

Women's Movements in Revolutionary Cuba & Nicaragua

Abstract: Despite their Marxist orientation, the revolutionary struggles of the 26th of July Movement in Cuba and the Sandinista National Liberation Front in Nicaragua were quite distinct. This is particularly true in regards to the experiences of women in both revolutionary movements. This paper explores this varied experience, focusing specifically on women within the guerrilla movements, women within their political arm of the vanguard, and the effect of the socio-cultural struggle on the realization of women's advancement after the movements had assumed power. It concludes three trends: more Nicaraguan women participated directly in the revolutionary struggle (albeit for different reasons), once the movements had been institutionalized the governments pursued women's advancement only in terms of greater class concerns, and the *machista* norm has proven a significant barrier in the progress of both revolutions.

There is little dispute over the role Marxism has played in movements for social change in Latin America. As an ideology reacting to the perceived injustices of capitalism, it seems relevant that a discussion surrounding the realization of Marx's alternative exists in the context of two successful revolutions. Moreover, while Marxism espouses a commitment to an egalitarian society, it is interesting to examine the extent to which this has been realized for women. This paper will argue that the advancement of women under the revolutionary movements of Cuba and Nicaragua, while beginning with similar ideological commitments, were experienced and realized in distinct manners. That is, although both revolutionary governments were committed to a similar vanguard Marxism, the experience of women varied in each country, as the result of the unique environments of both states.

Thematically, both revolutions sought the realization of gender equality only as a function of their broader class-based political aspirations. While both revolutions institutionalized the women's movement by giving it its own arm of the vanguard party, the change it was able to affect was primarily political, rather than social, in nature. Moreover, the revolutionary

governments were effective in addressing the political grievances of the women's movement, but these needs were only pursued insofar as addressing them was perceived to strive towards the broader ideal of the class change understood by Marxism. It is useful, from the outset, to take note of the ways in which cultural norms, such as *machismo*, inhibited the advancement of women in both countries.

In arguing that the similar approach to gender advancement within revolutionary Cuba and Nicaragua was met by unique conditions and therefore resulted in different experiences, this paper will present and analyze three components of the struggle. It will first discuss the varying degree to which women participated in the armed insurrection of both revolutions. It will then explore the difference in effectiveness of the women's political wing of the revolutionary states and, finally, look at the legacy of this struggle insofar as cultural norms have continued to inhibit the women's equality. First, however, the history surrounding the revolutionary periods in both countries will be described to provide a backdrop for the discussion.

### **Historical and Ideological Background**

On January 1, 1959, Fidel Castro and his band of revolutionary guerrillas, having outlasted numerous attacks from Batista's army, from subversive militant groups trained by the United States to thwart the Revolution and from a massive counter-revolutionary propaganda campaign, took Havana after two years of insurrection (Bonachea & San Martín, 1974; Prevost, 2006; Anderson, 1997). Ideologically, the 26th of July Movement emphasized principles such as "an effective reorganization of the democratic system... an efficient nationalization of public utilities; an intensive policy of agricultural and industrial development, and a new policy

concerning foreign trade” (Bonachea & San Martín, 1974, 157). Beyond the generalized goals of the Revolution, it lacked a specific ideological commitment and instead emphasized the overthrow of Batista, rather than the installment of a particular political system. For example, from the Programme Manifesto of the 26th of July Movement:

With regard to ideological definitions, the 26th of July movement prefers to avoid abstract formulations or pre-established clichés. The ideology of the Cuban Revolution must arise from its own roots and the particular circumstances of the people and the country. (as cited in Liss, 1987, 174)

It wasn't until after the successful overthrow of Batista that Castro proclaimed his Marxist orientation and, eventually, to the Soviet Union.

