



A-GENDA

GENDER AND TRADE IN CENTRAL AMERICA

DECEMBER 2006

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Nicaraguan women study their role in the global economy

by Tessa Mackenzie

Women in Granada, Nicaragua participate in an economic literacy workshop.



MEC

Since 2005 the Central America Women's Network (CAWN) has been supporting the Nicaraguan women's organisation *Movimiento de Mujeres Trabajadoras y Desempleadas 'María Elena Cuadra' (MEC)* in a project that uses economic literacy trainings to empower women. MEC's economic literacy work covers some eight areas of the country and over 1,000 women will participate in trainings over three years. This economic literacy

focus is an important element of MEC's wider agenda of work that aims to involve women in the country's decision-making processes and thereby make sure that governmental policy and practice better reflects women's concerns.

The question of how Nicaragua interacts with the global economy could not be more current. The impacts of the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), ratified by the Nicaraguan government in October 2005 and now

being implemented across the region, are gradually beginning to be felt. All indications are that the agreement will negatively affect national production, the economy and culture, while favouring US interests.

The European Union (EU) is currently beginning negotiations with Central American governments to establish a new Free Trade Agreement between the two regions. Impact analyses that take gender concerns seriously have so far been conspicuous by their absence in both of these processes and it is highly likely that Central American women will suffer in many areas of their lives as a result.

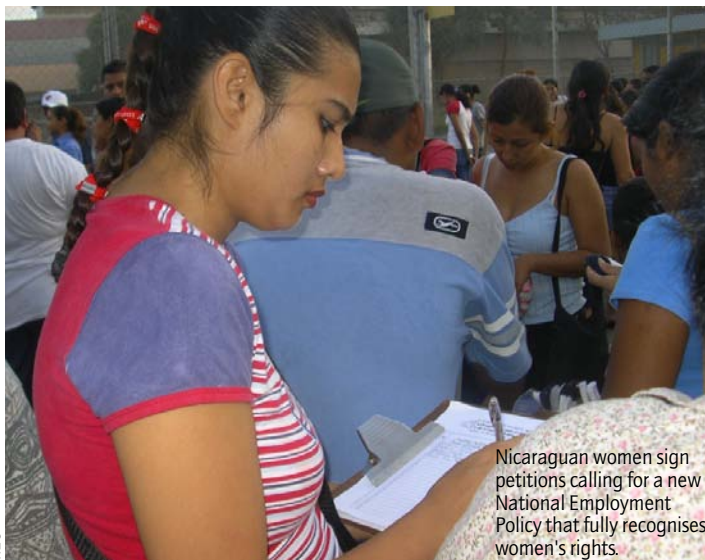
Nicaragua's formal and informal economy is increasingly dependent on the garment industry. The quota system of the Multi-Fibre Arrangement ended last year and as a result even more of the industry is becoming concentrated in China and other major producing countries. This change is likely to be disastrous for the textile industry of many Central American countries (see A-Genda March 2006 edition) but Nicaragua is hailed by many as the great suc-

cess story of the region.

The reality is, however, that Nicaragua is simply winning the race to the bottom. Labour, which is primarily female, is very cheap in Nicaragua even by comparison with its Central American neighbours, and the tax free status of the Export Processing Zones is providing a big incentive to foreign investment. The Nicaraguan government sees this 'maquilarization' of the country as a huge achievement, and it is true that jobs are being created. But the question is what type of jobs? Under what conditions do 'maquila' workers (who are mostly women) have to work in order to earn sometimes as little as \$50 a month? What does this mean for women's other vital roles in the community and household? What impact is it going to have on the next generation? And ultimately how can so many non-tax paying investors and very badly paid jobs benefit the ailing Nicaraguan economy?

In an economy so dependent on the exploitation of women as cheap labour, and in a context that is likely to change for the worse, it

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Nicaraguan women sign petitions calling for a new National Employment Policy that fully recognises women's rights.

MEC

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is vital for women to understand their own situation. Yet understanding alone may not change anything. As a capacity building process economic literacy needs to empower women not only to realise that they are, very often, exploited and under-represented at all levels of economic decision-making, but also to actively challenge this reality.

The economic literacy trainings carried out by MEC use the 'Wall' methodology (see box on page opposite) that starts from women's own lived experiences to reach a gender analysis of the global economy. The courses cover a wide range of issues that affect women's lives both at the level of the household budget and on a more macro-economic scale where women's interests are so often ignored or discriminated against. Topics covered include micro and macro-economies, public economic policy, national and municipal budgets and national and international trade.

Crucially for MEC economic literacy does not stop after women have attended a training course.



Women in Granada, Nicaragua participate in an economic literacy workshop.

