual intercourse. This song demonstrates quite clearly the co-existence of competing discourses of masculinity and femininity and captures the contradictions faced by men and women in Nicaragua today. On one level, the song is played on radio stations owned by key political elites supportive of the government and the Catholic Church and it is of course at odds with the ideologies promoted by these institutions. On another level, it represents an overt acknowledgement that there is indeed a discursive battle about sexuality in existence, based on the concern or realisation that, given the chance, many women will not reserve their sexuality for only one man. It demonstrates that while dominant social forces have the institutional power to construct meaning and disseminate cultural codes, their power to determine meaning is never absolute and is at best temporary.

### *Resistance in compliance*

While gendered subjectivity is contradictory in the sense it is complicit in its own oppression, it is also complex. It is its complexity which enables it to escape certain forms of discipline and surveillance. Using de Lauretis' (1986) notion of the 'female subject of feminism', Rose (1995:333) sees the subject as one which is "both produced by discourses of identity and destabilised by the contradictions and failures of those same discourses".

Adopting what at first sight appear to be positions of weakness or victimhood, such as being a *mujer pobre* (poor woman), *mujer sufrida* (suffering woman) or *damnificada*

(disaster victim) can also be interpreted as a position of resistance, a way of justifying non-compliance with hegemonic notions of motherhood. Adopting such positions, which are classed as well as gendered, while seeming at first sight to lack any form of subversive potential or resistance to dominant discourses, amounts nonetheless to a very powerful social justification for non-compliance with these discourses. It becomes a legitimate way of saying “I cannot mother like a middle-class woman”. It is a recognition that to mother according to MIFAMILIA or Catholic Church dictates requires resources, an absence or tolerance of violence and a breadwinning husband. The absence of these requirements inevitably entails a redefinition of motherhood. These positionalities represent, therefore, a powerful critique of the racialised and classed nature of hegemonic discourses with their Eurocentric origins and their limited applicability to most Nicaraguan women.

Redefinitions of motherhood involve a reworking of the constructions of appropriate femininities. Women often adopt what can be considered to be more masculine subject positions in relation to paid work or family maintenance, but in the context of a good mother discourse. That is to say, women appear to adopt only those masculine subject positions that are compatible with discourses of good mothering. Neglect, aggression and physical violence by women towards children do of course exist, but tend not to be discursively acknowledged in the way that they do when perpetrated by men within counter-hegemonic discourses which are critical of expressions of masculinity. The malleability of discourses of good mothering is such that even participants who are single mothers, who became mothers when they were teenagers and have children by a number of different fathers are still able to position themselves on the positive side of the good mother/bad mother dualism.

#### *Feminism and counter-hegemonic discourses*

Women’s organisations constitute an important part of what Radcliffe (1999b) sees as new imaginative geographies in Latin America. The overt nature of the feminist backlash in Nicaragua and the association of inappropriate femininities with Sandinismo meant that the women’s movement, in the spirit of defending the revolution, began to struggle

for and achieve things, such as significant legislative changes in favour of women (Chapter 4, Cupples 2001), which had never been part of the revolution. While the meanings which circulate about motherhood are always political, the gap between dominant discourses of motherhood and everyday practices of motherhood is not therefore an empty one but one in which all manner of negotiations, manipulations and performances are spatially constituted.

I argued in Chapter 4 that in many ways the post-revolutionary state is easier to oppose now that the women's movement is no longer subordinate to a political party. The cultural struggle which takes place between the women's movement and the state and between the women's movement and the Church is often not subtle, with both sides regularly coming to blows in the media. There is, to a significant extent, a climate of persecution being waged against the feminist movement and human rights organisations (Carrillo Barrios 2001, Pérez 2001). I use two examples from 2001 to demonstrate the nature and the outcome of this persecution.

In April and May, Nicaraguan feminists were engaged in a confrontation with the Catholic Church and in particular its leader Cardinal Obando y Bravo. They were accused by the religious leader of mounting a conspiracy to assassinate priests (López 2001, Pérez 2001). The confusion emerged after a Guatemalan journalist reported on a conference in Managua on sexual and reproductive health, where one of the participants referred to the need to neutralise the Catholic Church in order to make advances with the decriminalisation of abortion. The Cardinal denounced this statement as part of a conspiracy by pro-abortion activists to murder priests, a claim which led to the police investigating all the conference participants (López 2001). According to Nicaraguan journalist and feminist, Sofia Montenegro, these accusations backfired on the Church because they demonstrate the close relationship which exists between the Church and state power (Montenegro 2001).

In September, the Nicaraguan government expelled a US nurse, Dorothy Granada, working in Nicaragua and attempted to close down the women's clinic in Mulukukú (RAAN) where she had been working for the last 13 years (Lara 2001, Vargas 2001).

Dorothy Granada was accused by the government of carrying out abortions and only providing health care to Sandinistas. These accusations were investigated by the police who failed to find any evidence against her. Despite this, the government suspended her residency and she was forced to leave the country. The persecution of Dorothy Granada, who had the support of the Peace Commission of the National Assembly, of CENIDH (the Nicaraguan Centre for Human Rights) and the women's movement, was seen widely as an abuse of human rights and Dorothy herself as a target of obsessive behaviour and a victim of *revanchismo* (Vargas 2001).

These examples illustrate the discursive extremes to which the government and the Catholic Church consider they must go to control female sexuality and contain the parameters of dominant constructions of gender which are constantly being decentred by everyday practices. Consequently, even a conference on reproductive health is seen as a threat to the prevailing gender order. The construction of feminists as child murderers and terrorists (Montenegro 2001) clearly reveals the ideological component of this discursive battle. In both of these cases, the extreme nature of government and Church opposition to women who work in the field of women's health means that the feminist movement is seen, not as a voice of radicalism, but of moderation and more in touch with everyday sexual and reproductive realities. According to Montenegro (2001), the ideological battle for family values waged by the Church and the government fails because post-revolutionary Nicaragua has a critical civil society willing to enter into debate and a population which is tired of irresponsibility as a form of politics.

In Nicaragua as elsewhere, discourses which originate within feminism or the women's movement can be deployed to construct a more meaningful subjectivity within the context of lived experiences. In the context of domestic violence or structural adjustment, for example, alternative or feminist discourses become increasingly meaningful and provide women with the discursive means they need to take a job or leave a violent relationship. According to Weedon (1987), the ways in which a woman responds to domestic violence depends on the ways of understanding it to which she has access. Women in Nicaragua are able to respond differently to domestic violence today because of the circulation of alternative discourses. As I wrote in Chapter 3, thanks in part to the



lobbying of the women's movement, domestic violence is considered increasingly unacceptable as it now forms part of legal discourse, human rights discourse and public health discourse. The construction of domestic violence as a social issue through these discursive changes has enabled the legislative frameworks to deal with it to be strengthened.

The assertion of feminist rights and demands in Nicaragua is very much tied in with the critique of the economic model. The lives of Nicaraguan women are undoubtedly made harder by increasing poverty, high unemployment and decreasing access to health care and education which are part of the impacts of structural adjustment packages. Therefore the links between neoliberalism and mothering practices are undeniable. This association has, however, further enabled women not to deconstruct the good mother/bad mother dualism but to always position themselves (but not necessarily other women) on the right side of it. If children grow up and turn out well and do not become layabouts (*vagos*), like Marta Navarro's children, this is a source of pride and a positive reflection on one's good mothering. If they do however become delinquents, then blame is not attributed to inadequate mothering, but to the economic situation which deprives children and young people of opportunities to study, train and work. This sentiment was reflected in Isabel Quezada's quote on page 242.

#### *Escaping discourse, escaping boundaries*

The manipulation of discursive constructions of motherhood by organisations such as the Ministry of the Family constitutes a form of surveillance of women borne out of the notion that female sexuality is dangerous and must therefore be controlled. The Nicaraguan government and other institutions of power in Nicaragua work to constitute women as particular kinds of subjects, prioritising in particular the biological, nurturing and spiritual aspects of motherhood. This surveillance is, however, disrupted as it comes into contact with women who mother in a context of hardship or violence. As Robinson's (2000) work on women housing managers has concluded, surveillance is based on relationships between the subject of surveillance and the gazer and is therefore complicated by the mutual constitution of identity. The gaze might therefore fail to

adequately apprehend the subject given that the subject “is anyway only ever apprehensible in her exteriority or her communications: ultimately her interior choices and reflections ... must remain mysterious” (Robinson 2000: 80).

If this is the case, there exists the possibility of escape from the constraints of discourse. This perspective gives weight to critics of the Foucauldian notion that nothing exists outside discourse. Copjec (1994 in Rose 1999) argues that if all subjectivity is produced through discourse, this means all subjects can be fully known. Copjec suggests, however, that the subject is never fully discursive. Moore (1994a), while basing her arguments on the notion of subjectivity coming into being through discourses, likewise suggests that the self contains elements such as emotions and knowledge which are never fully discursive. If a woman’s interior choices and reflections are not apprehensible, then she is able to escape, or at least displace, some elements within dominant discourses which constrain her.

