

# An Unholy Trinity: The Church, the State, the Banks and the Challenges for Women Mobilising for Change in Nicaragua

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## 1 Introduction

In recent years, some commentators have applauded the World Bank's 'new' focus on social policy and social protection as a sign of a more holistic approach to development and a step in the right direction. Others have been more sceptical about the changes, seeing the new policies as a continuation of neoliberal principles, for example a means to shift the burden of social protection from the state to individuals (Molyneux 2006); a means to improve productivity and economic growth through, for example, promoting greater risk taking among the poor (World Bank 2000); and a means to widen the power base of the Bank (Cammack 2002). Similarly, while the Bank has pledged to 'engender development' via the adoption in 2001 of a Gender Mainstreaming strategy and the Gender Action Plan of 2006 (World Bank 2001, 2002, 2006), this has been critiqued, most notably for promoting economic growth rather than gender equality gains. A further strong critique has centred on the inclusion of women in policies and programmes as representing a 'feminisation of poverty reduction' that transfers the responsibility for improving the wellbeing of children and other household members to women and leaves them little choice other than to take on this new obligation (Chant 2006, 2008). A good example of such a programme is the Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) programmes now being implemented across the globe. These programmes have found support from the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and, more recently, the World Bank. They target women with cash transfers as long as a series of conditionalities

are fulfilled, most usually relating to ensuring school attendance, meeting health targets for children under five years old and the attendance by mothers at classes on various health-related topics (Molyneux 2006, 2007).

The policy focus arises from the efficiency of women in providing services to others. There is explicit recognition in the programmes that women tend to use household resources to further collective, rather than personal, wellbeing and implicit within this is the idea that their male partners do not. The initiatives also see a shift away from the focus on female-headed households of recent years, and diverts attention back to the heterosexual couple, implicitly reinforcing this as a key social unit and the nuclear household as the most acceptable household type. This implicit discourse of the 'traditional' family with a heterosexual couple at its centre finds resonance with what is often seen to be a very different set of actors – those associated with the Christian right and the related neo-conservative discourse. Within the new social policy arena there appears to be an intersection between these two apparently distinct discourses that focuses on women, and while both seem to promote women's role within the family, this new overlap may be seen to further threaten to erode established gendered rights. This article will use Nicaragua as a case study to explore this possible policy intersection and its consequences.<sup>1</sup>

The article begins with an examination of an IDB and World Bank-backed CCT, Red de Protección Social

(RPS – Social Protection Network) to highlight how the application of neoliberal policy prescriptions may reinforce neo-conservative ideals of gender roles. It then goes on to explore a little further the context in which the policy had been applied to highlight the challenges that arise for women mobilising for change when international Bank rhetoric interacts with that of the church and the state. The article highlights how the space of women's mobilisation is not only narrowing but that actions to resist encroachment of rights seem to remain uncoordinated, as different expressions of the women's movements not only prioritise different rights but also differ over what counts as a 'right'. In particular the priorities of young women appear to be somewhat ignored and collective action by, and for, this important group remains minimal.

## **2 Promoting family values to reduce poverty: the case of CCTs**

The World Bank's recent Gender Action Plan aims to advance women's 'economic empowerment' in order to promote 'shared growth' and accelerate the implementation of Millennium Development Goal 3. It is promoted by the Bank as 'nothing more than smart economics', since women's lack of economic opportunities is seen to be 'inefficient' in terms of poverty reduction and economic growth (World Bank 2006: 2). Its main policy proposals centre on 'making markets work for women' and 'empowering women to compete in markets', that is, valuing women for their potentially productive role in the economy. This is very much in line with the World Bank's wider neoliberal ideology and policy prescriptions. The new interest of the World Bank in providing social safety nets for the most vulnerable is, at first glance, less in line with traditional World Bank thinking.

