

Actualizing Feminism

*Feminism's intersections with class and politics in Brazil, Chile, El Salvador and
Nicaragua*

An exploration through essays, journalism and poetry

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“The change in historical epoch can always be determined by the progress of women toward freedom.... The degree of emancipation of women is the natural measure of general emancipation.”

—Karl Marx, *The Holy Family*

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Portfolio Contents

Item 1 <i>Introduction to Actualizing Feminism</i>	3
Item 2 <i>Class Consciousness and Organizational Success</i> , an essay	4
Item 3 <i>Non-Feminist Aid to the Feminist Cause: Women's Political Mobilization During the Allende Years</i> , an essay	6
Item 4 <i>Autonomy or Co-optation? Organizing for Women's Rights</i> , an essay	10
Item 5 Two Pages from <i>Barricada</i> , the Official Sandinista Newspaper	14
Item 6 <i>How can we tell if we don't know?</i> A poem	16
Item 7 <i>References</i>	18

Item 1

Introduction to *Actualizing Feminism*

When I began my course of study on the politics of Latin American women, I knew feminism would become a preeminent topic of discussion. And surely it has. Feminism has become central to discussions with classmates who have raised ideas that I have further explored in my writing. It is my contention that one cannot thoroughly study the political advancement of women without seriously examining the impact of feminism on the political status of Latin American women and the impact of Latin American women on feminism.

I entered this course of study with a pre-determined conception of the meaning of feminism. When I started to apply that definition to my studies of Latin American women and their politics, however, I discovered that my previous idea did not always correspond perfectly to the subject of study. The definition of feminism that I propounded was one of strictly North American origin—a political ideology that challenges patriarchy. Indeed, feminism for Latin American women is not completely dissimilar. But feminism in Latin America includes more.

Scholars, without much exception, have traditionally catalogued most Latin American nations, including the ones I examine in this compilation of works, as propagating a dominant *machista* culture, in which the man has the final say, in which patriarchy is alive and well and is not seriously threatened.

Today's Latin America may be showing the early signs of such a culture ebbing, but the legacy of *machismo* remains vibrant. And it is the strength of such a legacy in the memories of Latin American women that form the basis for reevaluating North American definitions of feminism in a Latin American context.

The subsequent essays, journalism and poetry are devoted to the exploration of Latin America's expanded definition of feminism and its numerous manifestations.

In *Class Consciousness and Organizational Success*, I examine the divergent paths of North American feminist activists and right-wing women activists in Chile. These two populations may appear to have little in common in terms of political objectives and thus may seem unusual cases for comparison. But they are ripe for that purpose due to one key difference—their attention to class.

Non-Feminist Aid to the Feminist Cause: Women's Political Mobilization During the Allende Years takes on the topic of feminism during the presidency of Salvador Allende and evaluates the ultimate effect women's political mobilization of any kind has had on feminism in more recent times.

Autonomy or Co-optation? Organizing for Women's Rights focuses on feminist and other women activists in Nicaragua and is an attempt to answer the question of what serves as the most effective organizational means of promoting the cause of women's advancement.

The two pages of a mock issue of *Barricada*, the official newspaper of the Sandinista party, that I have attached both include articles that personalize the topics I examine in other writings. I explore the development of a feminist, a Sandinista and a journalist through the life of Sofía Montenegro.

It is my hope that the subsequent writings challenge some readers' assumptions and help others to realize feminism as it is applied in real political contexts in Latin American nations.

Item 2

Class Consciousness and Organizational Success

As Margaret Power makes clear in *Right-Wing Women in Chile*, Chilean women who became politically active in opposition to President Salvador Allende were not feminists. After all, as Power points out, women from Poder Femino (PF), as well as other women's groups such as Acción de Mujeres and the Mothers' Centers, did not seek to change gender roles and challenge male domination and sexism from their political activism. In fact, any complaints about men addressed their occasional aversion to acting in their proper, socially-defined roles. Women, after all, became politically active in order to protect their interests as mothers and homemakers, their natural societal roles (Power 179). Despite the grave differences between North American feminists and right-wing Chilean women, the two groups faced some similar challenges in terms of their organization, and right-wing women in Chile proved to be successful in addressing such key challenges.

A constant test for North American feminists has been the task of forming a multi-class movement. Since feminists first began to organize in the United States, naturally those who could afford to organize were the most likely takers. The Chilean women who formed the PF were of middle- and upper-class stature, and thus could afford to devote time to political activity while other women could not. Only a particular population of women could abandon their household duties for an extended period of time on a near daily basis; PF women often devoted 10 to 12 hours per day to organizing against the UP government. Upper class stature also granted access to private phones for organizing and private vehicles for fast and easy mobilization. Despite the advantages of an obviously upper-class membership, this class composition also served as a liability to the group. PF participants thus began denying their upper-class status so as to give themselves cross-class credibility (Power 173).