In Nicaragua, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) appeared in 1962 as a rejection of the Somoza family dictatorship which had held power in Nicaragua since the 1930s (Nolan, 1985). Walker (1986) suggests that the Revolution was the result of a combination of grassroots Marxism and progressive Catholicism, whereby the resulting movement sought an authentically Nicaraguan ideology “based on the tactics and sociopolitical objectives of Augusto César Sandino” (41). Although various levels of fighting existed throughout the 1970s, the FSLN successfully overthrew Somoza in 1979, and subsequently installed a Marxist government, attempting to mimic the achievements of the Cuban revolution of 1959 (Nolan, 1985). Once in power, the FSLN pursued the following policy goals:

(1) a mixed economy with heavy participation by the private sector, (2) political pluralism featuring interclass dialogue... (3) ambitious social programs, based in large part on grassroots volunteerism, and (4) the maintenance of diplomatic and economic relations with as many nations as possible regardless of ideology. (Walker, 1986, 44)

Interestingly, the FSLN held power for just over a decade and was voted out of executive office in 1990, with the election of neoliberal candidate Violeta Chamorro.

The successful Marxist struggles in Cuba and Nicaragua undoubtedly resulted in greater attention to social justice, through policies of economic redistribution. The extent to which gender disparity was embraced and combated, however, requires a more critical examination of the revolutions.

### **Women in the Guerrilla Movement**

To begin, "...relatively few women participated as combatants in the guerrilla phase of the Cuban Revolution" (Kampwirth, 2002, 118). It is estimated that a mere 5 percent of the guerrillas were women (Kampwirth, 2002). Furthermore, in the limited capacity in which they participated, Luciak (2007) adds that "Cuban women in the guerrilla movement clearly performed counter-traditional roles. This does not mean, however, that gender relations in the July 26th Movement were necessarily different from society at large" (4). The lack of women's involvement in the armed insurgency can be attributed to societal norms, such as machismo, excluding them from such action—norms which the revolutionaries themselves did not specifically address in their insurrection. As another explanation, Kampwirth (2002; 2004) and Cerrutti & Bertocello (2003) has suggested this to be partly a result of the high rate of urbanization in Cuba at the time. In this sense, women were more likely to live in urban areas because the Cuban division of labor situated men as the manual laborers running Cuba's vast plantation economy, and placed women in service positions, such as maids in urban houses.

Conversely, according to Kampwirth (2004), “in [Nicaragua’s] guerrilla struggle of the sixties and seventies, thousands of women gained the opportunity to break the constraints of their traditional roles” and were very active in comparison to their Cuban counterparts—women made up an estimated 30 percent of armed insurgents, a number which increased towards the completion of the war (20; Luciak, 2007; Howe, 2007; Babb, 2001; Kampwirth, 2002; Kampwirth, 2004; Kampwirth, 2006). Kampwirth (2002) suggests that the “nontraditional conditions of guerrilla life” contributed to a breakdown of the gendered division of labor as women assumed equal roles in the guerrilla movement (33). Additionally, as one Nicaraguan woman explained (as cited in Howe, 2007), “we never entered into a lot of theoretical discussions about women’s liberation....In fact we never said we were equal—we simply demonstrated it in the battlefields, on the barricades and in the mountains” (237). It can be argued, therefore, that the direct involvement of women in the guerrilla insurrection of the FSLN was extremely important for those building a foundation for the seeking of gender equality in that it represented a breaching of traditional roles at the outset of the revolutionary period.

Explaining the reason for this difference in the involvement of women between Cuba and Nicaragua, the role of the Catholic Church provides an interesting perspective. For example, at the time of the Cuban struggle, in the late-1950s, the Church maintained a strong presence in the state, but existed as a supporter of the status quo, functioning as it had throughout the colonial era. However, by the time the FSLN had launched their guerrilla campaign in the 1970s, liberation theology had emerged as an influential force for social change throughout much of Latin America, espousing social justice and addressing the misgivings of traditional social hierarchies (Luciak, 2007). As Kampwirth (2004) has argued, “liberation theology provided the

theological underpinnings for women's direct participation in the revolutionary [movement in Nicaragua] for liberation theologians promoted the idea that men and women were equal in the eyes of God, and encouraged women to organize" (Kampwirth, 2004, 179). In this sense, whereas the comparatively high rate of urbanized women and the strong presence of machismo contributed to their lack of involvement in the armed struggle in Cuba, the presence of liberation theology in Nicaragua contributed to a breaking down of the gender norms which had traditionally constrained their action, and thus played a large role in their direct involvement in the guerrilla movement of the FSLN.