World Bank literature notes that while Social Safety Nets play a well-recognised redistributive role they also play a less well-recognised 'productive role' that allows the poor to 'assist in their own livelihoods' (World Bank 2008). CCTs are a good case in point as they provide cash transfers to alleviate poverty in the short term, but the cash transfers are contingent on the poor taking 'co-responsibility' for their situation and making behavioural changes in line with the policy's wider objectives of increasing investment in the human capital of children to reduce poverty in the longer term. Within these programmes, women are targeted as the most efficient mechanism by which to provide resources to children. The President

of the IDB states the case clearly when noting that investing in women is investing 'in the best instrument that we have to combat this [poverty] problem' (SEDESOL 2005, author's translation). Similarly, documentation related to the CCT in Nicaragua justifies the focus on women in the programme as motivated by evidence that resources controlled by women translate into greater improvements in the wellbeing of children and the family (IADB 2003: 2). As such, targeting women is 'nothing more than smart economics' and for the Bank, women are valued in both their productive and reproductive roles for efficiency reasons and the economic growth gains that they can bring, both direct and indirect, now and in the future.

This efficiency discourse has been apparent in all areas of policy formulation within recent Nicaraguan governments.<sup>2</sup> The policy context in Nicaragua has been bounded by the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) since the Structural Adjustment Programmes of the late 1980s and, more recently, the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) process has been important in influencing national policy initiatives. The PRSP document in Nicaragua is indicative of this focus being entitled 'The Strengthened Strategy for Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction'. A review of the PRSP by the World Bank and the Nicaraguan Government noted a lack of a clear poverty focus in many of the programmes (Vermehren 2002). However, the government's National Development Plan (PND) formulated in 2003 that looked to develop further the ideas contained in the PRSP focused on issues related to economic growth rather than poverty. The RPS has been one of the few clearly defined poverty alleviation programmes within the PRSP; however, even here the efficiency focus is clear.

The RPS assumes many of the features of the Mexican programme Progreso/Oportunidades on which it is modelled, but with some notable exceptions that reflect the differing economic and social contexts in which the two policies are applied (Bradshaw 2008; Bradshaw with Quirós Viquez 2008). For example, as the RPS does not have national coverage, certain regions and communities were selected over others for inclusion. The geographical selection was based not only on need but also the availability of existing services and more importantly that the area be one of the potential 'economic growth poles' established in the PND. The

incentives offered to households also differed. In the pilot project, the grants received by the eligible households in monetary terms were equal to those received in Mexico (around 18 per cent of average household income),<sup>3</sup> however, evaluation of the pilot highlighted that families would change their behaviour to suit the programme's objectives with very little incentive (IFPRI 2005). This led its designers to conclude that targets could be reached in a more 'cost-effective' manner and the programme was adapted so that the amount of the cash transfers received by a household declined over the three years, representing a decrease of nearly 30 per cent in real terms (IADB 2003).

While most CCT programmes state they cover the opportunity costs of sending a child to school, programmes such as the RPS do not take into account the opportunity costs of the women 'beneficiaries' who must ensure school attendance, take children for regular health checks and attend training sessions. The opportunity costs of ensuring ongoing health services have been found to be considerable, and it has been suggested that the opportunity cost of women's time more generally may be higher than men's (Eichler 2006). However, the pilot RPS was declared a 'success' and its coverage expanded based on an evaluation that considered only the impact on the goals the programme set itself which focused on children. The evaluation of the pilot RPS did not consider the impact of the programme on women other than assessing attendance at (mandatory) workshops. Not considering how involvement in the RPS affects women suggests that their actions do not warrant recognition and do not carry any costs. Women are invisible within the programme as they are constructed only as the objects of reproduction and the means to deliver development to others in a cost-effective manner.

While it may be easy to suggest that such programmes and policy focus have been forced on governments within the developing world by the IFIs, as noted above, the policies of the then government of Nicaragua demonstrate an obvious acceptance of IFI thinking and embraced neoliberal ideals. The PND, for example, goes further than the PRSP in focusing on productivity above poverty reduction; however, it does not explicitly mention women's potentially productive role despite the fact a number of the proposed areas for economic

expansion, such as tourism and the Free Trade Zones, demand a highly feminised labour force. That women will play an important productive role within the neoliberal economic growth model presented is implicit within the document but is not the prominent discourse when women are discussed. What is made explicit is the role of women in the home, and the PND pledges to promote, strengthen and protect the family unit and family unity, seeking to 're-establish' the values and morals of families (Government of Nicaragua 2003). Similarly, the government's literature around the RPS echoes this thinking, noting that the RPS aims to promote the 'development' of women in order to 'consolidate the family unit' (Government of Nicaragua 2002: 27). The overt discourse of the family and family unity highlights the influence of the other actors involved in national policy processes and in particular, the church's influence on parties, policies and politics needs to be considered.