Beyond simply denying this reality, the PF soon realized that if the group stood to succeed, the movement needed to include women of the working class. North American feminists have often been criticized for what some perceive as their aloofness and insensitivity to working-class concerns because of feminist organizations' upper-class membership balance. The PF determined that it needed to avoid a similar fate. The group thus began to focus on a collection of working-class issues, taking up, for example, the cause of La Papelera workers fighting the UP government's nationalization of Chile's printing industry. As part of this effort, PF women reached out to female workers, stockholders and prominent wives associated with the company, forging a cross-class unity (Power 200). When copper miners working at nationalized copper mines decided to strike, PF women also rallied on behalf of the striking workers, fearing the loss of their husbands' income (Power 206). The PF's interest in such causes marked a time of transition during which the group became a more socio-economically diverse entity. The inclusion of working class women positioned the PF to challenge the UP government, which branded itself as a government for working people (Power 207).

The ensuing expansion of protest techniques allowed women to protest without needing the transportation to leave home; transportation and the option of leaving home were often luxuries reserved for wealthy women. Though the subsequent pot-and-pan protests took place mostly in upper-class neighborhoods, working-class women did participate, according to some accounts (Power 189). And women did not need

telephones to receive word that such protests would take place. Word would proliferate among women waiting in line for food and other goods (Power 190-191).

The tangible success of the PF and other organizational efforts of right-wing women in Chile depended on their ability to forge a national, cross-class movement. It appears, from the historical accounts I have read, as if Chile's right-wing women were more sensitive to class concerns than North American feminists in the 1970s. Considering Chile's economic state during this time period, PF women organized without regard to class concerns at their peril. Clearly, in terms of growing their political clout, right-wing women in Chile made the right decision when they saw the need for a multi-class alliance.

Item 3

Non-Feminist Aid to the Feminist Cause: Women's Political Mobilization During the Allende Years

Introduction

Regardless of the form in which it manifests itself, feminism is a movement of resistance and opposition. For bell hooks, feminism is simply “a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (hooks 1). Through such a definition, hooks dispels the notion that feminism is exclusively a movement taken up by females. Instead, any person, man or woman, can be a feminist. Though scholars of Latin American feminism may agree with hooks' definition, based on a history in which the female in Latin American society is first and foremost the mother and the wife, few such scholars have noted significant assistance to the feminist movement from men or even the potential for such assistance. For Julie Shayne, Latin American feminism is most accurately described as any type of resistance to patriarchy that goes beyond satisfying women's practical needs and enters the realm of advancing women's strategic needs (Shayne 4). Though some feminists may consider socialist revolution and feminism to be intricately connected, Shayne notes that Socialist Chilean President Salvador Allende, the male leader from 1970 to 1973, was no explicitly feminist friend to Chilean women (Shayne 9, 84).

In Chile, then, feminism is always an act of resistance against male-imposed, oppressive, patriarchal structures. For that reason, although women, by virtue of their patriarchal gender roles, are indeed expected to be nonpolitical and their political activity could be seen as redefining gender roles, not all political involvement by women can be considered feminist (Baldez 279). This stands true especially for political activity by right-wing women who appear intent on maintaining patriarchal structures that define their societal roles as mothers and wives. Margaret Power, in her analysis of the role of right-wing women in ending the presidency of Allende, defines feminism similarly to Shayne and other feminist scholars. According to Power, feminists explicitly define male domination as a problem and struggle to redefine gender relations in society (Power 253-254).

The literature on feminism and female political involvement in Chile and elsewhere in Latin America seems to hold a general threshold for what can safely be considered feminism and what cannot. I argue in this paper that the literature in question, in nearly perfect unity, disqualifies right-wing activity from being considered feminist. When considering left-wing political activity, the distinction becomes less clear. For some scholars and activists, including Shayne, engagement in any patriarchal structure, such as a political party, rules out the possibility of feminism. Applying even that more restrictive definition of feminism to Chilean history, I also argue, reveals that even those who are not feminist can aid the feminist cause.

Right-Wing Gender Bending

The distinct conclusion of much literature on Latin American feminism is that politically active women of the right wing cannot be considered feminists. This assertion is questionable to some given that the political involvement of women in challenging Allende's presidency from 1970 to 1973 and challenging leftist ascendancy even before

that point was by some measures unprecedented. In a culture that emphasized the importance of women as homemakers and mothers, women's wide-scale political involvement and incorporation could certainly appear as feminist to those who consider any act of gender bending to be a feminist manifestation.

However, feminism, according to Maxine Molyneux, is more than gender bending, though gender bending is an element. What sets feminism apart from other female political activity is its explicit challenge to the dominant patriarchy. Molyneux argues that feminists organize in favor of their strategic interests, challenging their traditional roles in society. Other politically active women, such as those from the right wing who challenged Allende's rule, organize in favor of practical interests, or basic needs (Shayne 3). Indeed, right wing women's struggle against Allende could be characterized in terms of practical interests. "We women are going to protest because there is no meat to make soup for our babies," read a poster advertising the 1971 March of Empty Pots and Pans. "[W]e are going to denounce the fact that our husbands are obligated to attend political meetings in order to keep their jobs" (Baldez 279). Accordingly, Power notes the right-wing women's objectives and concludes that they were not feminists. "Although these women engaged in radical political activity and defied strictures on proper female behavior to do so, they were not feminists," she writes. "They did not define male domination as a problem, and indeed, they fought to preserve gender relations" (Power 254).