The mutual constitution of identity does, as I have indicated, have a constraining element given that women must interact with men, children and other women on a daily basis in a way that makes sense despite the fact that these others are located differently within a given discursive field. It was this differential location which led Paula, Sonia and Rosa to attempt to make lives with men who had treated them badly. It is also relationships with men and constructions of masculinity that make relationships between women so difficult.

However, while Moore (1994a) accepts the constraining aspects of relationships with others, she also sees its disruptive potential. She states that embodiment is not the essence of identity. The very existence of a relationship with others is evidence that we are not bounded and that our interactions depend on flows and movements. In that respect we are constantly being remade and possibly might remake ourselves in ways which dissent in subtle ways from the dominant cultural codes which surround us.

### *Marginality as strength*

According to S. J. Smith (1999:137), “part of the ‘decentring’ of social thought has ... been a recognition that spaces on the margin have an authority of their own”. The authority of the margin has been most clearly depicted in the work of hooks. Soja (1999) quotes from hooks’ (1990) work in which she locates the margin as a site of resistance and possibility. It is from the margins that counter-hegemonic discourses and practices can be produced. Similarly, Bhabha (1999:195) has asserted that identity is always claimed ex-centrally – “either from a position of marginality or in an attempt at gaining the centre”. If this is the case, it might be in women’s interests to retain marginality. Many of the sites of collective mobilisation that I have discussed in previous chapters can be considered to be marginal sites. These include feminist theatre, the work of the SIC and much post-hurricane reconstruction work. Despite their marginality from mainstream political culture, these sites of collective mobilisation position women in spaces where they have the power to define and interpret which, as Moore (1994a) points out, is a political power.

The slippages which can be detected in the impact of hegemonic discourses of motherhood on individual mothers mean that the social stigma attached to single motherhood is highly variable. In many parts of the world, single mothers tend to be pathologised as expressions of dysfunction and as deviations from the nuclear family. Safa (1999) believes that single mothers in Latin America are not subject to the same discursive attacks as those in the United States or the UK. While many Nicaraguan families threaten to disown their daughters if they turn up pregnant, when it happens the majority of families accept the pregnancy and become supportive. Montecino (1995) sees this family acceptance of part of a process of social legitimisation of single motherhood.

One middle class single mother told me that when she split up from her husband she felt very self-conscious about taking her children out alone for a pizza, suggesting she was aware of some degree of social disapproval of her single motherhood. Similarly, Juana Granada and María Dolores Gallegos of the Movement of Single and Unemployed Mothers clearly felt that single mothers experienced all kinds of social discrimination, in

social circles, in the labour market and within the legal system. However, most of my participants openly assumed identities as *madres solteras*, or single mothers. The fluidity of family life weakens the stigma which can in any case be overcome by a number of practical and discursive strategies adopted by women in the interests of improving their quality of life. These strategies include removing violent and unproductive members from the family and deciding to be a lone parent to protect one's children from abuse (Chapter 3), being a good worker (Chapter 6) or being politically active (Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7). In many ways, assuming the identity of single mother, which on the one hand is about asserting a counter-hegemonic form of motherhood, can also become a form of pride because it also suggests resilience, survival and strength. These are all qualities that make women feel good about themselves.

### **Motherhood, femininity and sexuality**

#### *Multiple femininities*

As I discussed in Chapter 3, historically family relations in Latin America have resulted from competing processes. I indicated that the colonial order had gendered, classed and racialised dimensions which led to the emergence of different family styles. Consequently, the stigma attached to single motherhood is highly variable and perceptions of single motherhood and alternative families exist in Nicaragua in a fractured and contested manner. In present day Nicaragua, the sexual practices of most Nicaraguan men and the widespread disregard for principles of marriage, monogamy and fidelity are an ongoing legacy of this system and fracture any state-led project to resurrect ideologies based on family values. The lack of correlation between discourses and experiences creates conflicts not only between competing political forces but also between dominant cultural constructions such as *marianismo* and *machismo*, whose apparent complementary symbiosis is being constantly contested.

Despite the sexual disgrace of the origins of the *mestizo* population, which leads to understandings of female sexuality as disordered, religious referents, in particular the cult of Mary, have become central to understandings of femininity and sexuality in Latin

America. The cult of Mary has been seen as a conciliatory way of coming to terms with the contradictions of the *mestizo* population (Montecino 1988 in Fuller 1995).

Female sexuality, particularly within Catholic cultures, tends to be constructed as heterosexual, masochistic and geared towards procreation. In Nicaragua today, versions of femininity based on Catholicism are influential and far-reaching and promote selflessness and masochism amongst women. The positions of suffering adopted by many Nicaraguan women in response to war and disaster can be seen as conforming with these understandings of femininity. They are not, however, the only models of femininity to which Nicaraguan women are exposed and sexuality is not of course lived in this singular fashion. While the influence of the Catholic Church in Nicaragua means that it is difficult to conceive of female sexuality except in terms of procreation, reproductive sexuality is however, as Montenegro (2000) points out, a very small part of sexuality as a whole. Neither is the cult of Mary a monolithic collection of images despite attempts by the Catholic Church to reify them (Hamington 1995). Mary is therefore used as a model, as she is contested by her lack of applicability to Nicaraguan womanhood and she exists alongside more erotic models of Latin American femininity. These models gain cultural acceptance in Nicaragua because of the tendency identified by Lagarde (1990) to confuse eroticism with love.

Some of these models emerge from the globalised media<sup>2</sup> world of LAMTV where international Latin pop stars such as Jennifer Lopez and Christina Aguilera sell music based on sexualised images and explicit lyrics, the Latin American versions of girl power. While these media images are based on styles which accentuate gender difference, they also emphasise the desirability of non-reproductive sexuality. Some Nicaraguan women, especially urban women, will strive hard to achieve standards of feminine attractiveness which are filled with sexuality. In urban working class culture in Nicaragua, it is clearly fashionable to dress in an overtly sexualised fashion. Lopez and Aguilera respond to existing images of Latin American femininity as they recreate them through their success. These are forms of femininity which, in the British context, have been described as hyped and transgressive and are influential in shaping the gender identities of girls and young women (McRobbie 1993, Laurie et al. 1999)

These images of femininity have a slightly different impact in rural areas. The women of El Hatillo told me how women in the community had begun to take a pride in their appearance which was interpreted by them as evidence of how much women had liberated themselves. Formerly, the women in El Hatillo did not comb their hair, put on make-up or dress smartly to avoid making their husbands jealous or suspicious. They recounted one sad story of a woman in the community who had committed suicide because her husband's jealousy was so extreme she even had to bathe in secret. This had all changed now, they told me, and women could now make themselves look nice. They were, however, also quick to condemn the two or three women in the village who were known to have had extra-marital affairs and whose behaviour was seen to represent a loss of values. This suggests that female sexuality can be expressed within a context of personal hygiene but must also be policed. It further demonstrates that while various models of femininity exist, these tend to be hierarchically organised. This means that some versions of femininity are more socially acceptable than others.

#### *Single motherhood and sexuality*

The Catholic Church in Nicaragua is instrumental in the control of female sexuality. As noted, it becomes difficult to conceive of female sexuality other than in terms of procreation and issues such as abortion or homosexuality are constructed as inconsistent with 'normal' families. At times it is difficult to separate sexual identity from procreation because of the high fertility rate and the inability of some women to control their fertility. I met a woman in El Molino in 1999 who had two daughters aged six and seven and was pregnant with her third child. She told me the father of the two girls had left her several years previously for another woman and she had brought them up on her own. She did however also tell me that the father of her unborn child was the same man. He would sometimes come to visit and in what she put down to "un descuido", a moment of carelessness, she had fallen pregnant. It is hard to know whether to interpret her willingness to engage in sexual relations with this man as evidence of her oppression by him or, rather, evidence of an active sexuality on her part in conditions which limit access to reliable contraception.

While the question of female sexual pleasure is virtually absent from popular discourse in Nicaragua, Azucena Mejía, Graciela Blanco and Margarita Morejón all clearly viewed themselves as sexual beings and Belli's (2001) autobiography is as much a testimony to the expressions of female sexuality, in all its beauty, passion and contradictions, as it is to revolutionary political struggle. A number of participants stressed how important it was to talk to their children about bodies and sex so they would not grow up with the same ignorance of these issues as they had.

### *The search for love*

Montenegro (2000) believes that young Nicaraguan women are faced with a dilemma in terms of constructing their gender identities. Seventy per cent of women surveyed considered that physical attraction was not sufficient justification for a sexual relationship, believing that women should also be in love. Montenegro (2000:80) explains this through the notion that female sexuality involves the suppression of desire.

Para ser mujer se debe acceder a la sexualidad, pero para ser una mujer respetable se debe reprimir al deseo. Para acceder al deseo y cultivar la sexualidad sin sentirse "deshonrada", las mujeres se convalidan o justifican a través del amor.

Sexuality is central to being a woman, but in order to be a respectable woman, desire must be repressed. To have access to desire and cultivate one's sexuality without feeling "dishonourable", women use love as a justification.

