Content of Research Report

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Abstract

The purpose of my research is to measure qualitatively the impact of the Nicaraguan Revolution on Nicaraguan women in the immigrant community in the United States. It is well known that women played a major role in the “failed” Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua (1979-1990) and despite recent political setbacks in Nicaragua, women appear to have been politicized, having gained political and social reforms. I wish to measure this process. The parameters of this study will cover the years of the revolution itself, and the post-revolution to the present, which is approximately 1979-2013. Through analysis of primary and secondary sources, as well as interviews of immigrant Nicaraguan women, I hope to gain an understanding of their general attitudes and perceptions of their revolution in regards to gender equality and education. This research is significant because although the literature on Nicaraguan gender relations is extensive, little to no research has been done on the immigrant community in Southern California which has molded a new community and identity. My research will help in filling the gap in contemporary immigrant history, a subject that has been neglected.
Introduction

In my mother’s early teens, she had learned how to rebuild an AK-47 and an M15 rifle. She was later recruited to be a part of a health brigade to vaccinate children in her neighborhood in Managua, Nicaragua. She has worked very hard and has sacrificed much to contribute as much as my father did, who was Mexican. I did not truly realize that I was half-Nicaraguense, half-Mexicana until adolescence. I assumed both my parents came from Mexico, and when I heard of Nicaragua, it seemed like a distant, esoteric place that was probably just like Mexico. But hearing parts of my mother’s story piqued my interest in my mother’s past because I knew practically nothing about Nicaragua. This reality of mine and my desire to recognize my mother and other women like her in History is my motivation for research.

Historical Context

Prior to 1979, the powerful Somoza family ruled Nicaragua as a client state of the United States. Known as one of the most corrupt and repressive regimes in Latin America, the Somoza dictatorship did little to modernize Nicaraguan society. Women were unable to participate in political decision-making, despite the fact that they contributed to Nicaragua’s economy as workers. The traditional Hispanic patriarchy, reinforced by machismo and the Catholic Church, furthered the marginalization of women by reinforcing the submissive role of women as mother and caregiver. Yet, Nicaragua’s backward and dependent economy also forced women into work in the formal and informal sectors to provide for their families, as many men--seeking work or fleeing political violence--abandoned their homes. It was no surprise that women played a major

role in manifesting discontent with the Somoza regime. During la revolución, women were encouraged to take up arms as an opportunity to achieve gender equality. Once the Sandinistas overthrew dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle and the FSLN came to power in 1979, women finally found their place in the public sphere. They served the Revolution as policy-makers, educators, healthcare professionals, and self-help advocates. Unfortunately, the revolution did not survive long. By 1990, the election of Violeta Chamorro of the conservative National Opposition Union proved to be a major setback to revolutionary change and to women’s rights. The Chamorro administration cut many programs that assisted women, once again relegating women to their traditional roles. Thus, the drive for gender equality in Nicaragua stalled in the 1990s and has improved little ever since. Despite the apparent reversals, there is evidence that Nicaraguan women underwent some degree of politicization as a result of the revolution.

Historiography

Research on this subject has been published very recently, from 2001 to the present. However, there is a lack of scholarship on Nicaragua specifically, so I have expanded the scope of my analysis to examine works written on other similar revolutionary movements, as well. Political scientists, historians, anthropologists, and sociologists have examined revolutionary women in Nicaragua and in other countries, and have proposed several interpretations of women’s role in revolution, as well as post-revolution developments.

A political scientist and one of the prominent authors on Nicaraguan scholarship of the Sandinista Revolution, Karen Kampwirth’s *Women & Guerrilla Movements* takes a strong feminist approach in analyzing women and guerrilla participation in Chiapas, El Salvador, and

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Nicaragua. In studying revolution, it is important to examine all aspects of a given society, not simply social structure (class struggle) and economics. Kampwirth’s assertion is that several factors came into play in the mobilization of women into guerrilla forces. Kampwirth’s goal is not to argue that the reasons women joined guerrillas were vastly different from men’s, but to argue that women’s changing social conditions set the stage for many women to have more access to politicization and mobilization into guerrilla forces. Her conclusion was not surprising, but her work has opened up new possibilities for the future of the study of revolution.