As I have stated, some scholars and activists believe that feminism cannot be advanced through the structure of a political party. *Feministas*, feminist activists not associated with political parties, have traditionally argued that feminist causes can be advanced only outside of political party structures which are generally unresponsive to feminist interests. Thus, autonomous organization is needed in order for feminists to achieve genuine progress in redefining gender relations (Shayne 6, 9). According to this definition, then, another factor that disqualifies the organization of Chile's right-wing women against Allende from being feminist activity is their incorporation into the Conservative Party and other rightist parties, which, early on, made a priority of organizing women unlike their leftist counterparts (Power 45). Since much mobilization of women against Allende was intricately connected to rightist political party structures, this association disqualifies such political activity from being considered feminist.

Advancing the Feminist Cause

According to Theda Skocpol, as related through Shayne, if revolution had occurred in Chile under Allende's Popular Unity (UP) government, "Chilean society's basic class and ideological structures would have been transformed." Shayne indeed does describe aspects of the UP government as revolutionary although she stops short of calling the years under UP rule a revolution (Shayne 67). A critical part of such a revolution would have been the realization of a feminist redefinition of gender relations. And as Shayne shows, Allende's goal was not to revolutionize gender relations. Indeed, "Allende's program for and placement of women was very much rooted in a patriarchal division of labor" (Shayne 73). For that reason, I question whether Allende, even if allowed to complete his term, would have led Chile to a full revolution by Skocpol's judgment. However, even if a full revolution were not realized, that is not to say that Allende's government did nothing for the feminist cause.

Although I have noted that the UP's programs aimed at women did not present structural challenges to patriarchy and can thus not be considered feminist, Allende's government did propose its share of initiatives of special significance to women. The Allende government's creation of the Women's Secretariat brought increased attention to issues of special importance to women, including health care, daycare centers, public food programs and public laundry facilities (Shayne 78). In Molyneux's terms, such government initiatives addressed women's practical interests. And, as she suggests, struggles to address such practical interests through the Women's Secretariat could have potentially led to struggles of a strategic and feminist nature, constituting an instance of aid to the feminist cause from a non-feminist origin (Shayne 3).

According to many accounts, Allende's government motivated women to organize around political issues more than any government had previously. In addition to the Women's Secretariat, the Mothers' Centers previously commissioned by the Christian Democratic Party were in large part responsible for the increase in women's mobilization during the 1970-73 period (Shayne 77). According to Molyneux, the Mothers' Centers could have provided another contribution to the feminist cause. "When women spend time together outside of the home they tend to share stories of their personal experiences with sexism, including domestic violence, only to find that such events are hardly unique," Shayne writes of Molyneux's contention (Shayne 3). Thus, when women have the opportunity to share their stories of sexism with others, they are more likely to organize around such experiences and confront sexism through feminist struggle.

Though feminist mobilization may have occurred on a small scale in the Mothers' Centers, as Power points out, the political activity commonly associated with the Mothers' Centers was anti-Allende activity organized through the Christian Democratic Party (Power 171). However, even right-wing political activity by women could have the potential to aid the feminist cause in later years. Such political mobilization does meet at least one of Shayne's five factors necessary for the emergence of revolutionary feminism in that women were challenging prescribed gender roles in being politically active at all in 1970s Chile (Shayne 10). According to Jo Fisher, women's mobilization during the Allende years in Mothers' Centers and neighborhood organizations established the precedent for feminist resistance against military dictator Augusto Pinochet in the 1980s (Shayne 95).

If Allende's government was in support of such gender-bending through the Mothers' Centers, then it partially contributed to the emergence of a revolutionary feminism realized more fully in the 1980s in resistance to the Pinochet government. This demonstrates that even non-feminist entities were and can be of assistance to the feminist cause. Though much of women's political activity during Allende's presidency was right-wing activity, it played an important role in establishing a precedent for women's involvement in politics on the right and left in later years. In becoming politically involved, if women do not have to battle the perception that they should not be politically active, that is one less obstacle standing in the way of promoting a feminist agenda.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the literature regarding feminism in Latin America seems to all but disqualify right-wing activity from being considered feminist. In addition, I have questioned whether feminist activity can occur within the traditionally

patriarchal structure of a political party. I conclude that, though such activity may not be feminist in nature, right-wing political involvement by women, including that which falls within a party structure, can ultimately be of assistance to the feminist cause.

Salvador Allende's presidency cannot be considered feminist because his stated objectives did not include the re-envisioning of gender relations in Chilean society in order to challenge patriarchy. However, Allende did aid in promoting the political participation of women, although much of that participation may have most directly aided the right wing. It is important to consider that any political activity by women satisfied at least one factor of what Shayne considers revolutionary feminism because women's political activity was an act of gender bending in 1970s Chile. Today's Chile is different, as it is difficult to argue that women's political participation is any longer an act of gender bending. Today's female political activists, feminist or not, have one fewer obstacle to confront in their political participation. They can look back to the Allende years as a precedent for their involvement in politics. Such political involvement, it can be argued, forged the foundation of any feminist activity in today's Chile.

Introduction

In 1970s Brazil, a vibrant, autonomous women's movement gained enough political traction in its opposition to bureaucratic-authoritarian rule that the 1980s saw the creation of various State Councils on Women's Rights and the National Council on Women's Rights, both of which undertook legislative advocacy (Haas 252-253). Autonomous organization in favor of women's rights was responsible for such successes.