The emphasis on acquiring sexual subjectivities through love and motherhood is, according to Montenegro (2000), more likely with women who have no competing projects in their lives in terms of study or work. In the absence of other possibilities, becoming a mother is a more accessible way of transforming one's status. Many of my participants did however have other aspirations and many were trying to complete the school or tertiary education as adults that they had been unable to do when they were younger. Many Nicaraguan women dream, not of getting married, but of being able to study and in this respect adopt a counter-hegemonic position with respect to dominant discourses of motherhood.

Butler's (1990) work has been valuable in demonstrating how sexual identities become reified through repeat performances. To some extent, both single motherhood and serial polygyny disrupt that repetition. While female sexuality continues to be disciplined through the legal system, the education system and the media, the absence of a husband removes the immediacy of that policing and allows women to consider, albeit in a restricted way, how they might envisage their sexualities.

### *Neither Jennifer nor Mary*

While pleasure is gained from being fashionably sexual, personal satisfaction is also achieved from models of femininity which have little to do with either the Virgin Mary or Jennifer Lopez, but are sometimes imbued with maternal values. In addition to the value placed on study and learning, this thesis has clearly demonstrated how being politically active or organised (*organizada*) is a source of personal satisfaction for many women. Much political activism carried out by women in Nicaragua is however feminised and is sometimes viewed as a natural outcome of maternal caring extended to a wider community. As I have already noted in Chapter 4, maternal politics might give women the moral high ground but they do not count for a great deal given that they are used to justify women doing much of this work without being paid, or if they are paid receiving lower salaries than men receive in the same organisation. However, while maternal values and ideas about women's roles are often the basis of political action, in the process motherhood and mothering work often get displaced in the sense that they are no longer viewed as 'naturally' providing fulfillment and satisfaction for women.

### **Conclusions**

When MIFAMILIA talks of the need for marriage in a society where many men and women have children with a number of different partners, when it promotes natural (rhythm) methods of contraception known to be unreliable in a country with a high birth rate and widespread poverty or when it puts more energy into protecting unborn foetuses than it does into protecting born children who are suffering from malnutrition and have no access to health care or education, it is easy to wonder to whom they might be talking. The Nicaraguan government, like the Catholic Church, manipulates hegemonic and



familiar constructions of motherhood which have increasingly lost their relevance to women's lives. In Nicaragua, it appears that these discourses are simultaneously hegemonic and weak, their effectiveness is reduced without their being undermined.

What is the impact of the circulation of discourses which, while pervasive, are nonetheless divorced from everyday materialities? Although cultural deviation from dominant discourses of motherhood is widespread, dominant discourses prevail because they simplify a complex situation and because they are generated by forces with considerable institutional power in society such as the state and the Catholic Church. Women still attempt to conform to dominant cultural norms in all kinds of ways, but compliance is often accompanied by subtle resistance which does sometimes result in spatial realignments or redefinitions of the boundaries of good mothering. Compliance with hegemonic discourses does not therefore always result in spatial containment, partially because the discourses which circulate about motherhood, sexuality and femininity are so contradictory and partially because their power is weakened as a result of contact with non-discursive conditions. This means that women adopt a multiplicity of subject positions which at times complement each other, at others clash and are themselves constantly changing. At times women appropriate naturalistic or normative understandings of motherhood to articulate (political) demands or negotiate unequal power relations, while at other times these understandings are resisted. In this context, the promotion of fixed identities for women sits awkwardly with the proliferation of subject positions adopted by Nicaraguan women and with the shifting nature of femininity.

The operation of power through discourse creates hegemonic constructions of gender and these have a limiting impact on the forms of subjectivity which people are able to adopt at a given time and in a given context. These dominant representations are central to people's understanding of themselves. Hegemonic discourses of motherhood can offer familiarity, reassurance, social acceptance and a sense of belonging, hence complicity with dominant norms at certain times and in certain spaces. It is difficult for mothers to have an understanding of themselves as mothers outside existing discourses of motherhood. But it is clear that individuals are also able to resist or dissent from cultural discourses, although resistance is, as stated, entangled with compliance (Moore 1994a,

Sharp et al. 2000). The interview data demonstrate the extent to which women have been able to rewrite their own personal histories and that discursive fields do exist which permit women to see their personal trajectories as historically produced. At times, what appears to be conformity with or reproduction of dominant discourses, can also simultaneously entail resistance.

Mothering in a context of war, disaster and structural adjustment produces place-specific and historically specific epistemologies. These epistemologies are constrained by the context in which and from which they emerge, but at the same time they are never closed and are always on the move. The modes of subjectivity offered by dominant discourses and adopted by individual women are sometimes reworked and put to a multiplicity of uses.

While essentialism is often used strategically by individual women to gain access to aid projects or support from other family members, to justify taking a job or going to war, the strategic use of essentialism has the effect of creating new spatialities. These might include the way in which mothering is sometimes done from afar, the deconstruction of the home/work dualism and the redefinition of motherhood as an economic activity. These new spatialities, which come into being through the use of strategic essentialism, in turn begin to contest the essential nature of motherhood because their emergence both attests to the socially constructed character of motherhood and reveals its mutability.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> More recalcitrant sectors of Nicaraguan society might however idealise the Somoza dictatorship as a time when female sexuality was more appropriately controlled. I came across such a view while working as an election observer in Nicaragua in November 2001. I was discussing the question of motherhood and sexuality with my driver, a Nicaraguan male in his 50s who was totally opposed to the Sandinista revolution. He told me he had children in all the municipalities of Boaco, a total of 18 children with 15 different women. He simultaneously lamented the sexual behaviour of women which he attributed to the revolution. During the Somoza dictatorship, he told me, things were much stricter and girls and young women were kept under much tighter control, but the freedoms provided by the revolution caused a lot of young women to go off the rails. I could not help pointing out that every pregnant teenager had of course been impregnated by an (irresponsible) man.

<sup>2</sup> A survey on perceptions about corruption conducted in Nicaragua in May 2000 found that the media had far more credibility as an institution than the Catholic Church. Seventy per cent of those surveyed had a favourable opinion of the media compared with only 37 per cent who had such an opinion of the Catholic Church (M & R Consultores 2000 in Montenegro 2000).

## Concluding remarks

During my first week of fieldwork in Nicaragua in 1999, I was introduced to Sadie's wealthy anti-Sandinista brother-in-law who came to visit from Managua for a couple of days accompanied by his wife (Sadie's half-sister), his two children and the children's uniform-wearing nanny. When I told him I had come to Nicaragua to research the question of motherhood, he rather dismissively suggested that motherhood was the same the world over (*Esto será igual en todo el mundo*). A few days later, when I was buying a school uniform for Natasha, the single mother who served me also asked what the reason for my visit to Matagalpa was. When I told her I was there to research the question of motherhood, she replied that it was a situation that was totally out of control in Nicaragua (*Pues esto es un descontrol total*).

The divergence of these two views on the cultural specificity of motherhood within the same country and culture demonstrates the gap which exists between dominant discourses of motherhood and its everyday practices. That is to say, it demonstrates how motherhood tends to be simplified in discourse and seen as natural and universal, but is lived in more complex ways by women themselves.

A number of state and institutional actors in Nicaragua have sought to undermine this complexity by attempting to fix the meanings of motherhood, family, femininity, masculinity and sexuality in simplified and reified ways. The Catholic Church and the government draw on essentialising discourses of gender in the pursuit of particular political goals and based on politically motivated understandings of national identity, which see feminist practices and ontologies as undesirable or threatening to the prevailing social order. But as Franco (1997:201) has said with reference to Latin America more generally, these processes are taking place in a context where the "limits of the permissible" are rapidly shifting.

This thesis has explored a number of arenas in which women must negotiate motherhood and has demonstrated how everyday practices challenge dominant understandings. There is a clear relationship between motherhood and space in the sense that motherhood is constituted spatially, taking specific and shifting forms in different spaces and because gendered geographies are made, remade or contested in terms of how women practise motherhood and other social identities in particular spaces.

The goal of this thesis has been to broaden understandings of the ways in which motherhood intersects with other cultural processes in particular spaces. By contextualising both the conditions in which women mother and the meanings women and others attach to mothering, I have explored the multiple models and dimensions to mothering which exist within Nicaraguan culture as well as the contradictions faced by women who mother within sites of intense cultural struggle. Broader and contextualised understandings of motherhood forms and practices have implications not only for feminist practice as women negotiate competing facets of multiple identities, but also for development practice which often formulates policy on the basis of assumptions made about what women, men and families 'do' and need. In this final chapter, I wish to reflect on the implications of this study for development practice and for feminist geography and methodologies.

