

Nicaraguan Developments

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Women as Agents of Change

By Rose-Marie Avin
*UW-Eau Claire professor and study
tour participant*

What is the relationship between economic development and women's welfare, equality, and empowerment? Has economic development improved or worsened women's well-being? These questions have been debated in the development literature since the publication of the seminal book by Ester Boserup (*Woman's Role in Economic Development*, 1970) in which she argues that women in the Third World have been marginalized in the development process. These questions were revisited in a World Bank Development Report entitled *Engendering Development: Through Gender Equality in Rights, Resources, and Voice* (2001). The authors of the Report explore the connection between economic development, existing institutions, and gender equality. They also discuss in great detail the role of public policy in promoting gender equality in the world.

Using a variety of data and empirical studies, the Report identifies three basic areas of gender inequality: rights, resources, and voice. According to the authors of the Report, although the last half of the 20th century witnessed great improvements in the absolute status of women and gender equality in most developing countries, "gender inequalities in rights, resources, and voice persist in all developing countries". There is no region in the world where women have equal access to social, economic, and legal rights; where women have equal access to such productive resources as land, education, information, and financial resources; where women have equal ability to influence decisions in their



Part of the team of the Comité de Mujeres Rurales in León; Fabiola Reyes, Denise Conrado, Patricia Siles, and Xiomara Berrios. Photo by Katy Skarlatos

households, their communities and at the national level.

The Report argues for a three-part strategy by policymakers for promoting gender equality: 1) reform the legal and economic institutions in order to establish equal rights and economic opportunities for women and men; 2) stimulate economic development in order to promote equal access to resources and participation by women and men; and 3) use policies to address persistent inequalities in the distribution of society's resources and in the political arena.

I believe that this Report is significant for three reasons. First, the Report is very effective at analyzing the various dimensions of gender inequality in the Third World, and at identifying some of its root causes and the various costs that this inequality imposes on societies and the individuals in those societies. Sec-

ond, the Report correctly recognizes the two-way relationship between economic development and gender equality: While gender disparities hurt a country's prospects for economic growth and development, economic development can play a significant role in improving gender disparities. Third, the Report acknowledges that policies that do not take gender into account will have negative effects on the well-being of women, children, and men. This is important because in societies where social misery and injustice constitute the norm for the majority of the population, women and children are by far the poorest, the most deprived, and the most exploited. They constitute the majority of the unemployed, the underemployed, and the landless. However, the Report fails to recognize the important role of social movements and women's

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2004 has been a year of anniversaries for Nicaragua and for WCCN. In fact, as you might remember it is the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Nicaraguan Revolution and the twentieth anniversary of the founding of WCCN.

On July 19, 2004 the world remembered the 25th anniversary of the Nicaraguan Revolution, one of the most important political events of the twentieth century, not only in Nicaragua but in the Americas. Twenty five years ago Nicaragua entered into history because a popular uprising ended with the overthrowing of a several decade long Somoza dynasty dictatorship. Few political events have created such a level of hope and expectation for social and economic transformations in Nicaragua and beyond. For an entire decade, Nicaragua gained unprecedented levels of public scrutiny in the US, not only because the US Government was opposed to the Revolution, but because millions of people mobilized to oppose Reagan's policies in Nicaragua and other Central American countries. Even though Nicaragua had only three million inhabitants, the Reagan Administration portrayed the Sandinista Revolution as the biggest threat to the United States at that time. Reagan's war against Nicaragua cost more than fifty thousand lives and thousands of millions in economic damages. As you know, Reagan died a few months ago and the media portrayed him as a freedom icon, almost a saint; few mentioned his policies toward Central America. However, after learning about Reagan's death, Uruguayan poet Mario Benedetti wrote a poem entitled "Obituary with cheers", that perhaps reflects the feeling of many Nicaraguans and people everywhere who suffered from and actively opposed Reagan's policies. An excerpt follows:

"(...) hurray
everyone is invited
come on, it's time to celebrate
not to say
that death
wipes the slate clean
purifies everything
on any given day
death
erases nothing
we've still got scars (...)"

* * *

During our annual meeting last April, WCCN celebrated its twentieth anniversary surrounded by board members, a group of supporters and current and former staff. WCCN prepared a slide show with the history of our work in Nicaragua during the first twenty years. The show was well received by those who attended the event. In fact, several members from outside Wisconsin asked us if the show could become part of a national tour. As a result we are now working to put the show in an electronic format that could be played on a DVD player or downloaded from our website. As part of our celebration, WCCN designed a t-shirt that was produced by the women's cooperative "Nueva Vida" in Nicaragua.