### **3 Mobilising for change: the church, the state and the women's movements**

The political pact forged between the ex-president of Nicaragua, Arnaldo Alemán (PLC party), and the current president, Daniel Ortega (FSLN party), is now well accepted, if still not publicly recognised by those involved. The third party to the pact, the church, while less widely acknowledged is no less a powerful player as indispensable in ensuring the pact could be agreed, maintained and making it 'acceptable' to the population. The Catholic hierarchy has assumed such a prominent position that some in the country have suggested it is difficult to call Nicaragua a secular state. For example, in March of 2000, magistrates of the Supreme Court of Justice, members of the national assembly and ministers of state attended a mass where the Minister of the Family read the homily that included the announcement of a government decree that established the National Day of the Unborn Child (Día Nacional del Niño por Nacer). The blurring of the church and state is clear in such actions and highlights that the church is not only able to influence government discourse, but is also able to influence government policies and even national laws. The recent change in the abortion laws in the country is the best example of how strong the Catholic Church's influence has become.

That a Bill to change the law around abortion, to outlaw even 'therapeutic abortion' which allows for

abortion when a woman's life is at risk if she carries the pregnancy through to full term, should be proposed in Nicaragua is not surprising, what is surprising is the timing of the Bill. The Bill was fast-tracked through the assembly during the run-up to the elections at the end of 2006. Before the vote in the assembly, the Catholic and Evangelical Churches of the country united to mobilise large numbers of people in public displays in support of the Bill. When the vote came in, it was backed by four of the five main parties contesting the elections, including the party in power and the 'revolutionary' opposition party (the Frente Sandanista) that later gained power. The only party to vote against the Bill, the self-style 'reformist' Sandanista party (the MRS), suffered an electoral backlash as religious and moral messages became mixed with political campaigning. That the church could force through the Bill at this time shows their strength, that the key political actors would allow them to do so shows their reliance on the church and their willingness to use women's rights as a political bargaining tool for electoral success. The well-established women's movements in the country appeared able to do little to stop these processes.

United under the slogan 'Unity in Diversity' the 'independent' women's movement emerged in Nicaragua in 1990. Unity has been elusive ever since, as diversity of opinions, particularly around political strategy has split the movement (Babb 2001). Establishing priorities has also been problematic. In particular, while the need to address both economic and sexual/reproductive issues is recognised, how they are discussed by different actors differs, as does the priority given to each by each.

Grassroots women's organisations struggle with the realities of economic deprivation in Nicaragua and rather than campaigning to change the structural causes of poverty, they have tended to seek practical solutions tending toward microfinance as a 'solution'. In contrast, the Nicaraguan women's movement and feminist groups have tended to focus on establishing and campaigning for sexual and reproductive rights and have tended not to engage with the politics of poverty. Thus the World Bank has escaped largely unscathed from collective actions of the women's movements despite the obvious impact of its policies on women and its increased targeting of women within its policies. Where actions focused on the IFIs have been taken by women's groups and movements it has usually been as part of wider groupings of

organised civil society and this has set up its own problems and divisions focused on the ability to present gendered claims within mixed/male spaces (Bradshaw and Linneker 2003).

The collectively produced 'Women's Health Agenda' of 2004 suggested both hope of a new unity and a potential rallying point for collective action, since the inclusion of support for therapeutic abortion in the Agenda demonstrated general acceptance across broad sectors of the women's movements for its provision (Bradshaw 2006). Ultimately however, large-scale collective action could not be achieved and instead, further fragmentation of the women's movements occurred. This fragmentation to an extent was due to the tactics adopted by different groupings within the women's movements but was also related to differing priorities and how these are understood (Bradshaw *et al.* 2008).