### **Implications for development practice**

When I was in Nicaragua in November 2001, both the British ambassador to Nicaragua, Harry Wiles, and the head of DFID, Georgia Taylor, stated to me in separate meetings that a new approach to development was needed, given that Nicaragua had received millions of dollars in aid over the last few years but it had made little difference to living standards. Although in many ways the jobs of both of these people depend on the development 'industry' and on the perpetuation of development discourse, they are to some extent aligning themselves with critiques which see development as failed and irrelevant and as having produced underdevelopment (See for example Escobar 1992, 1995, Watts 1999). This approach by the British government has clear implications for NGOs working in Nicaragua and their potential beneficiaries. However, development

practice is not something about which we can make generalised statements. Development practice must be contextualised and situated if it is going to make a difference. As Watts (1999:89-90) states “[d]evelopment is about forms of knowledge, the power that regulates its practices, and the focus of subjectivity fostered by its impulses”.

With its focus on the constitution of multiple identities, this thesis has made clear that the development process brings a great deal of cultural change but not necessarily the changes that might be expected when improvements in measurable development indicators are the aim. In many cases explored here, material deprivation is extreme and brings much desperation into the lives of women and their families. Improvement in conventional development indicators is essential if global inequalities are to be addressed. However, it is also clear that poverty cannot only be measured in these terms. As Jackson (1989:59) has indicated, we must avoid collapsing “all forms of disadvantage into poverty”. In the midst of desperate economic circumstances, there is a richness in the way my participants responded to their lived experiences which should not be overlooked. The complexity of the negotiations in which my participants were engaged in their daily lives has important implications for development practice.

I initially became attracted to the question of motherhood in Nicaragua as a result of what I perceived were cultural differences between mothering in Nicaragua and my own experiences as a young mother in Britain at the time. I was fascinated by the idea of militarised mothers, the absence of the notion of quality time, the lack of tension between motherhood and paid work and the freedom from childrearing manuals. Such cross-cultural comparisons possess a great deal of liberatory potential for those of us who mother in other cultural contexts and on a personal level, I have benefited from making these comparisons. However, I believe it is the intra-cultural differences which exist, the fluidity and flexibility of motherhood within Nicaraguan culture, that have more far-reaching implications for development practice. Motherhood in Nicaragua is a highly differentiated phenomenon. Not only did I find each participant’s experience to be complex and contradictory but also that participants with superficially similar background characteristics and life experiences will often position themselves differently in relation to dominant discourses.

Women move in and out of states of resistance and accommodation, vulnerability and strength, of self-sacrifice and self-assertion and of reproducing dominant constructions of motherhood and undermining them. This dynamism takes place because there are a number of identities at play at a given time and the boundaries between them are very fluid. Consequently, Marcia Picado adopted a position of victimhood despite the opportunities for empowerment presented to her, while Elsa Jirón simultaneously adopted a position of suffering and one of political organisation. Azucena Mejía insisted on the preferable situation of living with a female partner who loves her rather than a male partner who threatens and batters her, yet still felt uneasy about the absence of a father for her son. Isabel Quezada used notions of victimhood and widowhood to make political demands but was not interested in a new husband because she was unwilling to give up her independence and freedom. María Julieta Vega made the ultimate in maternal sacrifice during the war by feeding both armies but also was critical of her dead husband's *machismo*. Similarly, the women of El Hatillo were not straightforwardly dependent or independent, nor straightforwardly traditional or emancipated. The structural constraints in their lives, such as sexism and poverty, were enormous but their responses to these constraints were strategic and calculated. Through their participation in autonomously defined development projects and in reconstruction work which was simultaneously unremunerated (feminised) and involved hard physical labour (masculinised), they created spaces in which gender relations in the community could be reworked. These reworkings are often positive in terms of identity renegotiation.

Maternal identities intersect with other social and political identities in ways which define the course of the development process. Different and shifting family and political allegiances account for the multiplicity and fluidity of identity. When political parties or the Catholic Church in Nicaragua promote traditional identities for women, they are in a sense denying women's citizenship by overlooking the ways in which these maternal identities intersect with political identities. Development agencies, even those with a GAD focus, often replicate the same understandings by reproducing essentialist understandings of men and women. If women do not succumb to the negative aspects of identities of victimhood, then maternal identities are reworked to bring them into line

with reformulated political identities. Hurricane Mitch was a disaster which brought much suffering, but because images of suffering mothers evoke strength as well as weakness, the disaster allowed some women to reimagine certain aspects of self in affirmative ways. This was particularly evident in the cases of Silvia Montiel and Rosa Laviana. But if, for example, the disaster situation prevents women from working – both Marcia Picado and Ramona Dávila lost their jobs as a result of Mitch – and development interventions are focused on food aid and childcare – as was the case in El Mirador - it might be more productive to adopt a victim mentality to appeal to aid agencies, a process which is more likely to lead to aid dependency rather than self-reliance. Even though women are disadvantaged by the existence of essentialist cultural constructions, they also draw on these notions, sometimes strategically and often unconsciously, in order to make sense of their lives and construct their subjectivities in ways that are discursively present. Therefore, the development process constitutes spaces in which gender can be performed differently, or in which hegemonic gender identities can be used strategically. At times, the identification with motherhood prevents crisis-induced paralysis but the process can lead to motherhood and other gender identities being performed differently. This is because of the ways in which maternal identities intersect with other identities and because the same discourses allow for different practices in different spaces. At times maternal identities are eclipsed by other social identities.

Political and maternal identities are constantly in tension but at moments they appear compatible and these moments are seized by women in order to bring about political change in a way which does not bring further or other social exclusions. In this respect, single motherhood as a social status and an identity is profoundly contradictory. While a number of social and institutional processes work to exclude single mothers from official or national imaginings of motherhood, these exclusions have been deployed creatively to rework understandings of motherhood and employment or motherhood and political activism. These reworkings often take place from a position of marginality. Politically active or revolutionary single mothers, as discussed in Chapter 4, or single working mothers, as discussed in Chapter 6, have earned a measure of respect in Nicaraguan society and have heightened the irrelevance of much recent government policy. The

ideological and moral discourses which emanate from government ministries or the Catholic Church tend to work to exclude single mothers from formal political spheres. In spite of this, much of the activity undertaken by my research participants is deeply political. It is political in the sense that it challenges state understandings of what motherhood means.

In attempting to ameliorate the effects, for example, of poverty induced by structural adjustment or to contribute to reconstruction following a disaster, development practitioners need to understand not only that vulnerabilities are culturally constructed as well as created by extreme events such as a hurricane, but also that these processes have a spatial logic of their own. This means that, while the material outcomes of such processes may indeed be negative and need to be addressed, the spatial shifts which accompany these processes reveal potentialities which women might be able to exploit within a process of identity renegotiation. Therefore, rather than focus exclusively on what structural adjustment, war or disaster *do* to women, it is more productive to focus our understandings on how women feel about and reflect on the spatial realignments created by these events or processes and on the ways in which they constrain and facilitate. Becoming homeless, for example, represents a negative spatial shift in an individual's life, but for Ramona Dávila it also brought freedom from a violent relationship, spiritual revitalisation and a renewed sense of optimism. The interweaving of material relations and symbolic meanings in women's lives means that a focus on the material and a neglect of the symbolic will overlook how women often cope with the former by renegotiating the latter. In El Hatillo, awareness of the constraints caused by ongoing poverty did not prevent women from taking on positions of political leadership and new positive subjectivities in relation to their own bodies. Even when material circumstances are desperate, there is space for dissent. If development interventions are to be made on behalf of women who are mothers, they must focus on the facilitative aspects of hardship and suffering in ways which can adjust relations of power.

Spatial understandings are crucial here to understanding these processes and development practitioners need to focus on the political, economic and cultural context in which they take place and in particular on how local, national and transnational contingencies are



setting up gendered inclusions and exclusions. In the context of Nicaragua, this means looking at how women as wives, mothers, workers or political activists are being incorporated into or excluded from the national project or broader processes of development. This thesis has demonstrated how political processes work to exclude single mothers from hegemonic understandings of family or from post-Mitch reconstruction projects. Yet, women as idealised wives and mothers form an important component of the way in which anti-revolutionary Nicaraguan nationalism reverts to 'traditional' ideologies in an attempt to 'restore' social order according to normative and Eurocentric understandings of motherhood, femininity and sexuality. These processes are not absolutely determining in terms of how women construct their subjectivities but nonetheless do represent an exercise in boundary enforcement which will impact on the success and outcome of development projects.

Contextualised understandings in the context of development practice in Nicaragua mean that disaster-related homelessness cannot be understood in isolation from the political situation which produces long-term housing instability, just as reconstruction or agricultural rehabilitation projects cannot be understood in separation from the gender division of labour in a given community and how understandings of masculinity and femininity determine the extent to which men and women can participate in and benefit from these projects.

The way in which Ramona Dávila's and Marcia Picado's subjectivities diverged during the processes of disaster and recovery, despite superficially sharing similar background characteristics demonstrates clearly how suffering is determined by the intersections of disaster-related subjectivities (such as being a *damnificada*) with others surrounding understandings of motherhood and relationships with men. The intersections which become meaningful in a given time or place, and by this I mean the models of subjectivity which are taken up, will differ between individuals and cannot therefore necessarily be predicted.

