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# Todos a alfabetizar

## *Women and Literacy in Nicaragua*

**I**n Nicaragua, 50% of the adult population is single mothers. Abandoned by their husbands, or widowed by the war, they are often left to support large families. Through necessity their involvement in the revolution has been aggressive and radical. When women fight for their children they fight for everything real.

But prior to the Triumph of the Revolution in 1979, most of these women were uneducated, and many had never seen the inside of a school. Obviously it was not in the interest of the Somoza government to provide easy access to education for peasant or working class women. In their daily struggle to survive, the women themselves had little time to consider education a priority either.

So although literacy was a mandate from the beginning for the FSLN, the commitment to learning to read and write on the part of the people themselves seems to have come directly from a swelling political involvement and participation in the revolutionary process. As women started to gain power in the revolution and over their own lives, they then felt the need to learn to read and write. They needed to take notes in meetings, to understand the graffiti and posters of the underground, to have a voice in the neighborhood civil defense committees, and sometimes to carry messages to the Front. And they recognized that the opportunity to learn was a major part of what they had been fighting for. Here the idea that literacy was a right (and not a privilege) was more than just mere rhetoric. The Literacy Crusade was a direct proof of empowerment.

The Literacy Crusade was planned prior to the Triumph and it was put into effect within months of the victory. Modelled after the Cuban literacy crusade, it had both political and practical aims, and used Paulo Freire's pedagogical framework to achieve them. For six months in 1980, 100,000 volunteers, including 60,000 high school students in the cities, took time out of their own studying and working to go to the remote areas of the country and teach 500,000 students. Adult volunteers joined them in teaching neighbors throughout Nicaragua. Along with the equally ambitious Health Crusade, this Popular Education movement probably made the greatest difference to the people of the country, so many of whom had had no education available at all to them in the past. Great hope was placed in the Crusade and people listened eagerly to the broadcasted literacy census that reported how many people in which region had learned to read and write according to results of an organized testing process. After five months, the '*brigadistas*' had reduced the illiteracy rate from 70% to 11%.

This Literacy Crusade mobilized women in crucial ways. First, sixty percent of the 60,000 teenagers who went into the country side as literacy *brigadistas* were young women, as were the majority of the popular (uncertified) teachers in the cities. Their participation would make or break the experiment. Many must have felt for the first time that their efforts were valuable to the success of the Revolution.

It's hard to guess how many of the learners were women. Amongst them there were certainly the expected problems.

BY JO LAMPERT

Though everyone might agree that literacy is a good thing in theory, Nicaragua still has its share of machismo. Women who become educated are a threat to domestic and traditional life, especially if they appear to be learning more quickly than their husbands or if the school takes them from their chores and families. Without question, though, the women who participated found their worlds opening up. Not only could they now do practical things like read the newspapers

few belongings are displayed under glass, and we are given details of their death: shot while walking along a road in Muy Muy, killed in an ambush in Zelaya on the Atlantic Coast. These deaths have nothing to do with education, nothing to do with Nicaragua's attempt to attain autonomy, but they have an obvious effect on both.

These tragedies are the events that mobilize women and that have made their response powerful. An example of their

salary for equal work is just being raised. AMNLAE sees education as a key part of their work.

By some estimates the illiteracy rate in Nicaragua is now up to 25% again. The economic and military realities of a country at war makes it difficult for Nicaragua to keep up the momentum of the literacy campaign. Most children are still not getting past Grade Six (their efforts are often needed in the fields) and this is seen as a major problem in the battle against illiter-

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and the labels on medicine for their children (for instance, the national campaign to promote breast feeding and to inform on what to do in extreme cases of infant diarrhea required a certain level of literacy), but they began to gain knowledge of their own world's transformation. Students learn words necessary in their own lives, they read about their own revolutionary history and are encouraged to take a look at their own situations and conditions and actively make change. Through the literacy campaign as both learners and *brigadistas*, women became empowered and were perceived nationally as essential to the post-Somoza liberation of the State.

Since the Crusade in 1980, the news has been less optimistic. The American supported Contras have consistently made schools and teachers a target for terrorist action. A trip to the Literacy Museum in Managua makes this devastatingly apparent. The gallery of heroes and martyrs here displays rows and rows of photographs of young *brigadistas* who have lost their lives while teaching. These are pictures of young smiling women who believed strongly enough that education would make a difference that they put their own lives on hold to live in the difficult conditions of the remotest regions of the country. Their clothes and

response is the movement Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs. In Esteli, a town near the Honduran-Nicaraguan border, the movement has a building from which women disseminate information about the atrocities the war has inflicted on them. This movement has united women who have lost their children to death, who have seen their children raped and tortured, or whose children have been kidnapped by the Contras.