Soon after Brazil's transition to democratic rule, many women involved in the women's movement shifted their activism to political parties, such as the Workers' Party (PT). Incorporation into political parties has yielded a mixed fate for Brazilian women advocates. According to Liesl Haas, the PT specifically has turned out to be only marginally more successful than other parties in incorporating women and women's concerns into its agenda. The different factions that form the PT's coalition, including the Catholic Church and labor leaders, often stand in disagreement with female members' motives, ostensibly limiting the advantages of women's incorporation into the political party structure (Haas 259-260). In this paper, I intend to explore whether women activists in Nicaragua have experienced a similar fate. Have they, like their Brazilian counterparts, found that autonomous organization yields the most desirable results?

A Common Situation?

Like Brazil, the question of how best to advance women's rights is one that has often appeared in political discourse in Nicaragua. Nicaragua, according to some, boasts one of the most vibrant autonomous women's movements in the Western hemisphere today with roots that stretch back to feminist mobilization in the 1920s (González 41-42). Despite the evidence of a history that has yielded important gains for women in spurts, scholars still debate whether women's rights in Nicaragua have been most effectively advanced autonomously or through a party structure. The difficulty in answering such a question lies in the fact that, ultimately, a government tied to a party structure is needed in order to change its policies and codify any gains in women's rights. Therefore, a simple answer to the question is insufficient.

The answer is complex, and best addresses the question of how those in favor of women's rights can most successfully organize with the aim of effecting change through government structures. Should women integrate themselves into party structures and expect to bear the most fruit from organizing in that way? Or should proponents of women's rights organize autonomously from parties, in a multi-partisan or nonpartisan manner, and seek to influence the parties in power to legislate in their favor?

Based on a survey of Nicaragua's twentieth century history, it appears that proponents of women's rights have been unable to rely consistently on party structures to advance their agendas and make tangible progress with regard to advancing their rights. Their success in penetrating governmental structures has largely depended on the party in power, whose stances on women's rights can vary substantially. The variability of such parties' stances can also signify that any gains made in women's rights under one party may not be permanent. Though the organization of Nicaragua's autonomous women's movement has not been without its difficulties, nonpartisan and independent efforts to organize for women's rights have proven to be more successful in gaining publicity for

women's rights and thus elevating their importance in national campaigns. Though such efforts have not resulted in substantial gains in women's rights on the political level in recent years, I argue in this paper that autonomous organization in favor of women's rights has the potential to yield the greatest change due to the attention it can bring to the issues.

Women Under Somoza Rule

As I have stated, the roots of Nicaragua's feminist movement span from the 1920s to a movement that remained vibrant through the 1950s. During that time period, which included the beginning of over forty years of Somoza rule, feminists were an active political force to whom politicians paid attention. For Anastasio Somoza, upon his ascendance to power in 1936, addressing feminist concerns from the active movement was of primary concern. Feminists from a wide range of groups, including LIMDI y Cruzada, the Inter-American Committee on Women, and the Working Women's Cultural Center, advocated for females' right to vote and spoke on behalf of other feminist concerns. Feminist concerns were reflected in the Somozas' early rhetoric, such as a promise to endorse women's suffrage, as a result of such persistence from feminist advocates. Victoria González points to the prevalence of Somoza government officials' statements such as the following from Luis Manuel Debayle, Nicaragua's Acting Minister to the United States, as evidence that the Somoza government was concerned about feminist activity: "The country that has not given its women the opportunities afforded to its men advances very slowly towards the goal of the perfect state, and the hope of every nation lies in the recognition of this fact" (González 49). As evidenced by the attention given to the movement through its rhetoric, feminist concerns were given significant attention in the early Somoza years. Such attention is the result of the organization of a wide variety of women's organizations to publicize such issues.

These feminists acted independently from any political party and remained energetic until the movement became incorporated into the Somoza government, becoming a non-feminist, women's arm of the party—Ala Femenina. Ala Femenina was subsequently co-opted into the Somoza party structure and, as a result, did not devote significant energy to advocating for major gains in women's rights. By the end of the 1950s, the vibrant feminist group of earlier days had lost most of its momentum (González 53). Indeed, women did secure some important gains under the Somoza regime, such as increased opportunities in the political, economic and educational arenas. In addition, women were first able to vote under Somoza rule in 1957 (González 42). However, other gains in women's rights were few, as the party appealed to women and incorporated them into the party structure. For Somocista women, according to Victoria González, women's issues took second place to the well-being of the male-dominated party (González 43). This trend was seen in the fact that during the 1950s, feminist concerns all but disappeared from Somoza rhetoric, as a reflection of the Somozas' comfortable and secure position in power (González 53).

Women's issues did not receive much attention under Somoza until the treatment of women became a central moral issue for Sandinistas organizing in the 1970s against the Somoza dictatorship. AMPRONAC, the Sandinista-affiliated women's organization which advocated for women's rights, organized partially in response to what was widely perceived as the Somozas' degradation of women. The Sandinistas sought to introduce

the “New Man,” a morally superior man who would not engage in prostitution or any other acts of degradation toward women (González 46-47). Indeed, such action was occurring through a party structure during the Sandinista Revolution. However, women’s rights were not the primary focus of the Sandinista Revolution (Kampwirth 2002, 2). As one can see from observing these years in Nicaragua’s history, attention to feminist issues was minimal when autonomous organization in favor of women’s rights was similarly minimal. The next section of this paper will show that proponents of women’s rights, in the years following the end of Sandinista rule, largely turned away from any party-affiliated structures in their advocacy efforts.