MEC's work depends on mass consultations with women all over Nicaragua. From April 2005 to March 2006 MEC organised consultations with some 3,000 women in six departments of Nicaragua. The aim of these consultations is to elicit women's opinions and responses, based on their real life experiences, to national decisions that affect their lives. An example of the process and impact of MEC's work can be seen in their recent success at achieving the incorporation of a gender perspective in the new National Employment Policy. Basing their demands on feedback from women

gained through municipal and departmental consultations, MEC entered into dialogue with the Nicaraguan government in 2005 claiming that "for an effective employment policy there must be no more discrimination against women in work place". Following a march attended by 500 women on 1st May 2006, the National Employment Policy, that incorporates MEC's demands regarding women's rights, was formally approved by the Nicaraguan President.

To really demystify a fast-changing economy and analyse impacts that even economic experts are



EDITORIAL

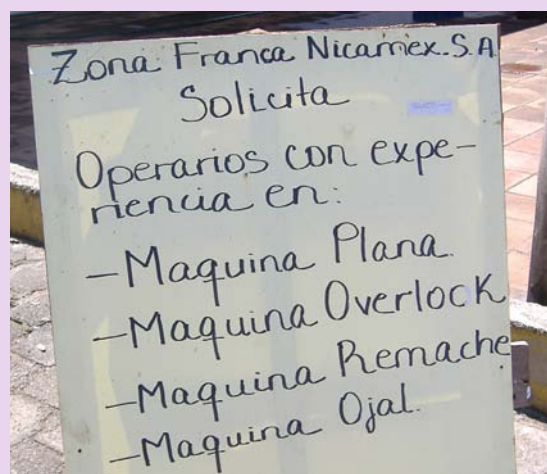
"Economic literacy (as a process of popular education) cannot produce macro-level change overnight, but it does slowly empower women to dare to 'get the big boys to listen', and in that sense feeds into more conjunctural, knowledge-based advocacy." WIDE.

Economic literacy can be a powerful tool. It can make women aware of their own situation, it can open their eyes to the role they play the economy of their country and the world, it can prepare them to challenge this reality. Economic

literacy is being used by organizations around the world as a bottom-up strategy for confronting the dominant neo-liberal economic model that has been proved to be unjust and to have devastating consequences for vulnerable sectors and particularly for women.

The impact of trade liberalization on Central American women is already being felt, and yet before the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) has had a chance to make clear the extent of its damage, the European Union is getting ready to negotiate its own free trade agreement with the region. Participation by civil society in the process for agreeing CAFTA was conspicuous by its absence, and as a result its full impact on vulnerable groups was not assessed. Unless EU member countries and their Central American counterparts learn from this lesson the downward spiral is likely to continue.

Never has it been more important that women become aware of what is changing and find ways to stand up against this and to create alternatives. So, for economic



A Managua garment factory advertises for workers, June 2006.

CAWN

literacy to be effective as a strategy it must be very clearly linked both to advocacy and lobbying that makes policy makers take women's rights into account, and to projects that support women in their roles as workers, mothers, carers, health providers, educators and community organizers.

With the number of households where women are the primary wage earners widely believed to be increasing, it is clearly anachronistic to believe that men play a more active role in economic

life. But more vital still is the social reproduction role – rearing and caring of children, caring for the elderly and other dependent family members, and nurturing and educating the labour force in their household and communities – played by women. Women are underpinning the global economy and they are also capable of changing it.

1. Economic policy, Social Reproduction and Gender in Latin America and the Caribbean, Dr. Mariama Williams, IGTN-Caribbean, December 2003.

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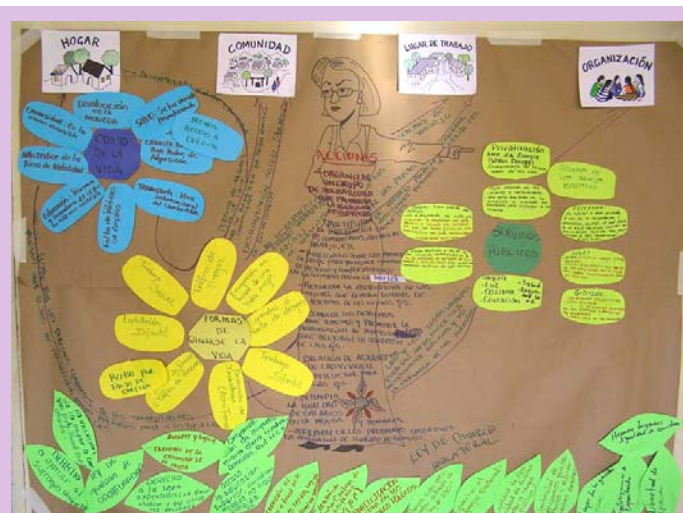
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Nicaraguan President Enrique Bolaños signs the new National Employment Policy with MEC's director Sandra Ramos in the background.