To understand the negotiations which take place and their potential for change, two focuses are important. The first is the need to focus on everyday life, because this is the

site where discursive meanings and social practices intersect in an immediate way. Second, GAD interventions would benefit from a greater understanding of gender identity as precarious. Even in contexts of hardship or disaster which impose a series of constraints in women's lives, gender is still variable and unstable as a category and its instability is often increased in such contexts. Focusing on the multiplicity of subject positions adopted by women and on the intersection of motherhood with other social identities, reveals how GAD emphases on categories such as female-headed households obscure the gendered relationships and interactions in which these women must engage, not only with other women and children, but also with men, as sons, employers, lovers and community leaders. Moreover, women's experiences of single motherhood, disaster, structural adjustment or war are built upon a multiplicity of discourses. Consequently, women do not necessarily show solidarity with other women in need nor do they necessarily respond to war, disaster, structural adjustment or family breakdown in the same way because they are women. While GAD has been invaluable in terms of shifting the focus away from women as an analytical category and onto gender, it has tended to reproduce static understandings of gender or create its own monolithic concepts such as female-headed households and the double burden. While such concepts have proved to be useful to an extent, they must also be challenged and seen in terms of their cultural specificity. The case of El Hatillo and the way in which identities are constructed and renegotiated in relation to development projects which *appear* to reproduce gender relations and therefore offer limited potential is illustrative of how development processes can only be made sense of in a spatial and contextualised sense. Even when women are disadvantaged by their confinement to feminised sectors of the economy or within development projects, their gender identities are still subject to change. Recognising that women as well as men adopt masculine subject positions in certain spaces can be a fruitful way of bringing what Cornwall (2000) calls the 'missing men' into GAD and begin to deconstruct the old essentialisms that are embedded in the categories 'man' and 'woman'. Rethinking motherhood and other constructions of gender in these ways may contribute to Escobar's (1992:22) call for "a more radical collective imaginary of alternative futures".

In the light of these understandings, it is far too simplistic to say that development has failed in Nicaragua. The post-Mitch scenario in communities such as El Mirador, El Hatillo and Apantillo Siales or the attempts at post-war reconciliation in Waslala provide clear evidence not only of the differences between communities but also of the differences between individuals. It is impossible therefore to produce prescriptive recommendations for development practice. Attention to context and principally to the geographies at play is fundamental as is, I feel, the need to enable Nicaraguans to set their own agendas in their own communities. This is why the arrival of aid in a given context is complex in terms of its ability to generate self-esteem or empowerment amongst beneficiaries. Development aid in El Hatillo, as Silvia Montiel's quotes in Chapter 7 demonstrate, acts as a motivating factor and one which enables women to strategically reproduce normative gender relations in the interests of more long-term emancipation. Aid in El Mirador, on the other hand, has had a disabling impact, generating dependencies which prevent people from making repairs to their homes or taking a sick child to the doctor. These outcomes constitute serious challenges to Nicaraguan NGOs like the Communal Movement in their attempts to provide aid which creates independence and empowerment. The tensions between political and gender identities and the interplay between shifting constructions of masculinity and femininity provide critical challenges for development theorists and practitioners, particularly in Nicaragua where gender inequality intersects with political polarisation in significant ways and where shifts in one do not automatically bring about positive changes in the other. Re-examining the meanings of motherhood in Latin America in a historically and geographically located way which pays attention to difference is essential for those working with women in development.

### **Implications for feminist geography**

As I indicated in the previous section, rather than looking at the oppressions suffered by or 'done to' women, I have instead tried to focus on how they respond to, construct and reflect upon the conditions in which they live and on the constitution of performative identities in a context of rapid social and political change. The social and political landscape of Nicaragua has changed dramatically since the 1970s when Nicaraguan

women politicised their understandings of motherhood to resist the dictatorship. As my participants revealed to me, 'good' mothers in Nicaragua at the present time do not only nurture children. They go out to work, sometimes taking on jobs which take them away from their homes and children. They are sometimes undomesticated and hand the physical care of their children over to someone else. They become soldiers or refuse to keep the home fires burning in times of war. They also have abortions, have extramarital and lesbian relationships, use men as providers of sperm and leave the fathers of their children. Despite the power and persistence of dominant discourses of motherhood, motherhood in its lived forms lacks coherence and is a precarious basis for the construction of gender identity.

Children are sometimes abandoned and neglected by their mothers as well as their fathers. Some women are clearly incapacitated by crisis and hardship, while others use crisis in resistive ways. Informal adoption, which is widespread in Nicaragua, involves a transaction between a mother who cannot or refuses to nurture and a woman who despite difficult economic circumstances, is prepared to nurture and raise non-biological children. To renounce motherhood (through choosing not to have biological children) is still not socially acceptable in Nicaragua. Not many women in Nicaragua renounce biological motherhood, but some renounce aspects of social motherhood, by giving their children away or by handing the physical care of their children temporarily or permanently to someone else. Despite these complexities and contradictions, women do not have any difficulty identifying as mothers because motherhood is such a powerful cultural symbol. However, this thesis has made clear that maternal identities are not linked exclusively to women's roles in the household or within the family. Conceptualising motherhood as a shifting and negotiable entity constituted through discourse and discursive practices contributes to feminist understandings of the relationship between gender and space.

### *Gender and space*

By focusing on a crucial but often overlooked aspect of gender identity which crosscuts sexuality, masculinity, femininity, religious identities, political identities, class and

ethnicity in a multiplicity of ways, this study has important implications for the epistemological transformation that is taking place within feminist geography in particular and within human geography more broadly. Motherhood has the discursive power to shape and define gender identities, but it can also be used to unsettle or destabilise gender and sexuality in material and discursive space.

For Foucault, space is where discourses about power and knowledge are transformed into actual relations of power (Wright and Rabinow 1982). Motherhood is therefore negotiated spatially. Given that individuals participate in a number of discursive practices simultaneously, the intersections of discourse and everyday practices work to create specific geographies of mothering. It is the relationship between motherhood and space which leads to the contestation or reproduction of gendered geographies and identities. It is the lack of spatial awareness of *marianismo* which has led to a failure to explain its simultaneous persistence as a discourse of power and its irrelevance in everyday contexts.

Discourses of *marianismo* only possess explanatory power for understanding motherhood if the spatiality of social relations – the sense that social relations are thoroughly embedded in space and can only become reality in a spatial sense – is considered. *Marianismo* persists in a discursive sense but is frequently destabilised through the process of spatial constitution. When women attempt to construct their subjectivities in relation to *marianista* discourses of self-sacrifice, the precariousness of the physical and discursive spaces which they inhabit means that *marianista* understandings can never be reproduced exactly nor is it desirable for them to be. While *marianismo*, along with nationalism and traditionalism, holds an ongoing appeal, women move in and out and between a number of competing discourses and inhabit a number of spaces simultaneously. Hegemonic discourses are therefore influential but never ultimately determining. Gender differences are embedded in dominant ideologies and are reproduced through everyday practices, a process which in turn creates gendered geographies. An examination of the everyday can potentially contribute to the exposure of the tendencies to naturalise gender differences and of the moments in which these tendencies are destabilised. The subversion of motherhood when it occurs, does so through spatial realignments. Actual mothering practices in Nicaragua are unsettling the

boundaries of received wisdoms, recreating the spaces and places in which motherhood is practised.

The spatial shifts or realignments which take place as a result of women's everyday renegotiations of motherhood can be discursive and/or material. There is sometimes a disjuncture between the material and discursive in terms of identity. Removing a violent, alcoholic or unproductive partner from the household represents a material spatial shift which might or might not be accompanied by a discursive spatial shift. Many of the women in this study, as Chapter 3 demonstrated, did experience a discursive shift in the sense that they assumed the identity of single mother in a positive sense. Others did not however and some tended to cling onto notions of romantic heterosexuality or become nostalgic about relationships with partners who had left them or had been killed in the war. Similar processes can also be detected in terms of work and motherhood. Not doing any domestic work or childcare or living separately from one's children represents a material spatial shift which potentially could lead to a discursive reconstruction of themselves as 'bad mothers' because of their neglect of mothering according to normative understandings. However, many women reconceptualise their understandings of motherhood to embrace its economic dimensions so that they can conceive of themselves simultaneously as workers, breadwinners or political activists and as 'good mothers'.

As Rose (1993) has argued, physical spaces cannot necessarily be separated from metaphorical or discursive ones. Similarly, being a mother in a discursive sense is not the same as being a mother in an embodied sense but nonetheless the corporeal and the discursive are mutually constituted and constantly in tension. Shifts in the corporeal or material practice of motherhood impact on the discursive practice of motherhood, just as the circulation of alternative or counter-hegemonic discourses of motherhood can impact on motherhood as a lived experience. However, these processes cannot be taken for granted nor do they occur in ways that can be anticipated. Consequently, motherhood as a set of discourses, discursive practices and lived experiences is filled with complexities. These complexities contain constraining elements, causing women to reproduce familiar

or reified social identities, but they are also often productive and create spaces for change.