In this issue of Nicaraguan Developments you will find a few articles written by participants in our June study tour to Nicaragua. Professor Rose-Marie Avin is a long time supporter of WCCN and the individual who has participated in the most study tours with WCCN. She wrote about the importance of taking women into account as agents of change in any development policy. Jessica Athens, a current intern with WCCN, wrote about her personal impressions and analysis of the trip. We also included articles written by two Nicaraguans now living in Wisconsin. Claudio Selva, wrote about Sergeant Camilo Mejia, a Nicaraguan born US soldier who has been the first conscientious objector of the war in Iraq. Winston Berrios wrote about the evolution of the agricultural sector and cooperatives in Nicaragua. Also in this issue our readers will find updates about some of our projects, activities and new publications.

In solidarity,

Carlos Arenas
WCCN Executive Director

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Nicaraguan Developments is published by the Wisconsin Coordinating Council on Nicaragua (WCCN). WCCN is a nationwide, non-profit, membership-supported organization working in partnership with Nicaraguans to promote social and economic justice through alternative models of development and activism, principally through two main areas: Sustainable Development and Social and Gender Justice.

WCCN was founded in 1984, building on the sister state relationship established between Wisconsin and Nicaragua in 1964.

This edition of Nicaraguan Developments was edited by Alisha Steele.

We welcome our readers' input. Please send comments or other correspondence to WCCN at: P.O. Box 1534 • Madison, WI 53701 • phone: 608-257-7230 • fax: 608-257-7904 • email: wccn@wccnica.org • website: www.wccnica.org

Nicaraguan Refuses to Return to War in Iraq

By **Claudio Selva**
WCCN Outreach Committee
Member

"Behind these bars, I sit as a free man because I listened to a higher power, the voice of my conscience".

Camilo Mejia



Camilo Mejia in Iraq.
photo from www.freecamilo.org

When a couple of official US Army recruiters approached Camilo Mejia in Miami in 1995, all he could think about was a possible future in college and the hope of leaving behind the Burger King where he had been working up until then. He was only 19. He never imagined that nine years later, he would be the first public conscientious objector to the US war in Iraq.

Mejia entered the army, but the recruiters' promises of being able to study anything he wanted in college never materialized, and after his initial enlistment, he ended up serving eight more years as a reservist, at the same time working as a private security guard—all so that he could study psychology. Mejia, son of singer-songwriter Carlos Mejia Godoy, well known as the musical voice of the Sandinista revolution, arrived in the US at age 18 with his mother.

In March 2003, as the US began to bomb Baghdad and other Iraqi cities, Mejia's unit was sent to Iraq, where he remained until October. While in Iraq, he became increasingly concerned by the many injustices he was witnessing, including the poor treatment of Iraqi prisoners. Mejia's general disagreement with what was happening in Iraq is underscored in a photo taken of him, in uniform, with a small sign declaring, "Give peace a chance".

Last October, Mejia was given a 2-week leave. Once home, he decided that he could no longer condone,

albeit implicitly, the suffering and humiliation that Iraq was undergoing at the hands of the US occupying forces. He thus became the first member of the military to speak out against the war in Iraq. When he did not rejoin his military unit two weeks later, he was declared AWOL.

Months later, with family and friends, he made the decision to turn himself into the military police in Boston, accompanied by another officer who testified to Mejia's responsibility and dedication. Mejia's official affidavit, turned over to military forces that day, denounced the torture carried out against Iraqi prisoners—months before the Abu Ghraib scandal became public.

"This is an immoral, unjust and illegal war," says Mejia. "The whole thing is based on lies. There are no weapons of mass destruction, and there was no link with terrorism. It's about oil, reconstruction contracts and controlling the Middle East."

After several months in military custody, Mejia was court-martialed and found guilty of desertion by a military court. During his trial, his lawyers were not allowed to present arguments relating to his request for conscientious objector status. In the end, he was given a dishonorable discharge and sentenced to one year in military prison. Hearing of the sentence, Maritza Castillo, Mejia's mother, cried, "Where is the justice? The American soldier who tortured Iraqi prisoners was sentenced to one year in prison and my son, who denounced these abuses and followed his conscience, was also sentenced to one year in prison. Is that fair? Is that just?" At this time, his sentence is under appeal. Amnesty International considers him a prisoner of conscience, as he has been imprisoned for his refusal to participate in a war.

Camilo Mejia's case is unique to date, and his principled stand needs our support. Please join us in offering Camilo the support and accompaniment he deserves.