not used to recognising, is a tall order. In addition MEC need to ensure that they really make the link between economic literacy and activism that leads to policy change. If it is to be effective as an empowerment strategy economic literacy must not only enable women to make changes in their domestic budget management, where they are often the main wage earner, but also allow them to see how Free Trade Agreements and other more subtle aspects of economic liberalisation affect their lives. And this must then be transformed into informed activism. Women must be able to participate in and lead lobbying and campaigns that can bring policy change. MEC undoubtedly has its work cut out, but they are already playing a key role in finding ways to bring women into the economic debate.

¹ MEC has worked since 1993 with women workers in many different sectors (workers in the garments-for-export processing industry, domestic workers, tobacco workers, miners, informal-sector workers, small/micro businesswomen, women without paid employment), raising awareness of their rights and carrying out advocacy and campaigning work. It has a membership of approx. 30,000 women workers from these sectors.



The Wall Workshop

To change today's economy, you need to start from the stories of women's everyday lives. This is the premise of the Wall Workshop – a visual educational tool designed to bring women together to conduct a gender analysis of the global economy, starting from their own experiences. The aim is to empower women to improve their living conditions. The tool uses the image of a stone wall to represent the economy, as it is made up of interrelated parts that build upon one another. Participants share their ideas, post coloured paper 'stones' on a large paper wall, and then look at how the stones in the wall are changing, the relationship between them and how the women can contribute to changing the wall. The 'Wall' is being used by women's organisations, trade unions, community groups and professional organisations in many countries around the world.

[For more information visit www.wallworkshop.com]

Knowledge is power The economic literacy work of the Women in Development Europe (WIDE) Network

by Mandy Macdonald

"We are brought up with the notion that certain disciplines like economics have a purity which removes them from the influence of such things as gender, race or class. They are presented as technical and neutral subjects. By identifying and analysing these assumptions, it is hoped that women will become both better informed and better able to challenge them, both in their personal and working lives." (Mariama Williams, Introduction to the series of WIDE readers on women and economics, 1998)

What is economic literacy?

The International Gender and Trade Network defines economic literacy succinctly as

"the ability to understand and think critically about how trade and economic policies impact our daily lives." This broad definition describes economic literacy as a goal to be reached. In this sense economic literacy is a tool for empowerment through knowledge, enabling citizens to under-

stand the way economies work by demystifying the concepts, terms and processes involved, and with the ultimate aim of enabling them to participate as informed stakeholders in debating economic policy. WIDE's economic literacy manual *Women in the market* (1998) defined it as being about 'understanding the national, regional and global economy and our places within it.'

However, the term 'economic literacy' is also used to describe the process of reaching that goal. As a process, it consists of sharing economic, political and social analysis and information with a group in accessible and entertaining ways, using participatory techniques to make complex ideas accessible and to unpack the general economic principles and issues behind what we observe and experience in our daily lives.

Economic literacy in WIDE has evolved, as both concept and practice, over the decade or so since it first became an important area of WIDE's work. There are currently various understandings of economic literacy in WIDE but the fundamental elements and

rationale for economic literacy have not changed: it is, as it has always been, a tool for women's empowerment, building their capacity to advocate for change from a gender perspective.

Why do economic literacy?

The need to promote economic literacy among women springs from women's realization that while the current world economic order, based on the 'free' market, is unjust to most of the world's people, it is unjust to women in particular ways, which women need to understand clearly in order to construct fair and sustainable alternatives.

Economic literacy training

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builds a bridge between women's unrecognized knowledge and competence in economic areas and the language and concepts used by policy-makers, which are often technical, bureaucratic and mystifying. In this sense it pursues empowerment for women based on the self-confidence that comes with knowledge and the creativity to conceptualize and argue for economic alternatives.

But economic literacy is also a tool for other things on a less personal level, such as advocacy and collective political action in local, national and global communities.¹ From the start WIDE's economic work has always aimed to provide tools that will enable its members and other groups to increase the effectiveness of their advocacy for gender equality.

The broad objectives of WIDE's economic literacy work are therefore to draw out and develop women's understanding of the interrelationship between gender relations, human rights and economics, particularly trade, and to provide them with the capacity to argue convincingly and confidently for the inclusion of a gender perspective in macroeconomic debates at all levels from the household and the village to the World Trade Organisation.