Also present in the country is AMNLAE, the strong and vocal women's organization. They originally saw their objective as allowing women an active role in overthrowing Somoza. In the years leading up to the Revolution, AMNLAE organized safe houses, sent women to carry messages through the war zones, and coordinated hunger strikes, amongst other things. Now they are beginning to deal with issues more closely related to women's rights. Women are still second class citizens and have a higher illiteracy rate than men. There are just starting to be laws created that demand responsibility on the part of fathers who have abandoned their children. Recently an amendment has been passed to allow unilateral divorce, and only in the last year have women who are family heads been allowed to buy a home. The issue of equal

acy. But teachers are receiving better training now, and the Ministry of Education is optimistic that the situation will improve. The dream is that in three years Nicaragua will have reached total literacy. The Ministry of Education gives a Grade Four national literacy level as its goal, suggesting that when people have securely reached this level they are unlikely to forget what they have learned if classes must be interrupted.

It is reasonable to suggest that women have been strongly affected by the Nicaraguan literacy movement. Because many men work long shifts, or are serving their time in the Military, it is often women who participate most regularly in literacy programs. In Managua, where each *barrio* has a CDS (*Comite Defensa Sandinista*), which approves and organizes a neighborhood literacy program, often as many as 80% of the participants are women. Most of the volunteer popular teachers are women too (though, predictably, many of the paid administrators are men). So, in essence, these programs model a situation of women helping other women.

The commitment asked of these learners is remarkable to a North American eye. Groups of nine to ten meet as often as five days a week, two hours a day, to

work on fairly formal lessons, prepared by the Ministry of Education. Students do exercises and practice writing. Often they attend these classes in less than ideal conditions. In a building in the very poor *barrio* of Ciudad Sandino, torrents of rain pour through the doors and windows. Most schools don't have enough chairs, and the blackboards haven't been in useful condition for years. Books are supplied to every program, but there are certainly no extras. Something is bringing people out to these programs, some personal satisfaction or knowledge that studying brings them closer to power for themselves and for the whole community. This notion is unfamiliar to us, but it seems natural to a people whose struggle has been a collective one.

Such a literacy movement could not exist without flexibility and more than a nod to reality. Many women with families cannot leave for classes five days a week. Consequently, literacy classes are offered both in the centers and in the homes of the learners. Predictably not all of the men in the households (though the majority of families are without men) are in favour of these programs, and organizers often find themselves in the position of having to raise the consciousness of men in the community in order to do productive literacy work.

This is less of a contradiction in Nicaragua than it is in North America. Becoming literate is perceived as just part of a larger process of education and empowerment. If the reading material supplied by the state appears at first to focus as much on revolutionary history and radical vocabulary as it does on the letters of the alphabet, this is because here literacy is, by definition, politicization. Literacy teaches people who causes the war, who carries the guns. Literacy reminds people

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of what their struggle has been and where their strength could take them. The Nicaraguans know what we pretend not to; that education is always ideologically based. So for women, empowerment comes not only from knowing how to read and write, but from reading about and discussing their own situations as women. Dialogue is a major part of each lesson and is crucial to the process.

The changes are slow in a post-revolutionary country halted by the American economic blockade and the war with the Contras. Nicaragua is frustrated in its efforts to progress in education and health care by lack of resources. It's too easy to glance at literacy in the small Latin American country and see only the surface details of a large number of small community based literacy programs. But the Crusade itself and the strength of the movement nine years after the Revolution are almost too radical to believe. Can it be true that 80-90% of adults in Nicaragua are participating in the programs? Can we quite grasp the notion that literacy is a priority and a national mandate of the

Sandinista government? In a country that has fought bloody wars and lost many children in the quest for autonomy, literacy is a tool being offered to the people to achieve this end.

For women in Nicaragua, '*alfabetization*' means change. Mothers express the wish that their daughters have opportunities that weren't available to them, that they not find themselves poor and illiterate and mothers themselves before they finish their schooling. But these mothers themselves see a new future in their own lives, and access to schooling is a concrete manifestation of their own hopes and dreams.

#### References

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### PATRICIA ELLEN K. ANNWN CRESSWELL

#### Reading Daughters of Copper Woman

I dove into your words  
as a child dives into a pile  
of crisp brown leaves  
tossing them into the air  
pushing my way to the center  
to make a warm dry nest  
hugging them to my breast.

I drifted on my back  
in the middle of your words  
feeling them buoy me up  
their direction mine  
we flowed together  
into ancient knowledge.