Attention to Women’s Rights After Sandinista Rule

The 1980s, under the Sandinista regime, did not mark a period of mass mobilization in favor of women’s rights. Indeed, like Somocistas, Sandinista women were asked to devote their time to serving general party interests in place of interests specific to women. “Women were...expected to subordinate their personal interests to those of the revolution, though they were not in much danger of being thrown out of the party merely for advocating women’s rights,” writes Karen Kampwirth (Kampwirth 2004, 62). Such a statement aptly captures the attitude of the Sandinista regime toward advocacy for women’s rights. Though the FSLN, for many women, was the preferable political option, the party provided little space for advocacy of women’s interests despite the presence of AMRPNAC, the Sandinista-affiliated women’s group from the late 1970s that had evolved into AMNLAE by the end of the 1980s.

The 1990s marked a point of transition during which proponents of women’s rights began organizing autonomously of the Sandinista power structure as a result of the FSLN’s aversion to organization for women’s rights. “The trouble was that, in the minds of the autonomous feminists, the FLSN and AMLNAE had seen themselves as vanguards, organizations that due to their special insights were in unique positions within their movements,” Kampwirth writes (Kampwirth 2004, 64). Autonomous organizers organized in a variety of ways, including forming a National Feminist Committee and a National Women’s Coalition. The National Women’s Coalition was a cross-partisan, cross-class alliance. Due to the nature of the alliance, which included some radical and other moderate women’s groups, the coalition did not propose or achieve anything major, but it was successful in the sense that it helped to bring attention once again to women’s issues from the press and from politicians.

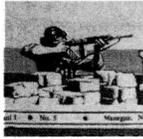
The National Women’s Coalition was a major advocate of successful legislation that approved the creation of a contingent of Women’s and Children’s Police Stations. The stations, like those begun in São Paulo, Brazil, “were staffed by women and...offered a holistic range of services including legal, psychological, and medical support” (Kampwirth 2004, 67). The Women’s and Children’s Police Stations initiative was a part of broader efforts by the Coalition to address problems of domestic violence, an issue on which all coalition members could agree. The issue appeared in the Coalition’s Minimum Agenda, which, three years later, attracted the support of the majority of political parties (Blandón 125). Through the Minimum Agenda, women’s interests were once again on the radar for Nicaragua’s political parties even if the endorsees of the Minimum Agenda were defeated in Nicaragua’s 1996 elections. Autonomous organization by women in favor of women’s interests had once again

succeeded in at least bringing attention to their issues, an area where party-affiliated activism had failed.

Conclusion

As I have shown, Nicaraguan women activists have found that the party structure is not a dependable setting for advancing their interests. As women activists in both Brazil and Nicaragua have discovered, the highest levels of success in achieving progress in women's rights come with independent organization of women activists who work autonomously. Nicaraguan feminists in the early twentieth century experienced significant success in securing promises from and forcing political leaders to pay heed to their concerns. When activists of the same strand became co-opted by the Somoza party structure, feminist activity nearly disappeared and government leaders paid significantly less attention to women's concerns. Not until the 1990s when women again began to organize autonomously on a significant scale did political parties again begin to pay public attention to women's concerns.

To answer the question posed at the beginning of this paper, then, one can conclude that in order to best promote their interests, proponents of women's rights must bring public attention to their issues and force the parties from the dominant political structure to publicly acknowledge their importance. The more parties that feel obligated to pay attention to women's issues, the more likely women are to experience desired legislative success.



BARRICADA



El periódico oficial
de la Frente
Sandinista de
Liberación
Nacional

The Official Newspaper of the Sandinista Front Since 1979

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For “free thinker,” party line not always observed

Experiences in party, at newspaper a mixed bag at best

As Dictator Anastasio Somoza García's National Guard waged massacres across Nicaragua in what came to be known as the 1978 insurrection, Sofía Montenegro, for the first time, experienced an event as a journalist would.

At the time, Montenegro, who had received training in journalism, served as a translator for foreign journalists as part of her work for Movimiento de Acción Popular (MAP), a Maoist revolutionary group. She also wrote for MAP's newspaper, *Nueva Opinión Cultural*.

The 1978 insurrection also influenced her political outlook.

“That’s when I said to myself, ‘The Sandinistas are right. There’s nothing left to do here but to blow this government sky high,’” she recalled.

Little did she expect that her politics would converge with her journalism just one year later.

In July 1979, she joined 12 of her fellow journalism students and

became a founding staff member of *Barricada*, the official newspaper of the FSLN. *Barricada*, with its distinctive logo depicting a guerrilla fighter at a barricade, grew from the tradition of *Novedades*, the paper of the fallen Somoza dictatorship.

“It was the only newspaper possible to make,” Montenegro said in 1988. “In conditions of war, it is vital to get information to the people that directs the organization of society.”