Capacity building for advocacy and networking

In WIDE's 2004–07 project 'Capacity building for advocacy and networking' economic literacy is identified closely with capacity-building and integrated with advocacy and lobbying. This is reflected in the two sub-components of the programme:

(i) **internal** capacity-building, aimed at WIDE's active members, including national platforms, in order to support advocacy and lobbying initiatives (activities ranging from training on specific macroeconomic issues to effective advocacy training);
(ii) **external** capacity building, provided by WIDE members to their own constituencies and partner organisations, including mixed European Union NGOs and trade unions, on economic literacy and gender mainstreaming.

The regional and national trainings held in 2005–6 reflect this dual internal/external emphasis and have included a capacity-building seminar on economics, gender and free trade agreements in Latin America; two EU-level regional capacity-building workshops, one reviewing and building WIDE's knowledge on alternative economic theories and strategies and the other focusing on advocacy skills for WIDE staff and National



Maquila workers in a focus group lead by CAWN in Managua, Nicaragua, June 2006.

Picture credit: CAWN

Platforms; a content-based Training of Trainers on gender and trade issues in Asia; and ongoing trainings organized by WIDE National Platforms or partners.

Many WIDE members and regional partners, having benefited already from WIDE's economic literacy training, set up their own economic literacy programmes and are now multiplying the trainings with other NGOs, trade unions, educational institutions, and other target groups. While these target groups do not necessarily identify with WIDE, they benefit from WIDE's analysis as presented in the trainings and from the training methods that have proven successful over the years, and many of them become

part of WIDE's web of contacts.

WIDE is currently working on a "Virtual Bibliography of economic literacy for women" which aims to be an ongoing knowledge base on economic literacy, bringing together workshop reports, tools and materials from WIDE and its partners around the world and making visible the common project of empowering women to make their voices heard in trade and macroeconomic debates in the North, South and East.

For more information on WIDE's work visit www.eurosur.org/wide/home.htm

¹ 'Economic literacy is important for building bases of political pressure in communities, as part of an advocacy process.' Carol Barton, in *Trade traps & gender gaps*, report of WIDE Annual Conference 1997, p53.

Is Training on 'Empowerment' Enough? An Integral Grass-Roots Approach with Rural Women in Nicaragua

by Marina Prieto-Carrón, University of Bristol/CAWN

"While the women told us how important was empowerment at the level of raising consciousness. Once empowered, they also asked us: what are the next steps?" (Ana Celia Tercero, 14 June 2006, El Viejo, Nicaragua)

In a recent fieldtrip to Nicaragua (June, 2006) I interviewed the leaders of two organisations working with women in the rural area of Chinandega, in the municipality of El Viejo. Edilberta Gómez

Hernández (known as Berta Gómez) is the coordinator of the Women's Health Clinic, an organiser of banana workers and, until recently, women's officer in the banana trade union FETRABACH (Federación de Trabajadores Bananeros de Chinandega). Ana Celia Tercero (known as Mayela) is the coordinator of the feminist organisation APADEIN (Asociación para el Desarrollo Integral de la Mujer en Nicaragua). In their work with banana workers and other

rural women, these organizations use an approach that recognizes women's different positions such as workers, mothers, wives and community leaders. They also have an integral approach that includes: organisation, training, basic needs such as health and literacy education, and economic opportunities. They know that empowering women through training is not enough. 'Empowerment' as a concept is itself holistic.

The Women's Health Clinic is a



A banana packing shed in Central America

Trade-centred and Gender-insensitive Development: Negotiations begin on an EU-Central America Free Trade Agreement

by Maria Sol Oyuela

At the end of the European Union-Latin America Summit, which took place last May in Vienna (Austria), EU and Central American leaders agreed to launch negotiations for a Free Trade Agreement (FTA). The so-called Association Treaty will drastically change the relations between both regions. Cooperation and political dialogue, the two paramount elements of EU-Central American relations since 1984¹, are being displaced by trade priorities.

Analysts claim that geo-strategic considerations are at the heart of the EU's interest in the FTA; the hegemony of the USA in the region will inevitably be challenged by the new commercial ties with the EU². Others argue that the EU is looking to protect its transnational corporations from the benefits that US companies enjoy through CAFTA's recent enactment³. It is beyond question that the FTA will benefit EU commercial interests; in particu-

lar, the privatisation of services has been identified as the main area of potential gains for European companies⁴. Central American leaders have also insisted on accelerating the negotiation process; they believe that such an agreement will serve as evidence of the region's integration into the world economy and thus attract foreign investment.

It is clear that negotiators have assessed the economic impact that the FTA will have both in Europe and Central America; however neither side has showed interest in evaluating how such an agreement will impact upon the poorest citizens of the continent. It has been widely recognised that trade agreements between unequal partners, such as the one between a large market like the EU and small economies such as those in Central America tend to exacerbate existing inequalities⁵. The experience of NAFTA has demonstrated that the burden is likely to fall heavily on

women⁶. The fact that the FTA affects men and women differently means that gender impact assessments will have to be undertaken to put in place protective measures for Central American women.

