

NICARAGUAN

women embody spirit of INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

BY ERIN STEUTER

THE SPIRIT OF EMANCIPATION, EQUALITY, AND SISTERHOOD that is the focus of International Women's Day may never be so embodied as it is by the women's movement in Nicaragua.

In a country of 2.5 million people, the women's movement has 50,000 members.

At the close of last fall's elections the percentage of women in the Nicaraguan government was higher than anywhere in the world.

With a pervasive presence in the military and defense, women make up 80 per cent of the revolutionary vigilante groups which patrol neighbourhoods throughout Nicaragua.

Sexist advertising is against the law, and equality in the workplace is a right.

In the context of Latin America, with its macho cultural tradition, the achievements of Nicaraguan women are cause for surprise and admiration.

"Women in the western feminist movement have traditionally felt our achievements were superior because women in Nicaragua were up against things like machismo," says Claudette Legault, the regional co-ordinator for OXFAM-Canada.

"However, since the revolution, women in Nicaragua have taken a quantum leap. They have now not only equalled and matched our feminist movement, but they have surpassed us," says Legault.

"Now we have something to learn from them."

Raped and tortured by the national guard, forced into menial labour and prostitution by the depressed economic situation, and treated even in the law as the chattel of men, the situation for women in pre-revolutionary Nicaragua was desperate.

"Women saw that they could only achieve equality with men when the dictatorship was defeated," says Legault.

"Thus the revolution was a woman's struggle as well as a political one—the feminist movement is not separate from the revolutionary movement," she says.

It was in 1979 that the revolutionary Sandinista Front (FSLN) overthrew the repressive Somoza regime that had ruled Nicaragua for over 40 years. Women participated in the revolution in numbers unprecedented in Nicaragua and in other countries.

Their involvement ranged from passing FSLN communiques inside tortillas and hiding weapons in laundry baskets, to tactical military leadership.

"Without the participation of women," says Legault, "there couldn't have been a revolution. Women constituted half of the fighting force and over half of the support forces.

And indeed their participation was well rewarded.

With the triumph of the Sandinistas, and even before the last fighters had laid down their guns, the first changes in the legal status of Nicaraguan women had already taken place.

The day after the revolution a decree was passed which prohibited the use of women as sexual objects, stating, "the utilization of women as sexual or commercial objects is prohibited, thus eliminating once and for all that infamous commercial

propaganda which always associates women with the consumption of alcoholic beverages."

Equal pay for equal work was legislated, prostitution was prohibited, and the women's organization (AMNLAE) was given a representative on the Council of State.

The Association of Nicaraguan Women—Luisa Amanda Espinoza (AMNLAE) is named in honour of the first woman member of the FSLN to die fighting. Created in 1977 as AMPRONAC (Association of Nicaraguan Women Confronting the Nation's Problems), it successfully mobilized women both around issues of particular concern to women and the wider struggle against the dictatorship.

Since the revolution its efforts have been focused on integrating women into the defense of the revolution, eliminating institutionalized inequality, raising political and social consciousness, and creating a presence for women in non-traditional sectors such as workplaces and unions.

It would appear that they have had great success.

Where previously in rural areas just the man was paid for his family's labour, now women and children over 14 must be paid individually.

Where prostitution and pimping were prevalent, now rehabilitation centres have been created to teach alternative job skills.

"There is recognition that the roots of prostitution are economic and therefore the solution must include economic alternatives," reads one AMNLAE statement.

But the most significant progress has been in the introduction in 1982 of the Nurturing Laws.

The Law of Nurturing regulates the relationship between parents, children and spouses. Under Somoza the father of a family was all powerful. In many working-class families the father did not live at home. In fact, a man would often have many children by many different women, and consequently would have several families with whom he never lived. Thus there were many mother-led families, where the father did not assume any responsibility—financial or otherwise.