What you can do:

Write letters to General William G. Webster Jr., to expedite the transcript of the trial. Webster also has the

power to reduce the sentence, and letters urging a reduction are needed. Please send copies of any letters you write to Louis Font (Mejia's lawyer). (see below for addresses)

Letters of support to Camilo himself, as well as his mother, are also appreciated.

Sign the international petition requesting Camilo's freedom at:

www.petitiononline.com/mejia/

Stay informed about the case by going to:

www.freecamilo.org

Addresses:

Major General William G. Webster, Jr.
Commanding General
Fort Stewart 42 Wayne Place
Ft. Stewart, GA 31314

Louis Font (Mejia's lawyer)
Font & Glazer
62 Harvard Street, Suite 100
Brookline, MA 02445

Pvt. Camilo Mejia
Building 1490
Randolph Rd.
Fort Sill, OK 73503

Maritza Castillo (Mejia's mother)
201 178 Drive # 323
Miami, FL 33160



Camilo Mejia was detained and tried for desertion. *photo from www.freecamilo.org*

The Agricultural Sector in Nicaragua

By **Winston Berríos**
Nicaraguan agronomist

Nicaraguan farmers have organized in different ways depending on the context and the structural changes in the agricultural sector.

The agricultural sector between 1940 and 1979:

The years between 1940 and 1960 brought great changes to systems of production in Nicaragua. Agriculture experiences accelerated expansion with the beginning of mass production of principle crops and agricultural exports such as coffee, cotton, bananas, and beef. During these years the government begins construction and improvements of ports, highways, airports and a series of research centers in almost every area of the country. Funds are created for credit, support, and technical assistance targeted at the agrarian sector and investing in different crops is promoted. Private national companies begin to produce pesticides and fertilizers and start to commercialize these agricultural chemicals. Although these were years of growth of the national economy, this created a gap between the social classes. Also, during this time, small farmers and indigenous communities in the western part of the country form movements demanding land that had been usurped by large landowners through tricks, sometimes with the complicity of the judicial system. Many of the small farmers become part of the workforce, either as farm workers of large producers or as colonists.

From 1960 – 1980 agriculture is expanded and deepened in the Central and Atlantic zones of the country. The government develops a plan for the relocation of displaced farmers, and those without land in the west and center of the country and relocates them to mountainous areas of Nueva Guinea and El Rama. At this time the national economy reaches the highest levels of growth in history, reflected in the gross national product and per capita earnings. Basic grains have record yields and the number of cattle reaches double the human population. In the agricultural sector dependence on external input deepens. New varieties of staple products are introduced; cotton, banana, and

coffee, among others. These initiatives are accompanied by technology, machines, and infrastructure such as the construction of importation centers and grain storage in nearly all of the towns in the country.

During these years the agricultural exports of the country are based on cotton, coffee, cattle, and bananas. The large agricultural producers counted on private technical services and trade organizations giving them access to research, technical information and training. At the same time, the medium and small farmers did not have access to these services since they were very unorganized and unattended.

The Sandinista Reforms

In 1979 the Sandinista revolution triumphs and during the decade that follows the agricultural sector is significantly transformed through the agrarian reform in terms of production and organization. The Ministry of Agriculture (MIDINRA) directed all production programs in a general way. There existed planning and follow up of all of the agricultural activities in a vertical way. At the level of services and credit, the banking sector is nationalized. Policies were initiated which allowed more access to credit; for example, the guarantees for agricultural loans were based on the harvest and not only on the land.

In terms of the agricultural systems, two sectors continued to be most prevalent: agricultural exportation and agri-food. The agricultural exportation system, which previously had been in the hands of the large landowners passed on to the government, converted into what was called the Area of Property of the People (APP). This is the principle economic sector during the Sandinista government.

The agri-food sector passed into the hands of agricultural cooperatives. In this sector two principle kinds of cooperatives are formed, the Sandinista Agricultural Cooperatives (CAS), and the Credit and Services Cooperatives (CCS). The organized producers of the CAS produce and distribute the profits collectively. They are built on the foundation of voluntary associations of medium and small farmers

who unite their means of production, workforce and or means of production handed over by the government. The CCS were formed by voluntary association of medium and small farmers in order to generate, manage, receive and utilize the different services available such as technical assistance, material and financial resources, and the supply of inputs and basic goods in an organized and efficient ways. This type of cooperative also works on the commercialization and mechanization. The CCS maintain the property, individual possession and use of their land and other means of production.