Until the mid-1990s, Montenegro served the front's newspaper in a variety of capacities, moving quickly through the ranks. She began as a secretary and in six months found herself editing the international page. She eventually assumed the powerful post of editor of the editorial pages, which she used to air her views at the height of conflict between the Sandinistas and the Contras. Montenegro, during her tenure, also edited *Gente*, a weekly supplement to *Barricada* aimed at young

readers and women.

As she settled into post-revolutionary life, Montenegro still encountered skepticism from many, including colleagues at *Barricada*, due to her last name. Personal troubles—the killing of her *guardia* brother and subsequent conflicts with her mother—complicated Montenegro's first several months at the newspaper. It was also during this time that her first husband decided to end their relationship.

“Quite simply, I fell apart,” Montenegro said. “I felt incredibly alone, and I don’t think that sense of isolation is something I’ve ever lost.”

“I’ve always felt set apart from other people, painfully conscious of this double burden of being a woman and a Montenegro,” she added.

Montenegro credits *Barricada* editor Carlos Fernando Chamorro, the son of Doña Violeta Chamorro, with providing her the necessary

Barricada, continued on next page



Seeking to Serve the Community. *Barricada* published an edition in Miskito as a service to Nicaragua's Miskito Indian population of the Atlantic coastal region. Sofía Montenegro, as a reporter, won a journalism award for her coverage of the Miskitos' attempt to secede from Nicaragua.

Born a feminist, Montenegro had early start

Before Sandinista success in 1979, Montenegro already on revolutionary path

It was 1978, and Sofía Montenegro sat by the bed of her dying father at a military hospital in Managua, her native city.

“I was already in the [Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional] then but I used to visit him,” Montenegro said. “Sometimes he would lose his mind, not exactly know where he was. But he knew that he was dying. He complained privately all the time that Somoza was wrong.”

Montenegro, the youngest of nine children, was the only one in her family to formally become a Sandinista. Though most of her siblings would have described themselves as Sandinista sympathizers during FSLN rule in the 1980s, the reputation of Montenegro's family would have caused most to think otherwise.

Her oldest brother gained infamy for his service to the Somoza regime as a lieutenant colonel in the National Guard. Montenegro, following the successful 1979 Sandinista revolution, brought her brother's corpse home to her mother after prison

Dictator Anastasio Somoza García. Sofía Montenegro's uncles and grandfather also served the regime as *guardias*, a term for National Guardsmen.

It was because of this multi-generational family history that her father's eventual rejection of Somoza played such a notable role in setting Sofía Montenegro on the path of a revolutionary.

That is not to say, however, that Montenegro had not yet begun to clear such a path for herself.

The FSLN, in 1978, was still a developing organization with a religiously anti-Somoza ideology. Montenegro thought she would find herself at home in such a setting.

“But I had a little problem,” she said. “It was that my name, my last name, was very well known. Everybody in the university knew who I was the daughter of and the sister of, and they didn’t trust me.”

So Montenegro set out to prove herself and joined another radical organization—Movimiento de Acción Popular—her involvement with which inspired an invitation from the FLSN to join its ranks. She admitted that, ironically, her family history aided her in some of her early activism.

“You know I had access to some places because I was the sister of and the daughter of...,” she said.

This was only one of many times that Montenegro, starting from a young age, had chosen to run against the grain of her family.

“I was always rebelling,” she said.

Perhaps, she said, her feminism took root in her family environment, in which she was constantly surrounded by her brothers. She described herself as a “tomboy,” and said she just could not accept her family's blatant gender divide. As she performed menial chores such as washing clothes, she watched her brothers join with their father in “men's

Life, continued on next page

Feminism flourishing post FSLN

Nicaraguan feminists show little need for party

Sofía Montenegro has never been ashamed to call herself a feminist. In fact, she was one of only 12 to openly declare themselves feminists following the Sandinistas' successful 1979 revolution.

In contrast, she pointed out that by the late 1990s, 95 percent of the groups that comprised Nicaragua's burgeoning women's movement were feminist. Even if the revolution failed in the long run, according to Montenegro, its one notable success has been the eventual proliferation of feminist thought, which has occurred especially since women's organizations autonomous of political parties have begun.

“If there is something that we women owe to the revolution,” Montenegro said, “it is the organi-

zational capacity we now have.”

Montenegro, during the days of Sandinista rule, was involved in AMNLAE, the FSLN-affiliated women's group. But since the Sandinistas fell and she moved on from *Barricada*, she has come to be a scholar and an advocate in Nicaraguan society.

Today she is the executive director of CINCO, el Centro de Investigaciones de la Comunicación, where she performs extensive academic research on media and communications. She is also an active feminist, having facilitated conferences sponsored by the National Coalition of Women. She has also helped to organize and promote the Coalition's Minimum Agenda, the beginnings of a national women's agenda that most major parties have adopted.

Sources: Irene Ortiz, María Teresa Blandón

“Everybody in the university knew who I was the daughter of and the sister of, and they didn't trust me.”

guards had gunned him down. He had attempted to escape while awaiting trial.

Montenegro's father, Alfonso Montenegro, also served the Somoza dynasty. Indeed, in the 1930s, he fought against nationalist guerrilla leader Augusto César Sandino, the namesake for the current day Sandinistas. Alfonso Montenegro went on to become a major in the U.S. Marines-supported National Guard under

From a young age, Montenegro on feminist track

Life, continued from page 1

talk."