Karen Kampwirth’s second book, *Feminism and the Legacy of Revolution: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chiapas*, is a sequel to *Women & Guerrillas* that focuses more on the post-revolutionary period. Kampwirth now examines how and why female guerrillas became feminists, and what kind of feminist movements have emerged after the revolutions in Nicaragua and El Salvador. She asserts that female guerrillas who had “mid-prestige” were those that went on to become feminists. Kampwirth’s point is that women joined guerrillas for several reasons, and gender equality was surprisingly not one, but participation in guerrilla warfare paved the way for women to become feminists. Another interesting point that Kampwirth asserts is that feminism and revolution are not naturally linked through her brief analysis of post-revolution developments in Cuba, Iran and Poland, where anti-feminism has taken root. Kampwirth’s scope does not analyze the impact that NGOs had on feminist autonomous groups.

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5 Kampwirth, 36-37.
7 Kampwirth, 167-177.
8 Kampwirth, 183-193
In “Abortion, Antifeminism, and the Return of Daniel Ortega: In Nicaragua, Leftist Politics?” Kampwirth provides an analysis of Daniel Ortega’s reelection and its connection to the anti-feminist movement that has gained momentum in Nicaragua. Upon Ortega’s reelection, a law was soon enacted that banned therapeutic abortions, making Nicaragua one of the few countries that has banned abortion,\(^9\) even in cases of rape and incest. Kampwirth argues that this outcome is the logical conclusion. The anti-feminist movement had organized itself well, and Daniel Ortega needed to garner more support. Ortega’s sudden shift to conservatism is believed to be a “shift to cynicism”,\(^10\) and she argues that had the election not been so close, Ortega may not have let the anti-abortion law pass. Kampwirth’s analysis of the divisions in the feminist movement are consistent with her findings in *Feminism and the Legacy of Revolution*.

Jennifer Leigh Disney’s *Women’s Activism and Feminist Agency in Mozambique and Nicaragua* explores women’s organizational theories and practices in Nicaragua and Mozambique. Feminists have cultivated a new definition of feminism that challenges Western feminist thought through the organization of their autonomous feminist groups.\(^11\) The significance of Disney’s research is that feminist agency is crucial to promoting equality in a world that experiences a growing gap in economic inequality. Both revolutions gave women the opportunity to participate, but it ignored an important part of women’s lives, the domestic sphere.\(^12\) Disney asserts that in order for social change and feminism to be more effective, economic opportunities and reproductive health must both be considered.\(^13\)

Finally, Rosario Montoya’s *Gendered Scenarios of Revolution: making new men and new*
women in Nicaragua, 1975-2000 is a historical ethnography that examines the effects of Sandinista ideology and the contradictions that arose in the small village of El Tule, Nicaragua. Montoya argues that although the Contra War worsened conditions in Nicaragua that greatly risked the survival of the Sandinista Revolution, the Sandinistas themselves also set the revolution up for failure, as they began to revert to patriarchal structures after having already created new opportunities and roles for men and women\textsuperscript{14}. Montoya’s work is a reinterpretation of the failures of the revolution in Nicaragua. Even though the Sandinistas restricted El Tule, the people actually went against the Sandinistas at times in order to advance their interests\textsuperscript{15}. This work provides insight into the transformations that take place during times of revolution, as well as the legacies that are left behind to confront the wave of neoliberalism that spread throughout Latin America in the late 20th century.

These works are the first lights illuminated on the history of women’s participation—whether direct or indirect— in revolutionary movements. They provide great insight into the extent of women’s involvement and the gains (or losses) they’ve made post-revolution. It is clear that feminist (and anti-feminist histories) are still in the making as the scholarship is so young, and each author I have examined present their theories and arguments well, relying heavily on interviews. Many sub-topics of revolutionary women are addressed, but health care and agricultural workers seem like topics to be researched to contribute to the current scholarship, since these topics were also very important in movements like the Cuban Revolution and in Chile.