FTAs tend to change the types of work available for women, the conditions of work as well as wages. Furthermore, it is likely that due to the privatisation process, women's access to public services will be severely constrained. Finally, given that Central American women are the backbone of agricultural production, they will be extremely vulnerable to an FTA with Europe whose Common Agriculture Policy will remain untouched as a result of the failure of WTO's Doha Round.

It is time for EU and Central American leaders to recognise that the trade regime that is being negotiated has profound gender dimensions. The terms of the Association Treaty need to be gender-sensitive in order to make trade

compatible with the sustainable development of the region. Otherwise, the well-known advantages of trade could result in a long-term damage to the societies of Central American countries.

CAWN will be monitoring progress in these negotiations and will report further on this issue in future editions of A-Genda.

Maria Sol Oyuela is a volunteer with CAWN

¹ In 1984 the San Jose Dialogue was launched at the Ministerial Meeting in San Jose de Costa Rica (EU Europa Trade Website: http://ec.europa.eu/trade/issues/bilateral/regions/central_america/index_en.htm)

² TLC con EU tiene propositos geoestrategicos: CEICOM? at www.bilaterals.org/article.php3?id_article=6010

³ TLC Centroamerica-EU: Posible favor a las transnacionales europeas?, at www.bilaterals.org/article.php3?id_article=4727

⁴ El Acuerdo de Asociacion entre la Union Europea y America Central? at www.bond.org.uk/pubs/groups/latinamerica/eusummitsp.pdf

⁵ See for example: (2006) ?Unequal Partners?, Oxfam Briefing Note; El Acuerdo de Asociacion entre la Union Europea y America Central? at www.bond.org.uk/pubs/groups/latinamerica/eusummitsp.pdf

⁶ UN research has demonstrated that more than 10 years since the implementation of NAFTA poverty increased by a 50% for women headed household in Mexico (UNIFEM, Reducing Women's Poverty and Exclusion at http://www.unifem.org/gender_issues/women_poverty_economics/at_a_glance.php)



non-profit organisation set up by banana workers. Although its primary target group is women banana workers, they also treat men, children and old people. Berta Gómez points out that they have saved the lives of more than 2,000 women. The work of the clinic has been very important in offering affordable and quality health that is sadly not provided by the employers in the banana plantations.

At the same time, training has been a key strategy of the clinic, because many women do not know about their rights and these are constantly being violated in the plantations. The clinic has trained around 700 women (and men) in issues such as self-esteem, reproductive health (and sexual education), labour rights and collective agreements and there are more than 1,200 workers organised in a newly formed trade union, linked with the clinic.

The clinic offers women an "inde-

pendent space from the employers" and Berta emphasises how it helps them to "realise their potential" and "advance with the organisation, so we can achieve collective agreements [in the banana plantations] while at the same time "offering healthcare for the workers and their families". The women feel that with this integral approach they have achieved something for themselves.

The feminist organisation APADEIN has worked since 1996 with poor women in rural areas in small and far flung villages. They provide basic literacy training to the women (in coordination with the Ministry of Education), psychological support, they work extensively on domestic violence with women and men and they have a radio programme. Through their training on sexual and reproductive rights APADEIN has opened a

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space in which rural women, many of whom are strongly influenced by the Catholic churches views, to talk about the controversial issue of abortion. Several women have gone to the police to report violence and rapes.

In a recent strategic planning process, women who have been trained by APADEIN identified productive projects and housing as priorities for the organisation. They felt that the projects needed to provide more than just subsistence and called for small micro-credit programs to be set up. APADEIN is very concerned about assumptions that "the economy is sustained by men" and the "women are invisible and are not respected" and is challenging this through their work.

Both organisations are involved

in a local network of women that is promoted by the local Women's Commission (*Comisión Municipal de la Mujer*) and in particular by two women counsellors: María Luisa Reyes García and Verónica Vanegas Serrano. Local political participation and economic opportunities for women are two of the key issues of this Commission.

Interviews with these women made very clear how strong the links are between training processes, 'organising' (through women's associations and trade unions), supporting the basic needs of women in their every day lives, and the need to influence political processes. These two projects are examples of women-centred initiatives that take into account that training alone is not enough, that 'organising' alone is not enough, that productive projects and basic needs attention such as health and pri-

mary education alone is not enough, that influencing policy-making alone is not enough. Only by responding to women in a holistic manner in all the different facets of their lives can interventions make a difference.