"So I'd ask my mother, 'why do I have to do all this when my brothers don't?'" Montenegro recounted. "[S]he'd invariably answer with the phrase 'Because you're a woman.'

"It's something that's stayed with me, all my life," she added. "Little by little I understood that having been born female meant having to eat shit, in industrial quantities."

Her upbringing into her teenage years had been strictly Catholic, including her education. But in 1969, as violence in Nicaragua against Somoza rule escalated, Montenegro's parents suggested that she change course. They sent her to West Palm Beach, Fla., to live with her sister and to complete her high school education. Montenegro was then 15.

"The idea was for me to finish high school and, if possible, go on to college—and, if possible, get married and never come back," she said.

Although in 1988 she told an audience in Toronto that her time in the United States proved to be "the best thing that ever happened

to me," her experience was a mixed bag.

Montenegro's most significant gripes concerned her interactions with Americans. Her criticisms of the people she met are similar to the criticisms she frequently lodged against U.S. foreign policy toward her home country during the 1980s.

"[Y]ou couldn't talk to them," she said of her American classmates. "They didn't know history or geography. They didn't even know where Nicaragua was."

Montenegro also lamented the intensity of racism she observed in the United States as Florida's schools began to integrate.

More positively, however, Montenegro's time in the United States did prove to be formative years in shaping her feminist world view. She found herself in the United States at a critical time. The Civil Rights Movement was in full swing, protests against U.S. engagement in Vietnam were intensifying and the U.S. feminist movement began to gain steam.

While in the United States, Montenegro encountered her first feminist literature as she was learning English. Her feminist reading led her to come into contact with writings by Marx and Engels.

"That's why, when people ask me how I became a feminist, I

always say, 'The opposite of most everyone else,'" she said. "It was because I was a feminist that I became a Sandinista."

Despite being introduced to such ideas during her time in the United States, Montenegro began telling her family that she wanted to return home—against their wishes. Eventually, her parents relented and Montenegro returned to Nicaragua after two years in West Palm Beach. Upon her return, she attended night classes for two additional years in order to earn a valid Nicaraguan high school degree. Her U.S. high school diploma was not recognized.

Following her return, on the top of Montenegro's mind was something else that set her apart from her family's gendered expectations.

"I was obsessed with the idea of getting a job," Montenegro said.

When she eventually convinced her parents to let her work, she was able to fund her two years of high school night classes.

But high school was not enough for this free thinker. Though she once again was resisting her parents' desired path for her, Montenegro took and passed the college entrance exams for architecture school. Her brother failed the same tests.



Sofia Montenegro in a 1994 interview.

Still, Montenegro's parents and elder brothers insisted that she could not attend college. On the other hand, the same brother who failed the entrance exams, they maintained, would have to find a way.

"My father said he knew that I was right, that I'd been the one to pass the exam," Montenegro said. "'But you're a girl,' he said. 'You'll find some fool to take care of you. Your brother will have to support a family.'"

Still seeking an undoubtedly independent path, Montenegro enrolled in art school, where she

met students and professors engaging in political struggle. And it is here that Montenegro first caught word of the FSLN.

"I knew I'd been fucked over because I was a woman. And I could see that rebelling at home had gotten me nowhere," she recounted. "The whole system was at fault. I was eager to destroy the system, beginning with my own family."

Sources: Rolling Stone, Toronto Star, Irene Ortiz, Margaret Randall

Party leadership stood in paper's way

Barricada, continued from page 1

support during this period in her life.

Carlos Fernando, Montenegro pointed out, found divisions in his family similar to those roiling the Montenegro family. The Chamorro family controlled the country's three major newspapers.

Chamorro's brother Pedro Joaquín edited their late father's *La Prensa*, the anti-Sandinista Conservative newspaper. A relative, Xavier Chamorro, edited *El Nuevo Diario*, an independent pro-FSLN newspaper. Carlos Fernando edited *Barricada*, which boasted the largest circulation.

"[W]e both came to the revolution with that family burden," Montenegro said of her and Carlos Fernando Chamorro, "no working-class credentials, nothing more than our own personal conviction that you do what you have to do, you do what's right, no matter who gets in your way—even if it's you yourself who ends up getting in your way."

As Montenegro dealt with her emotional troubles, she stopped work at *Barricada* in service of the party. In 1984, 47 peasants from the small, rural, mountain town Pantasma had been killed by a 500-strong contingent of Contras that entered the town, defended only by twenty armed civilians. Montenegro and the other soldiers were charged with the responsibility of speaking with the 20,000 peasants in the area.

"We would collect their opinions, their problems. What were their needs for health and for food; what was the need for building roads in order to sell their products?" Montenegro explained.

In addition, the soldiers undertook a chal-

lenging assignment during their time in the mountains—relating to a population of uneducated peasants so they could understand the political problems and the need to defend themselves.

"You have to learn the language. You have to go the peasant's world, not vice versa. You have to live like them," Montenegro said of this task. "Then you can talk in their terms."