The Area Property of the People played a very important role in the economy of the country during the 1980's. The Sandinista government invested a lot of effort in the APP, investing capital in agricultural machinery, irrigation equipment, technology, administrative equipment and training. This technical assistance was modeled after private technical assistance. The technical teams were very efficient in terms of creating plans for production and following up on those plans. This permitted the development of specialized models of production by crop. The managerial mechanisms were expanded in order to efficiently run the productive processes with strategic objectives. The APP were the economic foundation of the Sandinista government; also, this was meant to have a modernizing effect on other cooperative sectors. We can say that the formation of these cooperatives was the first in a series of systematic organizational processes that our farmers began to promote, many of which are still successful today. The same can not be said of the APP.

The transformation of the countryside after 1990

In 1990 the Sandinista government lost the elections and the economy entered into a profound process of structural changes. In the beginning of the 90's the country's economy is completely ruined. Many farms are not producing and have been abandoned for many reasons. The international prices of principle crops are at an absolute low. In the west there is a total catastrophe due to



Quilalí, January 2003. Photo by Carrie Hirsch

the fall of cotton prices. The cattle production nearly disappears. The state bank is privatized and new banks emerge with private capital but the small farmers can no longer access credit.

The actors in the organizational and productive processes in the countryside during the nineties can be divided in three categories: the Areas Property of the People (APP), the demobilized Sandinista army and the Resistance (the old Contra), and a new social class with economic power and interest in investing in agriculture. 25% of the total area of the companies of the Area Property of the People was transformed into the Area Property of the Workers (APT), and the rest were privatized. With the APT for the first time, agricultural workers became agricultural producers. However this experience did not work out and three or four years later, many units disintegrated or became cooperatives, of which the majority later disintegrated as well. Another group is the demobilized Sandinista soldiers and those of the Nicaragua Resistance who reintegrated themselves into civil society, trading in their weapons for land. Many of them had never been farmers. Some lands were given to an individual, but the majority formed cooperatives. Many dissolved and others exist to this day. The third group is the wealthy class, who created agricultural companies by buying up land for cheap, due to the economic and

legal instability in the agricultural sector at this time.

It can be said that in the nineties the cooperatives (the CCS and CAS) did not suffer profound structural changes. However, the CAS experience changes in the work organization and leave behind the collective model, in such a way that the difference with the CCS practically disappears. Some of these cooperatives turn over their land to demobilized soldiers or to their old owners in exchange for legalization, but the majority of these are successful and very few disintegrate.

Within this process there emerges a great number of women demanding the titling of land in the name of the couple and not only in the name of the man, which is what had been occurring in the eighties.

The current productive models in the countryside:

Since the mid-nineties there exist in Nicaragua two principle productive models in the agricultural sector. One is promoted mostly by the NGOs, and targeted at medium and small farmers. This model consolidates a way of doing agriculture that is more participative and horizontal. Also, they specialize in areas such as commercialization, organic farming, financial services, self-management and women's empowerment. The second model is principally promoted by the government and is directed at the

large producers of export products. This effort has counted on external financial support and thus advanced the diversification of certain crops and the reactivation of some cotton producing areas with new crops such as soy, peanut, sesame, and shrimp.

Current challenges

Nicaragua is facing three important challenges to overcome in order to achieve the success of the agricultural sector of medium and small farmers.

1. Finalize the process of legalization of land titles. This will create stability and allow for the beginning of a new process of capitalization of the resources of agricultural production. Many farmers do not capitalize on the production resources because of the legal insecurity of the land.

2. Guarantee widespread access to credit. This should be accompanied by politics promoting new crops and a reduction of the high cost of financial services. The access to credit should be thought of as a capitalization means to increase the liquidity of farmers and simultaneously increase production.

3. Create a national program of development. This is possibly the most difficult and important challenge. This program needs to be created from the ground up and in such a way that permits the participation of all of the previously mentioned actors. If not, we will continue developing important initiatives but without having a real impact on the national economy. It will be important that this process involve donors, government allies, target groups of farmers, NGOs, the private sector, and the universities. Within this framework the government should become a facilitator in the productive processes of all the development programs. It has to begin by approaching the different organizations, not only the private sector of medium and large producers. It must begin to recognize the different sectors as allies and not enemies. It must orient strategies towards the small farmers who produce 80% of the national production.

Translated by Alisha Steele

Modeling Economic Security for Women

By Jessica Athens
WCCN intern and study tour participant

Flying into Managua on my first trip to Nicaragua, I watched the hilly landscape dotted with ramshackle tin roofs pass underneath and noted the incongruous silhouette of the Hotel Intercontinental perched on the horizon.