\textbf{Research Questions}


\textsuperscript{15} Montoya, 10.
The purpose of my research is to measure qualitatively the politicization of women in Southern California. Most people who emigrated from Nicaragua did so after the Contra War officially began, to escape poverty and the growing violence. Much of the revolution’s achievements had been made by that point in time, indicating that those who left had already been exposed to the revolution and may have carried revolutionary seeds of thought with them to their new destinations. There are few sources on what happens after revolution, in Nicaragua’s case. What happened to Nicaraguan diasporic women? Did the revolution affect them? What does it mean to an older Nicaraguan woman in Southern California? What challenges do they face? Where does education fit into their realities?

Methods

My methods will involve traditional historical research concerning primary and secondary sources. This research falls under a postcolonial history framework with an added dimension of gender, and an anthropological approach, since I must help create new primary sources through interviews. I conducted six interviews. I met these participants at the annual Feria Nicaraguense hosted in Los Angeles. I interviewed older Nicaraguan women, aged 40+. A couple of sample questions I asked were, “When did you leave Nicaragua? Why?” and, “What was it like adjusting to life in the United States?” The purpose of asking questions like this is to gain a better understanding of women’s perceptions and attitudes towards the Sandinista Revolution, but also to focus on the new life they have created for themselves in the US. The questions are engineered to be open-ended because I did not expect certain results or answers from these interviews. The creation of these new primary sources is what will help me in formulating my final interpretations.
Discussion

There were some common themes that I have noticed in the interviews. The majority of the women interviewed immigrated alone, and although the primary reason was economic, escaping the violence of the revolution or domestic violence was also a major factor. Most of these women are single mothers who lived alone for a while in order to save money and pay for their children’s passage into the US. Another trend I have noticed is that half of these women received higher education in Nicaragua, and worked as either a lawyer, a government official, and a psychologist, which are considered prestigious professions. However, in the US they now work low-paying jobs since only very few degrees or certifications from Nicaragua are considered the equivalent of a bachelor’s degree. Even so, they are active members of their communities and work to end domestic violence or provide resources for women. The other women who did not receive higher education in Nicaragua also work low-paying jobs in the US, but did not report any involvement in their communities. Of these women, three stated that they did not believe the revolution helped women. Clearly these interviews are not representative of the entire targeted population, but this is a start in attempting to construct a history of the women belonging to the Nicaraguense community.

The interviews, should I get permission to have them archived, are contributions in and of themselves as new primary source materials for future scholarly research in many disciplines. This is also an attempt to find a middle ground between revolutionary ideals and gender equality in literature. The literature on the Sandinista revolution focused largely on the value of revolution in the public sphere instead of the value of gender equality in the domestic sphere. In addition, what happens often in history is that the questions that historians pose are almost always answered from a male perspective first, making women’s perspectives secondary. This is
why I went straight to asking women in the Southern California Nicaraguense community these questions first. This is important not only because women have long been marginalized from history, but the Sandinista Revolution had a powerful feminist impulse, as I explained earlier.

In looking for spaces or gaps that need to be filled, this research can provide a more useful, and more accurate history. The gap that I focused more on was education, because many of my sources merely glossed over it, but the Literacy Crusade was the Sandinista’s centerpiece for their revolution, which improved Nicaragua’s literacy rate exponentially, and there is an indication it played a role in education levels of the population I studied. This research is also a contribution to the history of the Nicaraguense diaspora in Southern California, of which very little research has been done aside from statistics. It is important to finally recognize this community, that has been largely ignored, despite being the 3rd largest Central American community in California. This community has molded a new identity, and warrants a voice in history. In the larger picture, this research helps fill in a gap that is central to understanding revolution in its entirety: the post-revolutionary period and women. Dr. Karen Kampwirth, a political scientist and expert on this subject, notes that by focusing on the questions of why states collapse and how revolutions succeed, the realities of revolution and the central role of women are often overlooked, at least until recently. However, the flourishing literature on gender roles in relation to revolution in Nicaragua is only the beginning.
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