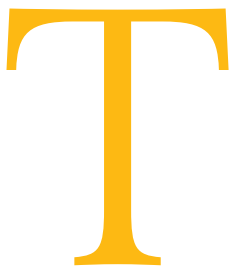


The Struggle to End Violence against Women in Nicaragua

by PAMELA NEUMANN



THE ENGINE of the old yellow school bus was already rumbling as I approached the crowd of teenagers and middle-aged women milling about and chatting animatedly. It was a humid June morning, and feminist organizations from across Managua were headed to Nicaragua's Supreme Court of Justice to demonstrate in

favor of a new law concerning violence against women. Popularly known as Law 779, it officially went into effect on June 22, 2012.

Law 779 is the most comprehensive piece of legislation about gender-based violence ever passed in Nicaragua, the fruit of years of struggle by the country's women's movement. The law criminalizes femicide (the murder of women on the basis of their gender), expands the definition of violence toward women to include the destruction of women's property, and establishes penalties for negligent actions by state officials. It also establishes new preven-

tative measures to better protect women who file complaints, and creates special courts where women can have their cases heard by specially trained judges.

We boarded the bus, armed with dozens of bright lavender flags with "Movimiento Feminista de Nicaragua" printed on them, as well as a few tables and chairs. When we arrived at the courthouse about ten minutes later, there was already a large group of women standing at the entrance. One held a poster-sized newspaper article about her daughter who was killed two years earlier, yet the case is still unresolved. Others chanted in call-and-response fashion. Soon reporters with cameras and tape recorders surrounded Luz Marina, a spokeswoman for the Women's Network against Violence (La Red de Mujeres contra la Violencia), as she began to read the organization's official statement about Law 779. The statement emphasized the importance of the law for women, and demanded that it be applied vigorously and promptly.

Violence against women is pervasive in Latin America, and Nicaragua is no exception. Research indicates that one of every two women in Nicaragua has experienced sexual violence during



Nicaraguan women demonstrate in favor of Law 779.

her lifetime. According to local newspaper reports, in the first half of 2012 alone, 144,749 complaints were filed by women who experienced sexual violence, a 42 percent increase from the same period in 2011. Last summer I went back to Nicaragua seeking to better understand this violence, and women's different responses to it. One of these women is someone I call Elena.

"Bajo sol, bajo lluvia, vamos." *Rain or shine, we go.* Elena repeated those words many times as she and I walked the dusty paths of "Barrio La Luz," inviting women to participate in a demonstration about Law 779. A single mother of three teenagers and a skilled seamstress, Elena has walked these streets for years mobilizing women to participate in different kinds of demonstrations—sometimes, she told me, putting her body in harm's way. "At a protest over abortion in Leon last year," she recalled, "they threw rocks at me." As we talked, men on tricycle taxis rode past us uttering "*cochona*" (lesbian), but Elena remained undeterred. "I do it for love," she told me. "For the women, so they don't experience violence like I did."

Elena is one of dozens of *promotoras* affiliated with a grassroots feminist collective

in Managua called Ocho de Marzo. Since its formation in the early 1990s, *el colectivo* has provided a variety of support services (legal advice, counseling, shelter) to women experiencing sexual violence. It also trains neighborhood *promotoras* like Elena through a series of workshops on violence, sexual and reproductive health, human rights, and political participation. Participating women later replicate these workshops, providing information, resources, and accompaniment to other women in their communities. The collective works in seven neighborhoods in the northeastern section of Managua, an area characterized by high levels of industrial development, informal economic activity, fragile infrastructure, and environmental contamination.

"When we first started," one member of the collective told me, "we saw 25–30 women every day. The line was out the door. We had to say to them, we're sorry, could you let us take a break to eat?" This was in the early 1990s, when the country was still reeling from the aftermath of the U.S.-supported Contra war and the ongoing economic crisis that was exacerbated by the rollback of public health services under

a series of neoliberal governments. Since Sandinista President Daniel Ortega returned to power in 2006, some new poverty-reduction programs have been implemented, but women's rights are still very much under attack. As vocal advocates for radical changes in Nicaraguan society, feminist organizations in particular have borne the brunt of recent government antagonism.

Most recently, this antagonism has manifested itself in the increasing opposition to Law 779 by members of Nicaragua's constitutional court. Although the law at the time of this writing is not even a year old, some judges have publicly announced that they are considering overturning the law or eliminating the provision that prohibits mediation as an acceptable option for resolving women's complaints. "This is why we have to be organized," various women at a workshop organized by Ocho de Marzo last July told me.

It is the experiences of these women—the activists who protest on the street and those whose lives are shaped in myriad ways by the violence in their communities—that I seek to understand through my current research as a graduate student in sociology at The University of Texas at Austin. My interest in these issues began in 2006 when I moved to Nicaragua to work for a nongovernmental organization. One of the first people I met was a young woman with a twinkle in her eye named Darling. Darling suffered years of abuse by her husband before eventually leaving him and completing a law degree while also caring for two young children.

When I came back to the United States and began the master's program in LLILAS several years later, it was Darling's story that I often reflected on. As my intellectual journey has progressed, I have become increasingly convinced of the importance of scholarship that is actively engaged with the concrete concerns of communities. My current research is inspired by Nicaraguan women like Darling and Elena. As long as their struggle for equality continues, so will mine. ☀

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Top left: Pamela Neumann (right) with Griselda, a member of the Ocho de Marzo collective. Top right and bottom: Demonstrators for Law 779.