Dualistic conceptualisations of space which exist in Latin America and identify women with home (*casa*) and men with street (*calle*) are inaccurate reflections of social spatialities in both a material and a discursive sense. It appears that many of the women in this study, through their experiences as children, as teenage mothers or as victims of violence or abuse, were socialised into a highly specific use of space at an early age. However, these hegemonic spatialities are disrupted by economic and political processes. These disruptions create new or alternative geographies in which motherhood and femininity can be reshaped or reworked. While certain spaces can be seen as male- or female-dominated, such as the formal political sphere or the domestic realm, there are no spaces that can straightforwardly be coded masculine or feminine. The formal political sphere, through its institutional and legislative power, makes incursions into the domestic realm, often forcing spatial realignments in its organisation, while the political sphere is feminised by the oppositional practices in which many Nicaraguan women are engaged. Feminised spaces such as the neighbourhood or the home often become political sites of conflict, resistance or oppositional social movements, while women sometimes adopt masculinised positions towards childrearing and domestic work, working for long hours outside of the home and allowing their children to be raised or their houses to be cleaned by others. The political sphere is often occupied in feminised ways through women's struggles for childcare, food, clean water, literacy, freedom from violence or a healthier social environment, while the home is occupied in masculinised ways when women become breadwinners, refuse to accept maintenance and renegotiate domestic work. At times, the complexities of daily transactions mean that masculinities and femininities become blurred, when masculinised work takes on feminised moral values, such as the emphasis on love rather than money. Boundaries are transgressed because gender identities and space itself are precariously constituted. It is the precariousness of gendered spatialities and identities that allows motherhood to be reworked in spite of the pervasiveness of dominant discourses.

*Single motherhood as a third space*

Bhabha's (1994) concept of third space and Rose's (1993) concept of paradoxical space are invaluable for rethinking motherhood in Nicaragua. Mothering in Nicaragua is a thoroughly hybrid phenomenon which constrains women but simultaneously contains potential for transformative change because of the ways in which motherhood intersects with other identities and because continuities with hegemonic understandings of motherhood co-exist with disruptions to these same understandings. In a sense, women inhabit a space between competing discursive practices, a third or paradoxical space, where new possibilities and hybridities can be envisaged.

It is of course impossible to be totally and permanently oppositional, because women and mothers must interact with other women, men and children. But it is also not possible to be the self-sacrificial, stay-at-home, all nurturing, partnered woman which is the ideal. Women must therefore negotiate a way through these contradictions – the clash between ideals and material realities – and attempt to do so without feelings of isolation, fear or social failure.

The mother as a metaphorical figure occupies a central place in the Nicaraguan cultural imagination, whereas mothers as women, especially single mothers, occupy the margins. Single mothers occupy paradoxical space, in which the tensions and contradictions between margins and centre can be used productively within a process of cultural change. Negotiating these tensions requires movement and this movement is a resistive corrective to attempts to fix gender identifications.

When constructing personal subjectivities in third space, women in Nicaragua have rich discursive material on which to draw. This material emerges from the legacies of the revolution, from the 'new' spatialities created by the state transition, from the remaking of femininity by political forces and feminist contestations of this process and from human rights and development discourses. The construction of subjectivity is not however entirely a matter of choice. Subjectivities must be constructed in ways that are discursively present and socially legitimate. Women are therefore living in-between what dominant social forces and legacies give to them and what they themselves do and create.



Single mothers in Nicaragua exist in both an embodied and a discursive sense. Post-structuralist theory proves to be the most useful way of gaining insights into the complexity of the negotiations in which women are engaged and their potential for change. Without understandings of the self as decentred and unstable, it would be difficult to explain why women adopt paradoxical subject positions such as victims and leaders. In terms of Nicaragua's revolutionary past, it demonstrates that women need neither the FSLN nor the completion of the process of national liberation to bring about feminist transformation. The inspirational aspects of the revolutionary past can be utilised while the *machismo* of the party leadership is condemned. Often the shifts which take place are subtle and delicate and occur within a context of cultural persistence, where discourse and embodiment are entangled and mutually constituted. Despite ongoing emphases in Nicaragua on the desirability of love and heterosexual romance, motherhood and domestic space are being uncoupled through the spatial practices of single mothers who mother within a context of post-revolution and structural adjustment. Such an approach enables us to focus on the subversive and transformative potential of motherhood.

### **Methodological implications**

It is common in academic practice for authorship to be linked with individuals (The Feminist Geography Reading Group 2000). However, the written thesis is a complex mix of mediated and intersubjective relationships with participants and with literatures consulted. Much of my thesis is based on words and information provided by my research participants and this in itself raises important questions about epistemology and the concept of authorship. The contributions made by my participants cannot be quantified, engaged as we were in the collaborative and mutual constitution of knowledge. Undoubtedly, the interviews proved to be a productive space in which the differences between researcher and researched could be negotiated and from which both parties benefited, although not in equal or similar ways. I was privileged to have received information from my participants that they had not been able to share with others and by focusing on everyday untold stories, we were jointly able to reimagine motherhood.

This research experience has also enabled me to achieve three valuable methodological outcomes. The first is that participants are represented in a way which demonstrates their heterogeneity and the permeability of the spaces in which they negotiate motherhood, which contrasts with static representations of the ‘third world woman’ critiqued by Mohanty (1991). Secondly, it has also enabled me to better envisage the struggle described in Belli’s quote on page 1 both to be feminine and to have masculine privileges and therefore to overcome essentialist understandings of motherhood and to make sense of motherhood in a way which is useful to feminist practice. This involves understanding the ways in which shifting constructions of masculinity and femininity are central to gender-based struggles and have material outcomes. Thirdly, my attempt to remain aware of own social locatedness, my own embodiment as a researcher and my shifting emotional and sexual subjectivities has contributed to my understandings of the research topic. Positionality is central to the deconstructive enterprise and I believe that such methodological outcomes can be achieved if we approach our work with passion and commitment and are not afraid to disrupt academic conventions. While I have attempted to produce a theoretically informed study, my thesis is a text which contains multiple and contextualised voices. This emphasis on contextuality politicises theory.

For me, the end of the writing process is accompanied by new emotional subjectivities and new perceptions of self. Sadie was central to my PhD. She facilitated the connections I was able to make with participants and other Nicaraguans and has therefore played a significant role in the construction of shared knowledge and hybrid spaces. I wrote this thesis with a deep sense of responsibility to Sadie’s life and struggles. During the writing process I was able to feel connected to Sadie and she continued to be a source of inspiration to me. In many ways, the end of the writing process is accompanied by a renewed sadness about her death as well as more general uncertainties about when I might be able to return to Matagalpa. The return visits that I was able to make to Matagalpa after my main period of fieldwork proved invaluable in a number of ways, in terms of keeping in contact with participants, of providing them with completed transcripts and of gaining more detailed understandings of my participants’ lives.

After I gave Carla Martínez copies of her transcripts in May 2001, she requested another recorded interview. I had not planned to record her again, as her interviews were extensive, but was more than happy to record her responses to reading her transcripts. This interview was in many ways both a validation of my methodological approach and the attempt to construct collaborative knowledges and build commonalities while respecting difference. The interview took place late one night in the offices of the Communal Movement, at the end of a long working day for her and while torrential rain, marking the much needed start to the rainy season, pounded on the roof above us. Her inspiring words encapsulate much of what I have achieved in theoretical and methodological terms.

In the following edited extract of that conversation, Carla demonstrated that she was aware of the social nature of her life experiences. In spite of the considerable personal tragedies and hardship she had to live through, she was still able to construct her subjectivity in a positive way and have a positive sense of self. Work in this respect was central to her identity. She talked about the therapeutic aspects of being involved in my research and alluded to the collaborative production of knowledge. She also made clear how she wanted herself and other Nicaraguan women to be represented, not as objects of pity but as evoking respect for their struggles. She also stressed the impossibility of real closure in the sense that the end of the writing process is not really an end as these life histories, struggles and experiences will carry on and must continue to be documented. Her words capture the cultural specificity of Nicaragua, infused as they are with Catholic notions of the need to suffer and revolutionary notions of war and struggle.

Mi historia es la de muchas aquí. Eso que me ha tocado vivir, me ha servido no para darme lástima, para sentirme merecedora de lástima, merecedora de pobrecita. En mi calidad de todo lo que me ha tocado vivir, yo creo que me ha servido para fortalecerme, me ha servido para darme valor, para sentirme que yo he logrado superar muchas cosas, que no me he dejado arrastrar por toda esta situación, que podría ser negativa. Yo no veo lo negativo, creo que las cosas podrían haber sido diferentes en mi relación con el padre de mis hijos. Pero no me pongo a llorar por el pasado, no me pongo a lamentar que las cosas pudieran haber sido diferentes. [...] Yo no doy gracias por ser madre soltera, porque pienso que los hijos no los hice sola yo, y no puedo decir que vivo una vida de madre soltera feliz. Pero yo considero la positividad de todo eso, en tanto que mis hijos

comen con todas las dificultades no. Pero yo no me siento tampoco una mujer sacrificada, porque lo hago con ganas, yo comparto con ellos lo que puedo tener de recursos. [...]