To Montenegro, it seemed as if her world continued to implode. She returned to Managua from her Pantasma assignment following a mental breakdown. There, she found that the party leadership had decided to suspend her membership. In the same year, she attempted to commit suicide.

"I resisted [the party's] dogmatic, orthodox, parochial vision of things," she said. "They said I'd been stuck up, arrogant, that I asked too many questions."

Despite her suspended party membership, Montenegro soon began working for Carlos Fernando Chamorro again, charged with managing public relations outside of Nicaragua. Chamorro was managing the government's Department of Analysis and Propaganda (DAP).

After a limited time in that post characterized by some notable skirmishes with colleagues, Montenegro was without a job.

"For a while, I was abandoned once again, without anything to do," she said.

Despite ongoing conflicts with party leadership, Montenegro soon returned to *Barricada*, obligatorily starting up from the bottom ranks because of her tense relationship with the party.

"I was being 'punished' at the same time...I was supposed to do all the shit work that none of the other journalists wanted; and of course, I was forbidden to hold a position of any

importance," Montenegro said.

The revolutionary feminist still made the best of her situation, adding to her resume a Cuban journalism award for a series on Nicaragua's Miskito Indians, a story that other journalists had initially refused.

The party leadership still, after some time, forced Montenegro and other *Barricada* staff to leave the paper for questioning in print what they considered to be Daniel Ortega's abuses of power.

"This time I said I wasn't going back," Montenegro recounted.

But then Editor Chamorro made her the offer of a lifetime. Montenegro soon began overseeing the newspaper's editorial page, which she did until 1989.

"The [FSLN] directorate had its own candidate, of course, but Carlos negotiated his preference, promising to 'control' me as well as limiting me to a kind of trial run, to 'see what I could do,'" she said.

To Montenegro, her mission was clear.

"[W]e were all more-or-less clear that the FSLN needed a profound process of democratization, and that we had an obligation to in the pages of its paper to open up a discussion capable of facilitating such a process," she said.

Her tenure on the editorial pages also saw the advent of *Gente*, which Montenegro introduced in an attempt at performing the party's ideological work.

"There was no discussion at all about that which is considered 'private,'" she explained.

When the Sandinistas lost the 1990 elections to the UNO coalition, *Barricada* entered a pivotal time. According to Montenegro, the editions published during that period were some of the most difficult the *Barricada* staff produced, as their

revolution seemed to have met defeat.

Despite producing them with "tears in our eyes," the staffers knew they had to respond to the situation.

"[I]t was important that we say something that made sense, that we get something out there that would help people understand what had happened," Montenegro said.

Almost immediately after the election, Editor Chamorro sought significant change at *Barricada*, including a weaker association with the FSLN. In Daniel Ortega's absence, the FSLN directorate granted official autonomy to the newspaper. *Barricada*'s staff launched a refined paper in 1991. The guerilla-at-barricades logo was removed.

"I think the press has some kind of social responsibility," Chamorro said of the decision to change. "Twenty years ago, I thought the social responsibility could be attained with a party framework. Now I believe the only way you can represent that responsibility is in a more complex way."

Ortega, however, disagreed and forced Chamorro from his post in October 1994. Many staffers protested, strongly criticizing party leadership in the paper's own pages. Most eventually resigned or were forced out. The paper folded in February 1998.

In a sign of how much she had turned on her former party, Montenegro had strong words of criticism for the leader.

"I call him the Great Destroyer," Montenegro said of Ortega. "The destroyer of so many hopes and dreams."

Sources: Rolling Stone, Toronto Star, Francisco Goldman, Adam Jones, Margaret Randall, Jiri Valenta and Esperanza Durán

Item 6

How can we tell if we don't know?

“The degree
of emancipation
of women
is the natural measure
of general emancipation.”

If Karl Marx is right
how can we know
if we are truly free?

If Karl Marx is right
how can we know
who is truly free
if history neglects
half the population?

Is Chile emancipated?
Is Nicaragua emancipated?
Is El Salvador emancipated?

It would seem as if
history couldn't ignore
the March of Empty Pots and Pans
1 December 1971

“Allende, listen!
We women are many,”
they chanted
and some listened
and they were thanked.

It would seem as if
history couldn't ignore
MEMCH '83 and Mujeres por la Vida.
They spoke out
and some listened
and Augusto Pinochet accepted defeat.

It would seem as if
history couldn't ignore
30 percent of guerrilla forces
fighting for the Sandinistas.

And AMPRONAC and AMNLAE?
A National Coalition of Women?
A Minimum Agenda?
The most active women's movement
in Central America today?

It would seem as if
neither history nor the present could ignore
those heading 31 percent
of all households in El Salvador.
Or 80 percent of maquiladora workers.

And leaders of the FMLN?
Supporters of the FMLN?
Union Organizers?
Those perpetually caught up
in the idea of revolution?

But for some reason
history leaves them behind.

And for some reason
the present still leaves them behind.

"The degree
of emancipation
of women
is the natural measure
of general emancipation."

If Karl Marx is right
how can we tell
from what is obscured?

If Karl Marx is right
why do we let this happen?
Why do we let
the IMF, the WTO, the NED
tell us who is free and who is not?

It's half the population
without whom
life as we know it
history as we know it
the present as we know it
would be inexplicably different.

Item 7

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