The traditional working-class family is

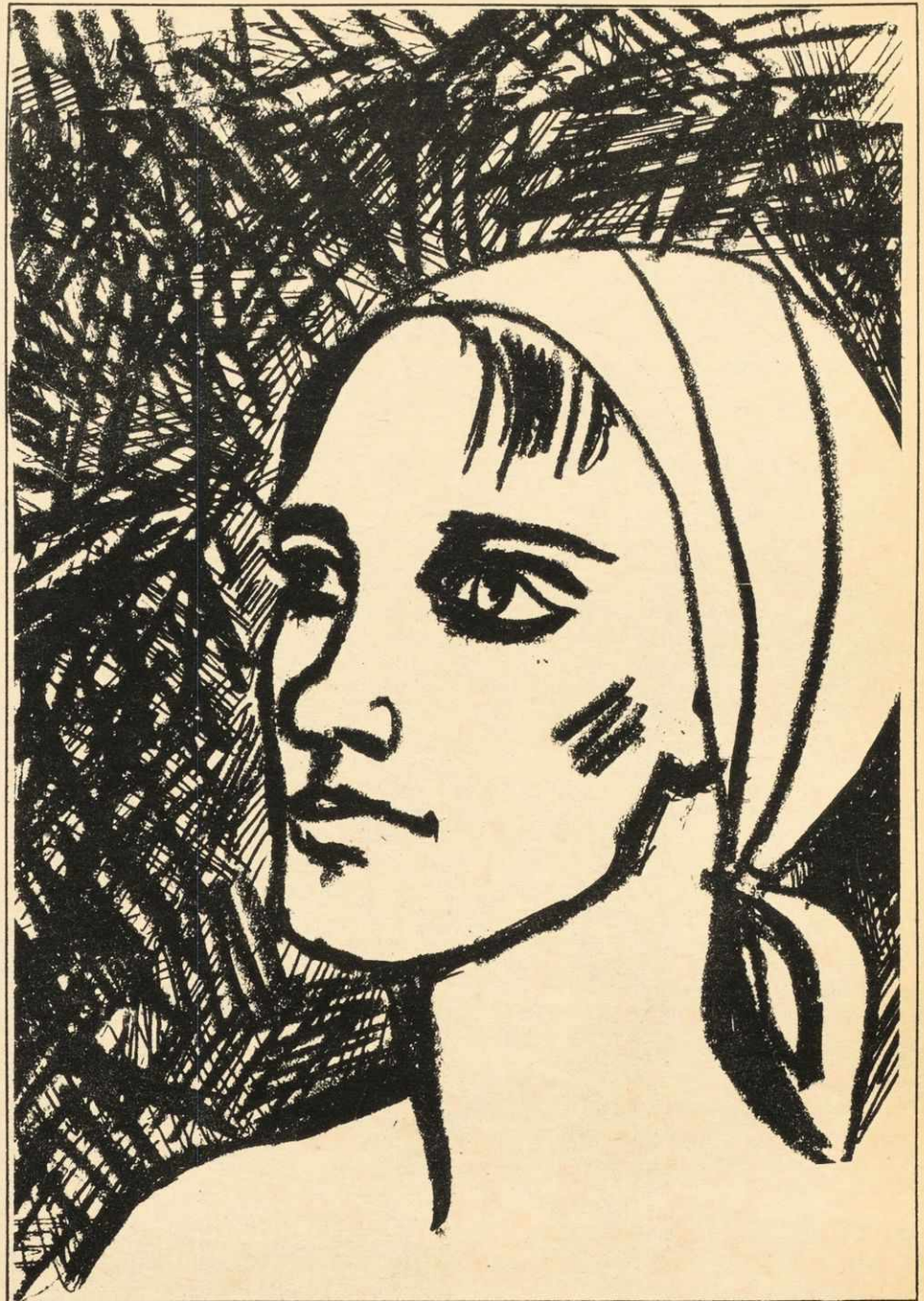


Illustration: Kimberley Whitchurch, Dal Gazette

an extended one with a woman and her children often living with her brothers, sisters, parents and grandparents, all in one home. Even though the father might not live with his children, the mother could not register them in school, take them out of the country for any reason, or engage in a number of social transactions without her husband's signature.

This was the situation for women prior to the revolution.

Under the current Law of Nurturing, it is both parents' responsibility, right, and duty to care for and oversee their children's development. This includes not only the provision of food and clothing, but education, healthcare and overall well being.

Though Nicaraguan women are advancing under the slogan of "Building the new homeland, we are shaping the new woman," these advances are not without obstacles and ideological problems.

There are no shelters for battered women, birth control is difficult to obtain, and a man can still divorce his wife for adultery while the reverse is not possible.

"The inbred machismo in the Nicaraguan society will take a long time to change," says Liz Baker, a Halifax member of the Latin American Information Group.

"Men believe that men fight the battles and the women stay at home. Marriages break up after the revolution when the man expects his wife to have supper on the table," she says.

"The process of change within personal relationships on an everyday basis is one of the most difficult tasks," says Barb Harris, a recent visitor to Nicaragua.

"Anyone who has had a relationship with a guy knows how long it takes to change things," she says.

But both Baker and Harris are confident that the desire for change is there and that Nicaragua has the revolutionary structure by which to accomplish it.

"Nicaraguan women live in a society that is in favour of change rather than against it. The state has a positive attitude about women and encourages liberation through legislative means," says Harris.

"The government is committed to equity," notes Baker.

"With less of a stratification in wealth, women—who are traditionally on the bottom of the economic scale—will be helped automatically," she says.

Thus the revolution in Nicaragua has been more than a military one. It has been a social and ideological revolution of tremendous proportion.

Says Margaret Randall in her most recent book on Nicaraguan women, *Sandinista's Daughters*, "It is impossible to exaggerate the transformation in the lives of tens of thousands of Nicaraguan women resulting from the revolutionary process."

But the near societal revolution that has been accomplished in the first five years of the Sandinista government is thought by many to be endangered by American aggression.

"There is tremendous grief and frustration in Nicaragua," says Harris, "because the resources that the government had been putting into fundamentally changing the society are now being used to defend it."

"The U.S. war with Nicaragua," she says, "is holding back the struggle for women."