The focus of gendered action has traditionally tended to be the state and laws. Actions in the case of therapeutic abortion were also forced to focus on the church given its high-profile role in promoting the change to the law. Actions against the church present a problem since the majority of women in women's groups and movements still have a Catholic past if not a current Catholic commitment. They also do not help engender public support since, while the Catholic Church may have lost some ground to the Evangelical movement in recent years, the teaching of both religions is strongly against abortion and presents women's place as being in the home, not 'in the street' making demands that would encroach on traditional male domains of power. Actions around protecting the provision for therapeutic abortion were also hindered by the limited strategies open to the women's movements in the current national and global context. While the women's movements have utilised the language of rights when stating their case in and to the public, this is hampered by the fact that the discourse of the church, the state and even the World Bank is increasingly a discourse of rights.

The church promotes familial and societal values, morals and rights, prioritising some rights, while effectively negating others. Within this it draws on seemingly natural and ingrained ideas around families that position women at the service of her husband and children. If this discourse is echoed by the state and other non-state actors, such as is the case with

the National Development Plan and the IDB and World Bank-backed CCT programmes, then it adds further moral weight to their claims. Interestingly, a recent campaign by elements of the women's movements also focused on the family, highlighting the consequences for family unity when lack of access to legal therapeutic abortion results in the death of a mother. The focus on the fragmentation of the family that may result may have greater resonance with the general public precisely because it draws on the same discourse as the church and the government around family values. While this tactic may 'work', it runs the risk of bypassing fundamental discussions of women's rights to choose and the issues of power and power relations within these choices (Bradshaw *et al.* 2008). As divisions within the women's movements also seem to reflect differing views on abortion and how far each group and individual is prepared to support claims to therapeutic abortion and abortion generally as a 'right', then avoidance of more in-depth discussion of the topic within the movement is perhaps not so surprising.

#### **4 Rights are nice but ...<sup>4</sup>**

A recent study by Castillo and Wilson (2007) of individual women and women in women's groups highlights how abortion as an unconditional right is not the dominant discourse even within some women's organisations in Nicaragua and rather acceptance of the right to abort is often dependent on the context or other conditions being fulfilled. Abortion when a 'child' becomes pregnant has perhaps greatest acceptance among the women they interviewed. When a woman's life is at threat also has greater acceptance than other cases, even rape, since as one respondent noted, seeing the pregnancy to term in the latter case does not mean the woman would die but does mean she would kill a 'child'. One woman highlighted a more general disquiet with discussing the issue of abortion especially with younger women, noting 'never in my life will I talk to my daughter about abortion' (author's translation). In general, when discussing young women the discourse of adult women tended to focus on the perceived risks and responsibilities associated with young women's sexual activity rather than their right to enjoy sex outside procreation, and constructed younger women as simultaneously naïve innocents and reckless youth. Concerns were expressed that abortion, if freely available, may be seen as an alternative to other forms of family planning, especially by the young, and become

something 'normal'. Such concerns echo those of the Christian right and not only limit discussion of young women's rights but question acceptance of abortion as an unconditional 'right' even within some women's organisations.

Economic need is also largely not accepted as a justification for abortion or only in certain circumstances. This perhaps reflects wider issues around the discourse of economic deprivation in the country. Recent studies suggest that when economic deprivation and poverty are discussed, the discourse is one of needs not rights (Castillo and Wilson 2007; Bradshaw *et al.* 2008). While poverty is recognised to be a factor that limits a woman's ability to fulfil gendered rights, women's economic condition is not discussed within a rights discourse, the right to work or the right to the free choice of employment for example, but rather a discourse of need. For example, the need for employment that would allow economic self-sufficiency is seen as an important pre-condition for a woman to feel able to leave a violent man and fulfil her right to live free from violence, rather than a right in itself. As noted above, this has led to a division between actions at the grassroots level by individual women's groups to 'solve' the immediate problem through income generation and microfinance schemes, and the feminist discourse that underpins actions by women's movements that call for the government to recognise and fulfil established sexual and reproductive rights.