Other organisations and initiatives have much to learn from this kind of grass-roots women-led initiatives. Sadly, these organisations also need much economic support. For more information about APADEIN and how to contact the organisation, see: <http://apadeim.bitacoras.com/>. For the Women's Health Clinic and the 'organising' project with banana workers, contact the author of this article (marina.prieto@bristol.ac.uk) (Note: Helping to provide the clinic with internet and other technological facilities may be a first step in helping them to gain some well-deserved international visibility).



Women's rights at stake in Nicaraguan elections

by Helen Dixon

Violence and corruption are unfortunately frequent elements of the pre and post electoral environment in Nicaragua and this year has been no different. In the present election campaign there is open foreign intervention, many people are fearful of backlashes against them if they don't campaign for the parties that presently rule the country's political life, and most Nicaraguans are concerned about the possibility of electoral fraud and violence before and after the vote.

On 5th November this year Nicaragua faces one of the most contentious and crucial elections in years. In an atmosphere that seems to be leaning towards a renewed dictatorship, this year's campaign has been marked by foreign interference in national sovereignty, and the

alliance of all but one political party with fundamentalist churches. In these elections women's issues have taken the forefront, which means that women have a lot to lose or gain with its results.

This national election is very different from the last three as there are five different contending parties, four of which have a serious percentage of the vote with slim margins of difference. Part of the reason for this is that the two dominant parties – the PLC (*Partido Liberal Constitucionalista*) led by Arnoldo Alemán from his luxurious ranch-cum-jail and the FSLN (*Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional*) led by Daniel Ortega formed a pact during the last governmental period and divided the cake of state powers, including the Supreme Electoral Council, to ensure their predominance. Neither leader has

shown willingness to pass on party leadership to any other contender within their ranks.

For these reasons, two independent candidates emerged: Eduardo Montealegre, ex-Minister of Finances and representative of the corporate and banking elite who has formed the ALN (*Alianza Liberal Nicaragüense*), and Edmundo Jarquín, for the MRS Alliance (*Alianza Movimiento de Renovación Sandinista*). Jarquín was originally vice-presidential candidate for Herty Lewites, the popular ex-mayor of Managua who died of a heart attack at the beginning of his campaign for election as president. This alliance is made up of Sandinistas tired of Daniel Ortega's strongman approach and FSLN pacts with the extreme right.

The campaign has been fought with open US intervention in favour of right wing and ex-contras Sandinista rivals, as guarantors of US policies in the region. US Ambassador Paul Trivelli made very public his governments' sympathy for banker Eduardo Montealegre, and while critical of the corrupt "Arnoldista" liberal faction, he made no mention of Montealegre's involvement in a corruption scandal which allegedly allowed big bankers, including Montealegre himself, to profit from government subsidies for bankruptcy. After all, Montealegre supports neo-liberal economic thinking and has been directly involved in the recently rat-

ified Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA).

The FSLN took maximum advantage of the continued US belief in the "communist threat" to strengthen its populist rhetoric. It also made the most of its links with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, who cuts a similar figure to Ortega and is eager to cement loyalties with his continental resistance to US intervention. Chavez has promised oil to Nicaragua, as well as facilitating free eye surgery dubbed "Operation Miracle" in Venezuela with Cuban doctors in order to benefit the FSLN's campaign and convince people to vote for Ortega. Edmundo Jarquín, candidate for the Sandinista alternative MRS, wrote a public letter to Chavez asking him to maintain neutrality and not to intervene in Nicaraguan voters' decisions.

The internal political climate has also been rife with conflict. After steering an ambiguous course between PLC rivals Arnoldo Alemán and Enrique Bolaños, Eduardo Montealegre failed to capture the official PLC candidacy and opted to go independent. The competition between the two emerging factions was fierce and during the campaign accusations flew back and forth as they tried to ensure support.

But the FSLN campaign has not been all reconciliation, sweetness and light. When the candidates were to be decided Herty Lewites, a

Therapeutic abortion outlawed in Nicaragua

In November 2006 the Nicaraguan Congress stripped women of rights they have held under Nicaraguan law for over 130 years by outlawing therapeutic abortion. The law change was supported by 52 of the 93 members of the National Assembly, including many representatives of the FSLN, Sandinista National Liberation Front. Women's organizations, other human rights groups and medical associations both in Nicaragua and internationally all campaigned against the legislation calling it a cynical electoral ploy and emphasizing that 'back-street abortion' is among the primary causes of maternal mortality in Latin America. The women's movement organized demonstrations which are pictured here. Not only does the law change strip women of basic human rights, it also violates the principle of separation of church and state which is clearly supported in the Nicaraguan constitution. At least four women have already died as a result of being refused an abortion even though their lives were in danger. The women's movement will continue to campaign against the new law.