As a final explanation for the difference in involvement of women in the armed insurrections, Kampwirth (2002) proposes that the FSLN's "mass mobilization strategy," focusing on "...winning the hearts and minds of thousands through work that was political as well as military," certainly contributed (127). In contrast, the Cuban guerrillas employed a "foco strategy," intentionally relying on only a small band of guerrillas to overthrow the dictatorship (Kampwirth, 2002). In this sense, while women were purposefully included in the recruiting of Sandinista guerrillas, the 21st of July Movement did not specifically call upon women to fill their ranks as part of their guerrilla strategy.<sup>1</sup>

The difference in the direct involvement of women in the fighting of the revolution is a key point of divergence between the Cuban and Nicaraguan experiences. Whereas in Cuba relatively few women participated in the insurrection (at no fault of their own), as many as 30 percent of the FSLN's guerrillas were women (Babb, 2001; Howe, 2007; Luciak, 2007; Kampwirth, 2004). Moreover, while the gendered division of urban and rural labor contributed to

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<sup>1</sup> Kampwirth (2002) also makes the interesting assertion that because the Cuban guerrillas faced an arms shortage throughout their campaign, the recruiting they did do was primarily of men, whereas the Sandinistas could consciously work to involve women because they did not face the same shortages of supplies.

a lack of female guerrillas in Cuba, the emergence of liberation theology in Nicaragua contributed to an acceptance of women as active participants in society and led to their strong representation among the Sandinistas.

### **The Political Wing**

Given that both revolutions approached their restructuring of society through a sort of vanguard Marxism—arguing that radical societal transformation can only be achieved through the actions of a single, dominant party (the vanguard)—it is unsurprising that they both institutionalized the demand for women’s equality through a political wing in the revolutionary party.<sup>2</sup> In Cuba the Federation of Cuba Women (FMC) and in Nicaragua the Association of Nicaraguan Women Luisa Amanda Espinosa (AMNLAE) were founded within a year of the ousting of their dictatorships (Luciak, 2007; Facio, Toro-Morn & Roschelle, 2004; Poncela, 1997). As Kampwirth (2004) notes, “both were founded with the dual agenda of promoting women’s rights and of promoting their respective revolutions” (193). Interestingly, both became very popular, and by the end of the revolutionary period AMNLAE had become the largest branch of the FSLN, while as of 1994, the FMC had 3 million members (Kampwirth, 2004; Leiner, 1994). Politically, these political wings were fairly successful at lobbying their party leadership to adopt policy which benefitted women; however, the Marxist governments were limited insofar as they only addressed women’s equality as a function of their commitment to class-based change.

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<sup>2</sup> These actions are “unsurprising” insofar as vanguard Marxism is generally accompanied by a sort of bureaucratic centralism, whereby in order to present itself both as unified and righteous, the vanguard determines all policy. By institutionalizing the women’s movement—and outlawing independent groups—the vanguard, at least theoretically, is the sole political actor. It makes sense that the vanguard would institutionalize the women’s movement in order to better control the sorts of policy it implements.

Both the FMC and AMNLAE immediately launched what have been understood as very successful literacy campaigns. Kampwirth (2004) has noted that, for Cuba, the rural-based literacy campaign was one of the most successful elements of the Revolution. Interestingly, one hundred thousand Cubans volunteered to assist in the program which contributed to a national 97 percent literacy rate (Luciak, 2007; Kampwirth, 2004). Similarly, AMNLAE's Literacy Crusade significantly increased Nicaragua's literacy rate from 50 percent to 87 percent within a few years of FSLN control (Howe, 2007; Kampwirth, 2004). Further, and perhaps learning from Cuba's experience some twenty years before its own, AMNLAE specifically focused on employing female teachers during the Crusade, which succeeded in giving women positions in the Cuban division of labor outside of the home (Kampwirth, 2004).