It is interesting to note that a recent study focused on young women who are leaders in their local community or youth groups, shows a further contrasting discourse (Casey 2006a,b). As one young woman interviewed notes 'perhaps an adult woman might be fighting for a right like abortion but really, I am interested in promoting the right of leadership of young women and the right to continue studying ... For me the rights I am interested in as a young woman are education, health, a dignified life, and the right to live without violence'. She goes on to note that her ideas may change over time, but for now economic necessities related to study and employment are of key concern. However, even for young women, these priorities are not constructed as rights and rights instead appear to be conceptualised as something outside the lived reality of young women, perhaps because of their association with the adult discourse, leading one

young woman to conclude that 'the concept of rights is nice, but it is not real life'.

## 5 Conclusion

The context described here and the divisions noted are not peculiar to any one country and they present difficult challenges for women's movements across the globe. Increasingly, the church, the state and the international development banks share a similar discourse drawing on underlying notions of the family and family values. The associated policies while seemingly promoting women's role in society aim to reinforce existing gender roles and relations and promote the primacy of heterosexual relations within marriage for either moral or economic gain, or both. The discourse of 'the right' is increasingly presented in the language of rights and is a discourse that has the advantage of drawing on seemingly natural and ingrained ideas of women, men and the family. Backed by both the moral weight of organised religion and the economic rationality of neoliberal actors, current policies concurrently threaten women's sexual, reproductive and economic rights. Alternative discourses find it difficult to compete in this context. The discourse of resistance in Nicaragua is further hampered by its own lack of coherence and the fact that counter-actions are often largely unconnected.

## Notes

- \* The ideas contained in this article arose out of conversations over time and space with many people connected to the women's movements in Nicaragua. In particular, ideas around the RPS benefited from the knowledge and understanding of Ana Quirós Viquez of Centro de Información y Servicios de Asesoría en Salud (CISAS, Centre for Information and Advisory Services in Health). The first draft of this document was enriched by the insight of Ana Criquillon from Central American Women's Fund (CAWF), while later drafts benefited from discussions with Amy Bank from Puntos de Encuentro. I am very grateful to them all.
- 1 The article draws on research conducted by and with the Nicaraguan feminist NGO, Puntos de Encuentro, with whom the author has worked for many years. It reflects ongoing processes of discussion within Puntos and other organisations, most notably CAWF, around how to promote more inclusive notions of gendered rights that

Economic needs are most usually not recognised as rights within the discourse of Nicaraguan women's movements and as such, the politics of gendered poverty goes largely unaddressed. In turn, the legitimacy of the rights agenda women's movements do promote is itself questioned by a range of powerful actors, including the church. The issue of abortion in particular complicates the presentation of sexual and reproductive demands as rights and adds to a lack of coherence within groups and movements since there is no general agreement on abortion as a right, not least given the ability of the church to influence all levels of political and daily life, including the lives of those within the women's movements. There is also an apparent divorce between the 'adult' feminist discourse and the lived reality of young female activists who struggle to see the relevance of the adult rights discourse to their own lives.

The lack of a shared understanding of what constitutes rights may not only limit the possibilities for collective action now but also in the future, as young women may grow disillusioned with what they see to be an unresponsive women's movement. The impasse allows the three key actors of the right to use the situation for further encroachment of these three fundamental rights.

recognise economic issues as rights issues, and how to get generational issues on the gendered agenda. For further information on the work of Puntos de Encuentro and CAWF, see [www.puntos.org.ni](http://www.puntos.org.ni) and [www.fcmmujeres.org/es](http://www.fcmmujeres.org/es) respectively.

- 2 In November 2006, after ten years of governments headed by the Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (PLC), the 'revolutionary' Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) regained power returning Daniel Ortega once again to the presidency. At the time of writing, while there has been much political discourse around change, there have been few concrete policy proposals to report and agreements with the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are still being honoured.
- 3 In the targeted communities, eligible households were enrolled on the programme for a fixed period of three years. During this time they were eligible to receive three types of grants: an education grant for each enrolled child between

the first and the fourth year of the six-year state primary education; a 'food security' grant of a fixed amount payable every three months; and a health grant to cover payments to the private companies that provide the health-related services (ODI 2005).

4 Many thanks to Jean Casey, Puntos de Encuentro, for allowing me to use the title of her report on young women and rights in Nicaragua.

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