Pictures: Helen Dixon

very popular public figure and previously the FSLN Mayor of the capital city Managua, was violently repelled by stone throwing "Danielistas" from the party congress, which then expelled Lewites from the party and re-elected Daniel Ortega for his fourth candidacy, in spite of having lost in the last three attempts. As time moved on towards the elections, an influential group of revolutionary *comandantes* – leaders from the 70s and 80s – broke ranks and formed a group to "salvage the original Sandinista vision and values" from pragmatic politicking and the increasingly mafia-style of leaders loyal to Ortega who also agree with the FSLN-PLC pact. Ortega, unfazed, went on to make alliances with former Somoza supporters and ex-contras.

The disaffected *comandantes* along with many Sandinistas concerned by recent events joined forces with the *Alianza Movimiento de Renovación Sandinista* (MRS). The MRS was formed in the early 1990s by among others Dora Maria Tellez and ex-Vice President Sergio Ramirez. Together they established a broad alliance with other groups of people who hope to establish a new progressive and left-wing alternative for Nicaragua.

After an intense discussion process this year in which women from organizations and networks across the country participated, the Autonomous Women's Movement

(*Movimiento de Mujeres Autónomas*) signed an agreement with the MRS based on five key points that reflect most organised women's concerns:

1. The establishment of democratic principles and practices in state institutions presently affected with corruption and party biases;
2. Respect for the secular state established in Nicaragua's constitution since 1893 and a commitment to build public awareness of secular culture based on human rights principles and citizens' participation;
3. The promotion of gender-based democracy and real parity for women in the public and private arenas, equality in decision-making, as well as state policies and resources to guarantee women's development and rights
4. Social justice including a justice system that in practice punishes criminal offences and defends women and children against violence, as well as economic policies that defend national sovereignty, access to education, health, basic services and resources for the poor majority. This point emphasises the need for special recognition of women's role as key agents in national development and safeguards for the environment and natural resources, especially water.
5. Population policies as part of a national development plan, that

ensure women's access to integral and specific health services, and guarantee sexual rights and reproductive rights for the population, including access to scientific sex education free from prejudice, contraceptives and therapeutic abortion. This point emphasises respect for personal autonomy and sexual diversity.

This is the first time that the women's movement has taken an overt position in alliance with a political party since its autonomy was declared in 1992. But it was not a casual decision. In spite of the Violeta Barrios government's openness to the Commissariats for Women and Children (*Spanish version*) at the beginning of the 1990s, all three of the last governments have taken stances in alliance with the conservative Catholic Church hierarchy and have placed church-appointed figures to ministerial positions in the state, including a prominent member of Opus Dei, twice Minister of Education, who is also a key figure in the pro-life group that actively campaigns against women's rights.

Another important factor is the deteriorated relationship with the FSLN. When FSLN leader Daniel Ortega was accused in 1998 by his step-daughter Zoilamérica Narvaez of child abuse, rape and sexual harassment since the age of 11, members of the Autonomous Women's Movement supported her personally, legally and in public

positions and actions. They were the only organised sector of civil society to do so. This caused a crisis of split loyalties for some women in the movement because of their Sandinista history, but most listened to Zoilamérica, debated within the different groups and networks and came out with a stronger sense of autonomy. When the FSLN was later criticised for its pact with the corrupt leader of the PLC, the Autonomous Women's Movement took a public stance and helped to organise the biggest mass mobilization since the time of the revolution, in which participants expressed their overwhelming repudiation for corruption and political wheeling and dealing.

These stakes were raised even more when Daniel Ortega and Zoilamérica's mother Rosario Murillo re-married in Managua's main cathedral with the help of right-wing Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo. Having publicly renewed their faith in God, traditional order and the family, the couple that now dominates FSLN leadership, then proceeded to recruit Christian fundamentalist support. Less than two months before the elections they also took a public position against abortion and ensured that the FSLN officially joined pro-life forces. They have backed a proposed new law which abolishes legal therapeutic abortions established in

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1891, and sets back women's rights to mid 19th century standards. The proposed law was reinforced with a large demonstration which was organised by churches and three political parties in the electoral race. Government Ministries brought pressure to bear, illegally, on public schools and state workers to join. The Women's Movement responded with a smaller but very spirited march. After the proposal was introduced into the National Assembly President Enrique Bolaños proposed to railroad the legislation through in record time, in open violation of normal procedures and of women's rights as set out in the national constitution. This anti abortion law makes women's organisations vulnerable to a new inquisition.