Las entrevistas, al leerlas, dije las cosas de una manera impresionada, por recordar lo que me ha tocado vivir. He contado lo que más ha pesado en mi vida. Tal vez debería haber contado cosas más alegres, que tal vez no las platiqué pero forman parte de mi vida y también tienen su peso, sino que puse las situaciones más dramáticas, las situaciones más tristes, las situaciones que realmente hubiera querido que hubieran sido diferentes. Desde ese aspecto, yo creo que si contara las cosas alegres que me han pasado, las cosas agradables, yo creo que a todo el mundo les daría risa. Yo he contado la parte más triste, la parte que para mí hubiera querido que fuera diferente. [...]

Pero siento que he sido una mujer privilegiada, una mujer con muchas oportunidades, y que esas oportunidades me han servido. [...] Pienso que verdaderamente hasta el momento ... no me he arrepentido. No me arrepiento de haberme separado del padre de mis hijos. No me arrepiento de lo que he hecho, no porque pienso que todo lo que he hecho sea lo mejor. Al menos considero que las cosas que he hecho, no las he tomado a la ligera. He considerado que dentro de la situación que he vivido, han sido las decisiones más razonables y las que en el momento valían la pena. Creo que no he sido indecisa, sino que he actuado maduramente y eso me ha servido a ser tranquila conmigo misma. Yo no me arrepiento de haber tenido cinco hijos. Claro, creo que lo ideal hubiera sido tener dos hijos cuanto más. Pero mis hijos son lindos y no me arrepiento. [...]

Yo me siento una mujer realizada, no soy una mujer frustrada en lo que estoy, y bueno con muchas cosas que aprender. Y a veces escribo las cosas pendientes que tengo que finalizar. [...] Pienso que estas cosas pendientes, esa página en blanco que estamos escribiendo, la podés dejar a medio escribir. Pienso que todo lo que he hecho me ha servido mucho y me siento satisfecha con lo que he hecho. Siento que hay pesimismo en la situación que vivimos con la situación económica de nosotros, los nicaragüenses, y de los que vivimos en países como el nuestro. [...] Nuestros ingresos por ser mujeres .. verdaderamente lo que ganamos no da para el mantenimiento de nuestra familia. Las familias encabezadas por mujeres verdaderamente tienen una situación más difícil. Pero no todas nos ponemos a llorar. Tenemos esa gran cualidad dentro de la realidad que nos toca vivir de no dramatizarla demasiado. [...] Doy gracias de que he podido trabajar, que he podido hacer cosas. Las cosas que hago las hago porque me gusta hacerlas. He tenido ese privilegio de haber trabajado, de tener salud para hacer cosas, de no haberme cansado hasta el momento de hacer cosas. Y bueno, eso a mí me satisface bastante y me hace ver las cosas con mucha positividad y soy optimista.

Aquí hay un refrán que dice 'No hay mal que por bien no venga' y creo que hay que ver el lado amable de las cosas. Yo creo que cuando las cosas no cuestan, no se valoran. Imaginate vos si hubieras hecho tu tesis dentro de la facilidad que te

prestaba el lugar donde vos vivís y no tenías que viajar al otro lado del mundo a conocer otras experiencias. Nosotras en ese particular tenemos en común muchas cosas. Sólo pienso en el caso tuyo, dejar a tus hijos, vivir una situación de riesgo, porque aquí es peligroso, tener que viajar tanto, para lograr hacernos estas entrevistas. Que va a ser de referencia para muchas cosas, va a dar lugar a que otras compañeras quieran profundizar un poco sobre este tema y que sea como algo motivador para seguir descubriendo cosas, porque las cosas no tienen un punto final. Verdaderamente ésta es la lucha y creo que la historia no termina. La historia continúa, vista desde muchos ángulos, siempre estaremos las mujeres, adelante, para dejar precedentes. Yo pienso que es admirable esta idea tuya y yo me siento como con un premio, de haber sido tomada en cuenta para escribir esto. Y lo digo porque habemos muchas mujeres a que les hubieran gustado contar la historia que se repite. No creo que sientan lástima por nosotras, sino que creo que van a saber valorar esta lucha. Tal vez hemos perdido una batalla, pero la guerra todavía la tenemos y seguimos adelante, haciéndole frente. Así es. Y bueno, dentro de lo que me ha tocado hacer en esta vida, dentro de estas páginas que a todo el mundo les toca llenar, yo pienso que he llegado largo.

My story is that of many women here. Everything I have been through, it is not so people feel sorry for me or that I am deserving of pity. Everything I have lived through has helped me to become strong, it has given me courage, and made me feel that I've been able to overcome many things, that I didn't let a negative situation drag me down. I don't focus on the negative, I think that the relationship with the father of my children could have been different. But I don't start crying over the past, I don't sit there wishing that things could have been different. [...] I'm not grateful that I'm a single mother, because I think that I didn't make the children on my own, and I can't say that I have a happy life as a single mother. But I focus on the positive in all this, that my children are able to eat in spite of all the difficulties. But I don't feel like a self-sacrificing woman, because I do it willingly, I share with them the resources that I have. [...]

I realised when I read the interviews that I got quite upset, remembering everything that I'd been through. I told the most significant things in my life. Perhaps I should have talked about happier things. I didn't talk about them, but they're also part of my life and have their importance. I talked about the most dramatic situations, the saddest situations, the things that I'd have liked to be different. But if I'd talked about the happy things that have happened to me, the pleasant things, I think everybody would find it funny. But I told the saddest part, the part I'd have liked to be different. [...]

But I think I have been a privileged woman, a woman who's had lots of opportunities, and these opportunities have been good for me. [...] I really think that I don't regret a thing. I don't regret separating from the father of my children. I don't regret what I've done, not because I think everything I've done was the best thing, but at least I think that I didn't make decisions lightly. Given my situation, I think I've taken the most reasonable decisions and ones that were

worthwhile at the time. I don't think I've been indecisive, but have acted maturely and this has helped to be at peace with myself. I don't regret having five children. Of course the ideal would have been to have two children at the most. But my children are lovely and I don't feel regretful. [...]

I feel like a woman who's achieved things, I don't feel frustrated with where I'm at, but I still have a lot to learn. Sometimes I write down the things that I still need to finish. [...] But I think that these things that are pending, this blank page that we're writing, it's all right to leave it half written. I think that everything I've done has been of use and I feel satisfied with what I have done. I feel there is a lot of pessimism in our economic situation, for Nicaraguans and people who live in countries like ours. [...] Our income, because we're women ... we don't earn enough to maintain our families. Families headed by women have a much harder time. But we don't all start to cry about it. We have this great quality of not dramatising the reality in which we live too much. This is our struggle and history doesn't end here. History continues and it can be seen from many perspectives, but women will always be here, in front, setting precedents. [...] I'm grateful that I've been able to work, that I've been able to do things. The things I do, I do them because I like doing them. I've had the privilege of being able to work, of being healthy enough to do things, and still not to have tired of doing things. And that makes me feel good and it makes me view things positively and I'm an optimist.

Here there is a proverb which says 'Every cloud has a silver lining' and I think it is important to see the kind side of things. I think when things aren't difficult, you don't value them. Just imagine how easy it would have been for you to have done your thesis in the place where you live, if you didn't have to travel to the other side of the world to learn about other experiences. In this respect we have a lot in common. I just think about you, how you leave your children, live in a risky situation, because it's dangerous here, how you have to travel so much, to be able to interview us. And it's going to be a reference point for many things, it will encourage other women to research this topic more, it will motivate people to keep on discovering things, because they don't have an end point. I admire this idea of yours and I feel like I've won a prize to have been included in this written work. And I say this because there are lots of women who would have liked to tell the story which repeats itself. I don't think people will take pity on us, but I think they will value our struggle. Perhaps we have lost a battle, but we are still in the war and we are moving forward, confronting it. That's the way it is. And well, within my life experience, within these pages that everyone has to fill, I think I have come a long way.

Carla Martínez, 24 May 2001

The women who speak in this thesis cannot necessarily be seen as straightforwardly representative of single mothers in Nicaragua. But their stories, as Carla pointed out, are ones which repeat themselves and the themes of these stories are politically mobilised by the women in this study in their everyday lives. These political strategies are central to

transformative politics. However, women as single mothers are multiply positioned and their shifting social and political identities are differentially constructed and performed across space. As such, they defy stereotyping or neat categorisation, and the metaphorical and physical spaces they inhabit are themselves constituted by these performances.

The politics of single motherhood in Nicaragua involves the intermingling of 'old' and 'new' geographies, of individual trajectories and collective imaginaries and it is this intermingling which permits the performance of multiple and intersecting identities. In short, a focus on the politics of single motherhood demonstrates the flexibility and precariousness of motherhood as a discursive site and as a set of embodied practices.