To me, this view from the plane's window aptly represents the Nicaraguan socioeconomic divide. The majority of Nicaraguans, nearly 50 percent, live below the poverty line. Nicaragua's richest 10 percent, conversely, holds nearly 49 percent of the country's wealth. Everywhere in Nicaragua, the juxtaposition of wealth against a vast background of poverty has become a dominant theme. Shining new cars speed past hawkers trying to sell newspapers and cashews in Managua intersections and while wealthy tourists shop at the glossy Metrocentro mall, students of the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Nicaragua make do with tired and worn buildings connected by dirt roads.

The study tour this June focused on a specific form of poverty and inequality in Nicaragua: the lack of land tenure among women. As in other countries, poverty and inequality have a gender aspect in Nicaragua—the poor are more likely to be women. The importance of land tenure for women is best outlined by economist Bina Agarwal (1992). As Agarwal argues, women's inability to access productive assets such as land leaves them with a weak "fall-back" position. Since women are dependent on their partners for economic security, they are often vulnerable to both poverty and abuse. In the Nicaraguan context, because land has typically been deeded to male heads of household, Agarwal's argument rings true.

During the study tour, we heard the testimonies of many women who were struggling to take care of themselves and their families. Because they had no land, and were not the main agricultural workers, women were not recognized as key contributors to their family's economic security.

Because of their dependence on their partner's assets, they were often unable to escape physical, sexual, and emotional violence. When they did, they were looked down upon as man-haters trying to destroy their families.

Thankfully, for each of these stories of struggle, we heard nearly as many successes. The Gender Unit of Nicaragua's Rural Land Titling Office, for example, had begun promoting joint titling of land between men and their wives or partners; both men and women needed to attend a workshop on gender biases before titles were granted. Through this process, noted Gender Unit director Patricia Hernandez, both male and female participants gained a better understanding of women's economic role. Other organizations, such as the Comité de Mujeres Rurales (Committee of Rural Women) and the related organization of Xochitl Acalt were working to undo gender stereotypes and help women gain social and economic strength. In addition to projects on women's health care, gender training, and the "Popular Defenders" program that provides advocacy and accompaniment to abused women, these organizations were also dedicated to assisting women obtain land and begin farming for self-sufficiency. Though not all participants that began the program were able to continue their farms, the organizations' loans and technical assistance helped several women improve their livelihoods.

During our stay in Malpaisillo, for example, we visited with a round, smooth-skinned woman named Rosita. Rosita lives on a hot, arid farm with her family and almost 30 goats, 7 cows, a few dogs lounging in the sun, and several baby chicks hunting for insects. The house is small, but sturdy, with a tin roof and a covered front porch. In the backyard, Rosa proudly showed off a power-operated well. She and her family no longer had to haul water or to boil it before drinking, she happily reported, because the well is treated with chlorine tablets.

Rosa sat with us on her front porch to tell us her story. Formerly a resident of León, Rosita began attend-



Rosita demonstrates her power operated well in Malpaisillo. Photo by Katy Skarlatos

ing workshops at Xochitl Acalt. Her interest in the organization's programs earned her coworkers and friends' scorn and, when she decided to begin farming in Malpaisillo, she was told that she was crazy. Nevertheless, she began her farm with a pair of goats loaned from Xochitl Acalt, and also started work at the organization's shop producing small silos for grain. Over time, Rosita's small stock of goats grew and she added cows to the farm, as well. Her family benefited from both the milk and meat added to their diet. Her daughter used to be very sickly, she told us, but is now grown fat and healthy thanks to goats' milk. When former coworkers' who had chided her about being "crazy" saw the improvement in the health of Rosita's family, their opinion quickly changed.

Unfortunately, Rosita had recently been struck with an illness that paralyzed the side of her face, making her unable to work for three months. Illness for the poor is often the factor that pushes them over the edge into extreme poverty. The combination of bills for doctors and medicine, as well as the inability to work, can make even short bouts of illness catastrophic. Due to her newfound security from her farming and her work at the Xochitl Acalt factory, however, Rosita and her family were able to maintain their livelihoods without



New Additions to WCCN's website

We would like to encourage you to check our website on a regular basis. WCCN has been putting more energy into this important communication tool and we are committed to keep an updated website. Some of the new additions are the following:

- A document on the work and contact information of 20 Nicaraguan women's organizations, written by Amanda Mehl, a Beloit College student, who interned with WCCN during the Fall of 2003.
- A Spanish version of the social impact study of microcredit in Nicaragua.
- An English version of the work with the Network of Women Against Violence on emotional recovery from trauma.
- An updated version of a bibliography on alternative credit in Nicaragua.
- A document entitled "Microfinance and Women's Economic Empowerment: Bridging the Gap, Redesigning the Future", written by Katy Skarlatos, a recent graduate from the La Follete School of Public Affairs at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Katy was an intern at WCCN during the 2003-04 academic year.
- WCCN's 2003 Annual report.
- Spring edition of WCCN's newsletter *Nicaraguan Developments*

sinking further into poverty. She was offered sick pay from the shop and had her livestock to sell for financial reserves. When congratulated on her recovery, she smiled. "Thank God ... and," gesturing to the Xochitl Acalt organizer who had accompanied us, "thank my women for not letting me die yet."

The testimony of Rosita, and the testimonies of other women with whom we met, serve as a reminder of what a friend calls "sprouts" of development. Though the situation, viewed broadly, looks grim—inflation, low employment and wages, lack of social services, environmental degradation, and poor health; many organizations such as the Committee of Rural Women and Xochitl Acalt are working to undo the violence of poverty, civil war, and natural disaster. Their work, however, provides a point of departure, a model on which Nicaraguans can base a society of greater equality. What seems most important now is to ensure that these organizations continue, and their reach extends to all of Nicaragua.



WCCN intern Jessica Athens wearing the 20th Anniversary t-shirt.
Photo by Alisha Steele

WCCN 20th Anniversary t-shirts

As part of WCCN's 20th anniversary we are offering t-shirts made in Nicaragua by "Nueva Vida", a women's sewing cooperative located in Ciudad Sandino. Through these purchases we can support organic cotton production and women's economic empowerment.

The cost of these t-shirts is \$15 dollars each (including shipping). The shirts are a cream colored organic cotton with a blue logo. We have sizes from small to extra-large.

If you are interested in having a t-shirt please order it soon, we only have few left!

WCCN thanks our Outreach Committee Member Claudio Selva for designing the 20th anniversary logo.



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agency in shaping policies that would empower poor, rural, and working class women in the South.

As the example of Nicaragua illustrates, women can make a significant contribution to their own empowerment if given a voice in shaping the policies that directly affect them. This implies that women need to become agents of change in their societies, an idea developed by Amartya Sen in his book *Development as Freedom* (2000). According to Sen, "any practical attempt at enhancing the well-being of women cannot but draw on the agency of women themselves in bringing about such a change". Women, acting as 'agents' instead of 'patients,' can play a significant role in eliminating the inequities that reduce women's well-being. Therefore policymakers need to focus not only on the well-being aspect but also on the agency aspect of economic development. Women need to become active agents of change in the transformation of their lives and societies, as rural women in Nicaragua seem to do. I will discuss two case studies of rural women in the department of Leon, Nicaragua: the 'Comite de Mujeres Rurales,' and the Xochilt-Acalt Women's Center, two organizations that I visited during the WCCN Study Tour to Nicaragua, June 12-20, 2004.

Women in eight communities including Chinandega have actively become agents of change and, in the process, are transforming their societies.

According to Fabiola Reyes and Patricia Siles of the 'Comite de Mujeres Rurales,' women in eight communities including Chinandega have actively become agents of change and, in the process, are transforming their societies and altering not only their lives but also the lives of their children and men. The 'Comite' was born out of the Peasant Workers' Association and was formed ten years ago when a large number of women became unemployed as a



Members of one Youth Group of the Xochilt Acalt Women's Center in Malpaisillo.
Photo by Katy Skarlatos

result of the collapse of cotton agriculture in the region. The lack of opportunities and the extreme poverty in rural areas mean that many women migrate especially to Costa Rica in order to survive. The major objective of the 'Comite' is to empower extremely poor rural women by giving them alternatives and some control over their lives. After receiving funds from Great Britain and OXFAM, members of the 'Comite' have focused their work on three broad areas: ideological empowerment, economic empowerment, and strengthening of institutions. In the area of ideological empowerment, the 'Comite' has three projects: prevention of violence against women, adult literacy, and internal reflection on women's rights and domestic work. The literacy program is particularly important because 45 percent of rural women were illiterate in 2001. As for the economic empowerment program, it facilitates women access to resources and technical training. The program consists of 200 women involved in two different economic activities: backyard gardening where they are provided seeds and technical assistance, and livestock raising where they are given two goats with the condition to return two goats to the 'Comite' at the end of one year. Both activities can eventually earn income for the women by generating a surplus that can be exchanged for other needed goods. How successful

has the 'Comite' been in facilitating the process of empowerment and gender equity?