The FMC also improved women's access to health care and offered sex education programs, specifically focused on women in rural areas, a demographic which had largely been ignored under the previous government. Cuban health care was made universal and access extended to the rural poor, clearly benefitting women (Kampwirth, 2004). In terms of sex education, as previously noted, "the FMC viewed sex education not as the dissemination of technical information, but rather as part of the development of revolutionary consciousness, interwoven with the struggle for women's equal rights" (Leiner, 1994, 68).<sup>3</sup> In this sense, the FMC's attention to health care and sex education programs specifically benefitted rural women who had previously suffered from a lack of access to such services under the Batista dictatorship. AMNLAE, on the other hand, addressed slightly different women's issues based on the successful strategy of its Literacy Crusade. For example, women were involved in preventative-

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<sup>3</sup> Leiner (1994) further suggests that sex education as a method of transforming "revolutionary consciousness" arose from Castro's disgust at sex practices under the Batista dictatorship, whereby Cuba was perceived to have become the brothel of the West.



medicine, hygiene, and nutrition brigades (Chinchilla, 1990; Howe, 2007). Through the lobbying efforts of AMNLAE, women also filled 30 percent of government positions (Babb, 2001).

AMNLAE and the FSLN, however, have been strongly criticized for their refusal to address male privilege as a root cause of gender equality, considering the issue to be too sensitive (Babb, 2001). As Babb (2001) concludes, AMNLAE (and he might have added the FMC) "...gave women greater access to the public sphere, yet stopped short of transforming gender relations in the family and society" (59).

While the Sandinista leadership adopted policy through a sort of bureaucratic centralism, Fidel Castro occasionally acted on behalf of gender concerns apart from the FMC (Luciak, 2007). In other words, while AMNLAE's policy generally resulted from the unilateral direction borne of discussion within the upper echelon's of the FSLN, Castro occasionally directed Cuban policy on his own, independent of the FMC. For example, in 1970 Cuba became the second country to ratify the UN's Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, "aimed at promoting respect of integrity, and the human, sexual and reproductive rights of women" (Horta, 2005; Luciak, 2007). Interestingly, for the reason that Castro recognized the importance of women's equality yet occasionally made policy decisions from *above*, he has been described as a "patriarchal feminist" (Kampwirth, 2004; Luciak, 2007).

Generally, it would seem that the FMC was the more politically successful organization of the two insofar as it was able to launch programs which directly benefitted women, especially women in rural, poor areas. It seems to me, however, that rather than necessarily a stronger devotion to women in Cuba than in Nicaragua, this difference can be largely attributed to a fundamentally different political experience and environment within the two countries. For

example, the FSLN was immediately faced with the brutal Contra War, funded by the United States, and therefore had to devote much of its attention and funding to defeating the insurrection. Cuba, however, while it certainly faced its fair share of regional opposition, also from the United States, it received both incredible funding and security from the Soviet Union and did not face an armed rebellion to the same capacity—the Soviet Union agreed to withdraw its missiles from Cuba, ending the Missile Crisis, for example, when the United States promised to never invade the island.

Despite their overall success in advancing women's political rights and situations, it is important to recognize that attention to women in both Cuba and Nicaragua came only as part of the broader class struggle. In other words, the benefits the FMC and AMNLAE were able to win for women were, in many ways, the result of the revolution's commitment to advancing the proletariat. Luciak (2007) argues this at some length:

The new (Cuban) government faced the same dilemma that confronted the Sandinista leadership of revolutionary Nicaragua, which took power two decades after its Cuban counterpart; namely, whether to give priority to the overall goals of the revolutionary project or to satisfy specific sectoral interests, in this case those of women. Similar to the Sandinistas, the male-dominated Cuban leadership defined what constituted 'the interest of the revolution' and proceeded to implement its policies toward women based on the premise that all group interests had to be subordinated to the revolution's survival. (16)

That is, both governments decided that, rather than appeal to many specific interests, they would instead pursue equality from a class-based perspective. Nevertheless, women certainly benefitted politically from the Marxist revolutions in both Cuba and Nicaragua, and were able to establish large, influential women's arms of the vanguard. Simply stated, both were effective in

institutionalizing the advancement of women through a political arm in the vanguard, however, this political wing was clearly given secondary treatment.