The only electoral contender that has openly supported therapeutic abortion, and that respects women's basic human rights has been the MRS. In the present climate, heavily influenced by Vatican

FSLN wins Nicaraguan elections

On 7 November, the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE) declared FSLN candidate Daniel Ortega President-Elect of Nicaragua. The results were FSLN (Daniel Ortega): 38.07%; National Liberal Alliance (Eduardo Montealegre): 29%; Constitutional Liberal Party (José Rizo): 26.21%; Sandinista Renovation Movement (Edmundo Jarquín): 6.44%; Alternative for Change (Eden Pastora): 0.27%.

and evangelic rhetoric this could be seen as a serious disadvantage. However, the MRS presidential candidate Edmundo Jarquín refused throughout the campaign to make demagogic promises and in this case to change his position for political convenience. His sincerity and transparency was convincing for a large percentage of the electorate – no small achievement in these times of generalized cynicism and disillusionment with other image-led politicians.

At the time of writing, the results of this fragile process are still unknown. The fact that there are five contending parties means that the National Assembly will probably be released from its two-party

pact. However, the Presidency is key. It will be a tight race and may well go to a second round. As women in Nicaragua face the choice of candidates, they will have an important impact collectively on the decision, as long as the popular vote is respected by the Supreme Electoral Council. In choosing between the different candidates most adult women will feel pressured by their most basic and immediate needs in the desperate economic situation, family loyalties, as well as political loyalties from the times of the contra war. But also by their sense of their own rights and their vision for the future. The younger generation's votes will be key in measuring a

growing consciousness about their rights as young women and men, and their view of modern society.

We can only hope that organised women and young people in alliance with sincere Sandinistas will manage to hold back the tendency towards organised fascism and the resuscitation of dictatorships, giving us instead, a renewed space to breathe and advance as women, citizens and human rights activists.

¹ Arnoldo Aleman was tried and found guilty of stealing millions of dollars from the Nicaraguan state while President between 1996 and 2001. He was spared a 20 year prison sentence by a pact made between the FSLN and the PLC. As a prisoner under house arrest he is forbidden from participating in political life, however he has continued to act openly as head of his party.

² A special service for women and children who denounce violence, including special units in police stations and services coordinated with women's organizations, centres and clinics.

³ Especially from the Women's Network against Violence (*Red de Mujeres contra la Violencia*) and the National Feminist Committee (CNF).

Looking at the Economy through Women's Eyes Banúlacht's economic literacy work in Ireland

by Maeve Taylor

There has been much analysis in recent times of increasing inter-relatedness and interdependence at a local and global level. Globalisation has come to be associated with the spread of capitalism and neo-liberalism, western cultural dominance and the influence of the international media and information technology. Globalisation also has political, economic and sociocultural effects at local, national, regional and global levels. Some are positive, such as transnational social movements and opportunities for dialogue and action at local and global levels. Others, such as increasing global inequality and lack of access to decision-making at international levels, very negative. As a feminist organisation that links locally based women's groups in Ireland with the experiences of

women in the South, Banúlacht is particularly concerned with the effects of globalisation on women and on gender inequality.

A real barrier to women's engagement with globalisation is the elitism of economics, which can make it seem inaccessible and overwhelming, so that those most adversely affected by the negative impacts of globalisation are likely to have least access to the concepts and skills for challenging it and creating alternatives. It is critical, therefore, that women develop the skills and confidence to engage with economic policy. One response to this need has been the development of economic literacy programmes for women by women's organisations such as Women in Development Europe (WIDE), the International Gender and Trade Network (IGTN), the Caribbean

Association for Feminist Research and Action (CAFRA).

Banúlacht, which is the Irish platform of WIDE, has been actively engaged in economic literacy work since 1999. Originally basing our work on WIDE's economic literacy training manual, we have now developed our own distinct approach to meet the needs of women's networks and community development organisations in Ireland. The training is based on a feminist approach to the economy, and aims to contribute to women's empowerment through a process of demystifying the economy. The use of the term 'literacy' is not intended to imply that participants are 'illiterate' about the economy. Rather, it is used to refer to a Freirean adult education process that is grounded in the values of community development, and

aims to facilitate critical engagement with ideas.

Economic literacy training aims to make visible the vast areas of human activity, including much of the work carried out by women in the home and community, that is invisible in economic calculations and unregarded in economic policy, simply because it is unpaid. The name of our programme, and of the facilitator's guide we published in 2004, is '*Looking at the Economy through Women's Eyes*', reflecting that economic literacy training is about looking at the world differently, seeing what mainstream economists do not see and about re-visioning alternative economic systems. The experience has been powerful. Participants have come to recognise and value their own knowledge of the economy. They have recognised their right to critique government policy based on their lived experience of the economy. As the competence and confidence of individual women and women's organisations and networks to engage with economic policy grows, we hope that policy makers and decision makers will be able to see the economy through women's eyes.

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