Based on the testimonies of many women who have participated in the various programs, this 'gendered' development model has been a huge success. The women exude self-confidence and keep repeating "Mi vida ha cambiado (my life has changed)." They have realized for the first time that they have value as women and as economic participants in their communities. According to Paula Nidya Lopez Zapata, a single mother of five children, participating in the program has been a life-transforming experience. Before, she worked as a domestic worker in Leon, sold food at the bus station and was violent with her children; now, she works in her vegetable garden, stays home with her children, and is a more understanding and patient mother. Furthermore, her children are better nourished and have become healthier.

A more comprehensive version of the above development model has been developed by the Xochilt-Acalt Women's Center located in Malpaisillo, a municipality with a population of about 3200 people. The Center was formed in 1991 when 3 Municipal Council members started a sexual and reproductive health clinic for women in the urban area of the municipality, with a mobile clinic to

provide services in the rural areas. In 1993, after doing a 'participatory assessment' of the conditions of women members, it was discovered that women were suffering from a variety of problems: malnutrition, illiteracy, domestic violence and lack of resources to create community gardens. Today, the organization has 800 members in various programs with 325 women participating in 4 economic projects: cultivating fruit trees, community gardens, raising goats and cattle. Women also receive assistance in terms of access to training, technical assistance, in-kind credit, and infrastructure. In-kind credit is given to women in the form of goats and cows. To receive credit in the form of cows, at least seven acres of the family farm must be in the woman's name. Furthermore, the majority of young members are studying either at the secondary or college level. This program has already moved women from a subsistence-based economy to one where they generate a surplus and participate in the market. Other programs provided by the Center include: adult education, consciousness-raising, and prevention of domestic violence.

The women exude self confidence and keep repeating "Mi vida ha cambiado" (My life has changed).

Testimonies from many women who have participated in the various programs offered by the Center show a remarkable transformation in the lives of these women: from voiceless and invisible to self-confident and empowered. Lidia Mendoza, a mother of 5 children, was a victim of Hurricane Mitch that devastated Nicaragua in 1998. After receiving assistance from the Center to build a house, she joined the Center and participated in the goat program. Today, she is a goat rancher and is in the 4th year of secondary school. She described her experience as "the most important thing that happened in my life." She also added that it was like seeing the light after living in darkness all her life ("de la oscuridad a la luz").

What is so different about these 2 case studies? First, they are different from the standard top-down approach to economic development as practiced by international organizations because they have included the voices and ideas of the women themselves. Second, they are examples of how women can become active agents in the development process and how active participation by women can improve women's welfare, productive efficiency, equality

and empowerment. Third, they are also examples of a flexible approach to development that allows personal and economic empowerment. Women have also been able to improve the welfare of their families and members of the community through improved nutrition and better health. This economic development model has definitely improved the lives of rural women in the department of Leon, Nicaragua.



Members of a women's group supported by the Comité de Mujeres Rurales near León. Photo by Katy Skarlatos

Join the WCCN Pledge Program!

<p>Won't you consider becoming a WCCN Pledger?</p> <p>I'll send you my pledge of \$___ every month/quarter/six months (<i>please circle one</i>).</p> <p>Please automatically deduct my pledge from my credit card (<i>below</i>).</p> <p>Name _____</p> <p>Address _____</p> <p>Phone Number _____</p> <p>Visa/Master Card # _____</p> <p>Expiration Date _____ email _____</p> <p>WCCN • PO Box 1534 • Madison, WI 53701</p>	<p>By becoming a pledge, you help guarantee WCCN a fixed and dependable income. We will send you a monthly pledge letter and reminder.</p>
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Partnership with Coordinadora Civil on Property Issues

WCCN has started working in partnership with the Coordinadora Civil (Civil Coordinator), an umbrella organization of more than 350 Nicaraguan civil society organizations. Coordinadora Civil has been a very successful model of coalitions between social movements and NGOs in Nicaragua that have been working together since the emergency relief efforts after Hurricane Mitch.

WCCN and the Coordinadora Civil will do a follow up to a project funded by the World Bank on property issue in Nicaragua, called the Land Administration Project or PRODEP. Amber Zeddies is a graduate student in International Affairs at the La Follete School of Public Affairs at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, who is interning at WCCN this semester coordinating this project. Amber joined WCCN's June study tour and then stayed in Nicaragua for five additional weeks to work on this project. She has been collecting information and interviewing key informants in Nicaragua and the US regarding PRODEP.