## Glossary

|                            |  |
|----------------------------|--|
| <i>albañil</i>             | labourer   |
| <i>amancebamiento</i>      | illicit union  |
| <i>americanidad</i>        | Americanness   |
| <i>atolera</i>             | festival to celebrate the corn harvest   |
| <i>ayuda</i>               | help   |
| <i>barraganía</i>          | concubinage  |
| <i>barrio</i>              | district or suburb of a town or city, can also be a shanty town                                  |
| <i>beneficio</i>           | coffee processing plant  |
| <i>brigadista</i>          | brigade worker, volunteer  |
| <i>calle</i>               | street   |
| <i>campesino</i>           | small farmer   |
| <i>canasta básica</i>      | a basic market basket of goods and services considered the minimum required to maintain a family |
| <i>casa</i>                | home, house  |
| <i>céramica negra</i>      | black pottery  |
| <i>champa</i>              | makeshift shelter  |
| <i>chayote</i>             | a green bristly vegetable  |
| <i>chele/a</i>             | a foreigner from Europe or the United States, a fair-skinned person                              |
| <i>Chicano/a</i>           | person of Mexican descent living in the United States  |
| <i>china</i>               | nanny  |
| <i>comandante</i>          | commander, a Sandinista or Contra military leader  |
| <i>contra</i>              | Contra, member of the counter-revolutionary forces   |
| <i>comedor infantil</i>    | collective children's kitchen  |
| <i>compa</i>               | Sandinista comrade, short for <i>compañero</i>   |
| <i>compañero</i>           | Sandinista comrade, a de facto partner   |
| <i>córdoba (C\$)</i>       | the Nicaraguan unit of currency (in 1999 US\$1=C\$12)  |
| <i>cuajada</i>             | curd   |
| <i>cususa</i>              | home made liquor brewed with fermented maize   |
| <i>damnificado/a</i>       | disaster victim  |
| <i>desmovilizado</i>       | demobilised soldier  |
| <i>directiva</i>           | executive committee  |
| <i>Doña</i>                | female courtesy title, used before Christian name  |
| <i>educadora</i>           | educator   |
| <i>enchilada</i>           | a corn tortilla, fried and topped with beans or meat and chile sauce                             |
| <i>Frente</i>              | Front, short for Sandinista Front (Frente Sandinista)  |
| <i>fresco</i>              | a drink made of liquidised fresh fruit, sugar and water  |
| <i>fritanga</i>            | street stall selling fried food  |
| <i>gritería</i>            | part of the festival of the Immaculate Conception  |
| <i>guardia</i>             | a member of Somoza's National Guard  |
| <i>hacienda</i>            | large estate   |
| <i>huerta familiar</i>     | family vegetable garden  |
| <i>jornada de limpieza</i> | a day when volunteers clear a <i>barrio</i> of rubbish and mosquito breeding areas               |
| <i>machismo</i>            | Latin American variant of masculinity  |

|                        |   |
|------------------------|---|
| <i>madre</i>           | mother  |
| <i>madre soltera</i>   | single mother   |
| <i>madresposa</i>      | wife and mother   |
| <i>maquiladora</i>     | assembly plant which assembles goods for export   |
| <i>manzana</i>         | a land measurement, 1 manzana = 1.75 acres or 0.7 hectares  |
| <i>marianismo</i>      | the cult of the Virgin Mary   |
| <i>mestizaje</i>       | miscenogation   |
| <i>mestizo</i>         | Spanish speaker of mixed European and Indian descent  |
| <i>mulato</i>          | of mixed European, indigenous and black descent   |
| <i>nacatamal</i>       | seasoned meat and corn dish wrapped in a plantain leaf  |
| <i>nacionalidad</i>    | nationality   |
| <i>parrandero</i>      | party animal, party lover   |
| <i>partera</i>         | midwife   |
| <i>patria potestad</i> | the law of the father   |
| <i>piñata</i>          | a papier-mâché figure filled with sweets which is broken at children's parties; the distribution of goods and property during the political transition period in 1990 |
| <i>pitahaya</i>        | a bright purple fruit used to make drinks ( <i>fresco</i> )   |
| <i>plaza</i>           | town square   |
| <i>posicles</i>        | popsicles, home-made frozen drinks  |
| <i>Purísima</i>        | the Feast of the Immaculate Conception  |
| <i>recontra</i>        | a rearmed Contra  |
| <i>recompa</i>         | a rearmed Sandinista  |
| <i>regalado(s)</i>     | given away  |
| <i>revanchismo</i>     | revanchism, political culture based on revenge  |
| <i>revueltos</i>       | mixed groups of rearmed Contras and Sandinistas   |
| <i>señorita</i>        | young lady (often used to refer to girls who are post-pubescent but still virgins)  |
| <i>Somocista</i>       | a Somoza supporter (pejorative)   |
| <i>toma</i>            | land invasion   |
| <i>tortilla</i>        | maize pancake, a Nicaraguan staple  |
| <i>unión libre</i>     | de facto partnership  |
| <i>vaca parida</i>     | cow (which produces milk)   |
| <i>vago</i>            | layabout  |

## Abbreviations

|          |  |
|----------|--|
| AMPRONAC | Asociación de Mujeres ante la Problemática Nacional<br>Association of Women Confronting the National Problem           |
| AMNLAE   | Asociación de Mujeres Nicaragüenses Luisa Amanda Espinoza<br>Association of Nicaraguan Women Luisa Amanda Espinoza     |
| ARDE     | Alianza Revolucionaria Democrática<br>Revolutionary Democratic Alliance  |
| CCER     | Coordinadora Civil para la Emergencia y la Reconstrucción<br>Civil Coalition for Emergency and Reconstruction          |
| CDI      | Centro de Desarrollo Infantil<br>Child Development Centre (crèche/preschool)   |
| CDS      | Comité de Defensa Sandinista<br>Sandinista Defence Committee   |
| CEB      | Comunidad Eclesiástica de Base<br>Christian Base Community   |
| CORIAC   | Colectivo de Hombres por Relaciones Igualitarias<br>Men's Collective for Equal Relations                               |
| CENIDH   | Centro Nicaragüense de Derechos Humanos<br>Nicaraguan Centre for Human Rights  |
| DFID     | Department for International Development   |
| ENDESA   | Encuesta Nicaragüense de Demografía y Salud<br>Nicaraguan Demography and Health Survey                                 |
| EPS      | Ejército Popular Sandinista<br>Sandinista People's Army  |
| EU       | European Union   |
| FDN      | Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense<br>Nicaraguan Democratic Force   |
| FIDEG    | Fundación Internacional para el Desafío Económico Global<br>International Foundation for the Global Economic Challenge |
| FONIF    | Fondo Nicaragüense de la Familia<br>Nicaragua Fund for the Family  |
| FMLN     | Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional<br>Farabundo Martí Front for National Liberation                    |
| FSLN     | Frente Sandinista para la Liberación Nacional<br>Sandinista Front for National Liberation                              |
| GAD      | Gender and Development   |
| GHCV     | Grupo de Hombres contra la Violencia<br>Group of Men against Violence  |
| HDI      | Human Development Index  |
| HEC      | Human Ethics Committee   |
| IDB      | Interamerican Development Bank   |
| IDNDR    | International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction  |
| IMF      | International Monetary Fund  |
| INEC     | Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos<br>National Institute of Statistics and Censuses                           |

|           |  |
|-----------|--|
| INIM      | Instituto Nicaragüense de Investigaciones de la Mujer<br>Nicaraguan Institute for Research on Women                                  |
| INSSBI    | Instituto de Seguridad Social y Bienestar<br>Institute of Social Security and Welfare  |
| JS        | Juventud Sandinista<br>Sandinista Youth  |
| LAMTV     | Latin American Music Television  |
| MED       | Ministerio de Educación<br>Ministry of Education   |
| MIFAMILIA | Ministerio de la Familia<br>Ministry of the Family   |
| MRS       | Movimiento Renovador Sandinista<br>Sandinista Renovation Movement  |
| NGO       | Non-governmental organisation  |
| NIDL      | New International Division of Labour   |
| NSC       | Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign  |
| NSM       | New Social Movement  |
| PLC       | Partido Liberal Constitucionalista<br>Constitutionalist Liberal Party  |
| PRRO      | Protracted Relief and Recovery Operation   |
| RAAN      | Región Autónoma del Atlántico Norte<br>Autonomous Region of the North Atlantic   |
| RAAS      | Región Autónoma del Atlántico Sur<br>Autonomous Region of the South Atlantic   |
| RN        | Resistencia Nicaragüense<br>Nicaraguan Resistance  |
| SIC       | Servicios Infantiles Comunes<br>Communal Children's Services   |
| SMP       | Servicio Militar Patriótico<br>Patriotic Military Service  |
| UCA       | Unión de Cooperativas Agrícolas<br>Union of Agricultural Co-operatives<br>Universidad Centroamericana<br>Central American University |
| UNAG      | Unión Nacional de Agricultores y Ganaderos<br>National Union of Farmers and Ranchers   |
| UNDP      | United Nations Development Programme   |
| USAID     | United States Agency for International Development   |
| WFP       | World Food Programme   |
| WGSG      | Women in Geography Study Group   |
| WID       | Women in Development   |

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