### **The Socio-Cultural Struggle**

A key component of the limited success of the FMC and AMNLAE, in addition to the limited commitment they received from their respective Parties, was the perseverance of the *machismo* norm. Defined as “a heady mixture of paternalism, aggression, systematic subordination of women, fetishism of women’s bodies, and idolisation of their reproductive and nurturing abilities, coupled with a rejection of homosexuality,” machismo’s existence as a cultural norm clearly undercut the Revolutions’ attention to gender equality (Sternberg, 2000, 91). In Cuba, for example, it defined women as secondary to men, and therefore inhibited the full realization of the FMC’s Family Code of 1975 which had sought a reconceptualization of the family division of labor. Insofar as the FMC also worked to promote women’s health care and education, machismo certainly played a role in undercutting the success of this goal (Leiner, 1994, 93-113; Kampwirth, 2004). Additionally, machismo has undoubtedly contributed to the acceptance of women’s involvement in Cuba’s sexualized tourism industry, and threatens to erode any sort of progressive social female identity created by the FMC (Cabezas, 2006; Geske & Clancy, 2000).

In Nicaragua, despite women’s participation during the guerrilla movement, Kampwirth’s (2002) interviewees clarify that in many ways life simply returned to “normal” after the FSLN insurgency took power. In this way, the norm of women as nurturers, caretakers, and generally secondary persons to men, continued to define Nicaraguan culture during the revolutionary

period. Once again, the FSLN's attention to gender equality as subordinate to social class equality weakened its effectiveness towards the social advancement of women (Kampwirth, 2008; Poncela, 1997; Howe, 2007). The prevalence of machista social norms in Nicaragua is further evidenced by the recent overturning of therapeutic abortion practices, criminalizing all types of abortion in the country (Kampwirth, 2008; Kane, 2008).

A second form of cultural opposition towards gender equality in Nicaragua is the antifeminist backlash experienced after the revolutionary period. As Kampwirth (2006) has suggested of Doña Violeta's presidency, "in the early 1990s, a number of day care centers were shut down, state-funded marriage counseling, workshops against domestic violence, and services for battered women were eliminated, and contraception counseling was no longer offered in public hospitals" (79). In this way, the neoliberal movement which took power following the FSLN, and reversed many of its women-friendly policies, is largely understood as a repressive blow against women's advancement in Nicaragua and served to entrench socio-cultural norms against women's equality (Kampwirth, 2006).

In this way, although the Cuban and Nicaraguan vanguards created women's political wings to address women's advancement, machismo norms manifest in different ways to create different experiences in both countries. Whereas in Cuba, the continued existence of this norm is represented by the rise in sex tourism, its existence in Nicaragua is evidenced by the country's antifeminist backlash which has contributed to the full criminalization of abortion in the years following Sandinismo (Sternberg, 2000; Leiner, 1994, 11-14; Howe, 2001; Poncela, 1997; Cabezas, 2006; Geske & Clancy, 2000; Kampwirth, 2002; Kampwirth, 2006; Kampwirth, 2008; Kane, 2008).

## **Conclusion**

Despite the similar commitments of the revolutions in Cuba and Nicaragua, and their adopting of a women's political arm within the vanguard as the primarily vehicle for addressing the advancement of women, the distinct experiences of both countries resulted in different realizations of this goal. From the outset, while Castro's 21st of July Movement did not include women within its guerrilla struggle, the FSLN specifically incorporated them into the ranks of their army. Interestingly, this can be attributed to the position of the Catholic Church—whereas the Cuban Church served to reinforce colonial era hierarchies, the Church in Nicaragua, informed by liberation theology, effectively inspired women to transcend their traditional roles, therefore encouraging them to fight side-by-side with men (Kampwirth, 2004).

Once in power, the FMC and AMNLAE, similarly, were adopted by their governments as a way to include women in the revolution. Both organizations launched extremely successful literacy campaigns, which resulted in over ninety percent literacy rates in both countries (Chinchilla, 1990; Kampwirth, 2004). Additionally, whereas the FMC focused on increasing women's access to health care and launched sex education programs, AMNLAE addressed issues such as women's representation in government positions and was reasonably successful in doing so. Socio-culturally, however, both countries have experienced setbacks which can be attributed to the persistence of machismo. The revolutionary progress towards women's equality has been threatened by sex tourism in Cuba, and by the antifeminist backlash in Nicaragua.

In these ways, while the state relied on women's political wings to affect change—in spite of the many successes of these organizations—the realization of women's equality was hampered by the commitment to class-based change and the perseverance of machismo.

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