The ultimate goal of this project is to collect information on PRODEP and write recommendations on how Nicaraguan civil society organizations could participate in PRODEP and influence its implementation and outcomes. This information will be used by the organizations that are part of the Coordinadora Civil as input for further involvement on this important topic.



WCCN intern Amber Zeddies at the office of the Coordinadora Civil in Managua.
Photo by Katy Skarlatos

The New Latin American Left



Nicaraguan political leader Alejandro Martinez-Cuenca (center) with some Nicaraguans during the conference on the New Latin American Left in Madison. *Photo by Ulpiana Tamayo.*

Venezuela, Ecuador, Brazil, Uruguay, Bolivia and Argentina. One of the novelties of this conference was that two people with different backgrounds from each country were invited. One was a political or social leader and the other was an independent academic. In the case of Nicaragua, former Sandinista Minister of Economic Planning, Alejandro Martinez-Cuenca was invited as a Nicaraguan political leader. Martinez-Cuenca is the president of the economic research center FIDEG. He is currently competing against Daniel Ortega for the presidential candidacy on behalf of the Sandinista Front. The political analyst invited was José Luis Rocha, a researcher at Nitlapán, a prestigious research center at the Central American University in Managua.

The Havens Center is launching a website with more information about the event, including papers, photos, and conclusions of the conference (www.havenscenter.org). At the same time, the Havens Center is currently editing a book, to be published by the end of this year in Spanish and by early next year in English, with the papers submitted to the conference.

Cooperative " Banco Campesino San Antonio"

The Latest NICA Fund Partner Agency

On April 1, 2004, for the first time, the NICA Fund disbursed a loan to the Cooperative "Banco Campesino San Antonio". As a result, the NICA Fund now has twelve partner agencies in Nicaragua (8 NGOs, 3 cooperatives, 1 financial institution). The Cooperative "Banco Campesino San Antonio" is located in Nueva Guinea, a remote town about 280 kilometers from Managua on the East side of Lake Nicaragua. The principle activities of the co-op are meat and dairy production.

In 1988, after Hurricane Joan provoked serious damage to the economic and social life in Nueva Guinea, the Council of Evangelical Churches of Nicaragua (CEPAD) organized local committees in different colonies of Nueva Guinea to establish a development-oriented strategy to help local families to rebuild their houses. CEPAD provided in-kind credit, particularly agricultural tools and seeds of corn and beans to those rural families.

This in-kind credit system continued operating until 1993 when the local committee of the colony of San Antonio proposed that CEPAD initi-



The Board of Directors of the Cooperative "Banco Campesino San Antonio".
photo by Carlos Arenas

ate a revolving fund. CEPAD approved an initial \$5,000 loan. These initial financial resources were part of the funds provided by WCCN to CEPAD through the Nicaraguan Community Development Loan Fund (NCDLF), WCCN's previous loan fund program.

Currently the Cooperative has 540 members, of which a little more than 40% were women, and its lending portfolio is approximately

\$750,000. Besides its main office in Nueva Guinea, the Cooperative is providing microfinance services in Muelle de los Bueyes and El Rama, in the Southern Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAS) of Nicaragua. The NICA Fund is very pleased of starting this relationship with the Cooperative "Banco Campesino San Antonio", who is serving a very remote area with great needs of credit.

Yes, I Want to Support the Wisconsin Coordinating Council on Nicaragua

- Enclosed is my tax-deductible donation of \$_____ to support the work of WCCN.
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Join WCCN on a study tour to Nicaragua January 8-16, 2005

Improving Lives through Alternative Economic Projects: Microcredit, Fair Trade, and Housing in Nicaragua

Join the Wisconsin Coordinating Council on Nicaragua (WCCN) for the opportunity to see first-hand, successful Nicaraguan organizations working to improve the lives of thousands of Nicaraguans through alternative economic projects. Witness the work of organizations and social movements such as those providing microcredit to small urban and rural producers, cooperatives involved in the fair trade coffee movement, and organizations working in poor urban neighborhoods. We will visit some of the most dynamic and successful alternative economic projects in Nicaragua which are helping little by little to improve the living conditions of many Nicaraguans.

The cost of the tour is based in a sliding scale, \$900-\$1,200 (plus airfare to/from Managua), depending on what you can afford. Individuals of all backgrounds are welcome to participate! The WCCN staff is happy to advise interested people about possible ways to fundraise to help cover their cost.

Please contact WCCN for more information: (608) 257-7230

wccn@wccnica.org www.wccnica.org

