To Alfonso
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<tr>
<td>AGEM</td>
<td>Women’s Economic Agenda (Agenda Económica de Mujeres)</td>
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<td>AMNLAE</td>
<td>Luisa Amanda Espinoza Association of Nicaraguan Women (Asociación de Mujeres Nicaragüenses Luisa Amanda Espinoza)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATC</td>
<td>Rural Workers’ Association (Asociación de Trabajadores del Campo)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COLACOT</td>
<td>Latin American Confederation of Cooperatives and Mutual Societies (Confederación Latinoamericana de Cooperativas y Mutuales de Trabajadores)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONACOOP</td>
<td>National Council of Cooperatives (Consejo Nacional de Cooperativas)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENABAS</td>
<td>Nicaraguan Enterprise of Basic Foodstuffs (La Empresa Nicaragüense de Alimentos Básicos)</td>
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<tr>
<td>FEMUPROCAN</td>
<td>Federation of Agricultural Cooperatives of Rural Women Producers of Nicaragua (Federación Agropecuaria de Cooperativas de Mujeres Productoras del Campo de Nicaragua)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FSLN</td>
<td>Sandinista National Liberation Front (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INFOCOOP</td>
<td>Nicaraguan Institute for the Promotion of Cooperatives (Instituto Nicaragüense de Fomento Cooperativo)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INIM</td>
<td>Nicaraguan Women’s Institute (Instituto Nicaragüense de la Mujer)</td>
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<tr>
<td>INPYME</td>
<td>Nicaraguan Institute for the Support of Small and Medium Sized Businesses (Instituto Nicaragüense de Apoyo a la Pequeña y Mediana Empresa)</td>
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<tr>
<td>INTA</td>
<td>Nicaraguan Institute for Agricultural Technology (Instituto Nicaragüense de Tecnología Agropecuaria)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAGFOR</td>
<td>Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (Ministerio Agropecuario y Forestal)</td>
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| MEC          | María Elena Cuadra Working and Unemployed Women’s Movement Movimiento de Mujeres Trabajadoras y Desempleadas "María Elena Cuadra"
<table>
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<th>Full Name</th>
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<td>MIFAMILIA</td>
<td>Ministry of the Family, Youth and Childhood (Ministerio de la Familia, Adolescencia y Niñez)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MINSA</td>
<td>Ministry of Health (Ministerio de Salud)</td>
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<tr>
<td>PECOSOL</td>
<td>Regional Program for Economic Solidarity in Central America (Programa de Economía Solidaria en Centroamérica)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLC</td>
<td>Constitutionalist Liberal Party (Partido Liberal Constitucionalista)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNAG</td>
<td>National Union of Farmers and Ranchers (Unión Nacional de Agricultores y Ganaderos)</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNIFEM</td>
<td>United Nations Development Fund for Women</td>
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This thesis investigates the extent to which successful, autonomous women’s organizations can emerge from class-based mass organizations, using the case study of FEMUPROCAN (Federation of Agricultural Cooperatives of Rural Women Producers of Nicaragua). I examine the nature of the organization, the extent of its success in achieving its objectives and the degree to which it has been accepted as a legitimate representative for rural women producers. I then discuss the concept of autonomy in terms of political, economic and organizational independence and explore the relationships between FEMUPROCAN and its international NGO partners in depth. I argue that whereas FEMUPROCAN has achieved some significant successes in a number of areas, there are certain areas in which the organization has not managed to make much progress towards its goals. Having achieved a high level of political autonomy, the biggest weakness of this type of women’s organization appears to be financial. Complete dependence on funds from international development NGOs limits the organizational autonomy of these organizations and leaves them vulnerable to the whims of development organizations based in the Global North. Although
FEMUPROCAN appears to be making the best of a situation that is far from ideal, they do not seem likely to decrease this dependence any time soon.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION: LIVING IN PERMANENT DEMONSTRATION

Women’s movements in post-revolutionary Nicaragua have been widely praised as some of the most successful and dynamic examples of women’s organizing in the whole of Latin America. During the Sandinista period (1979-1990) the revolutionary government pledged its commitment to achieving gender equality in the country and women made some important advances. The FSLN set up an official women’s organization, the Luisa Amanda Espinoza Association of Nicaraguan Women (AMNLAE) and channeled significant quantities of money and resources to class-based mass organizations affiliated with the party. These organizations provided the only legitimate space for women’s organizing and the Sandinista party exercised a significant degree of control over the movement at this time, limiting the ability of women to define their own objectives and priorities for action. Women within the mixed-sex organizations continued to experience significant discrimination from their male counterparts and often struggled to reach leadership positions. Furthermore, as the Contra war dragged on the goals of defending the revolution took priority for the mass organizations, and women’s rights took a backseat. Because of this, women within the Sandinista unions began to push for greater freedom, both from the FSLN and within their organizations.

The electoral defeat of the Sandinistas opened up new spaces for the creation of an autonomous women’s movement in the country. This movement would flourish into a highly influential and visible part of Nicaraguan civil society and combine coordination around common themes with a recognition of the diversity of women’s experiences. These developments did not go unnoticed by scholars and there is a significant body of work on women’s activism in post-Sandinista Nicaragua. The Sandinista-affiliated
class-based organizations experienced a period of disarray after 1990 as many of their members became disillusioned after the FSLN’s electoral defeat and these organizations lost their position as privileged spaces for the discussion of women’s rights.

Many of the leaders formerly active in the Women’s Secretariats of these organizations had been pressing for independence for some time and seized this opportunity to break away from the mixed-sex organizations and form their own women’s groups. These new organizations asserted their independence from the FSLN and from their parent organizations. This was often possible because funding in this period was available from some international NGOs who switched from channeling the majority of their aid through the government to concentrate more on funding civil society organizations. In her book *From the Revolution to the Maquiladoras* (2005) Jennifer Bickham Mendez describes how the María Elena Cuadra Movement for Working and Unemployed Women (MEC) emerged from the Sandinista affiliated workers union (CST). She explores some of the challenges they faced in establishing the organization and investigates its strengths and weaknesses. Although the MEC successfully managed to distance itself from affiliation with a particular political party, the extent of their autonomy and success was limited by a number of factors. Two of the most important of these were a lack of economic sustainability and its dependence on international funding.

This thesis presents a similar case study, but whereas Bickham Mendez focused on an urban women’s movement, I based my research on the largest women’s organization representing rural women producers active in Nicaragua today. Just as the
MEC emerged from the Sandinista CST, the Federation of Agricultural Cooperatives of Rural Women Producers of Nicaragua, henceforth known by its acronym, FEMUPROCAN, had its roots in the Women’s Secretariat of the National Union of Farmers and Ranchers (UNAG). This organization also had links to the FSLN, although it was widely regarded as one of the most autonomous of the mass organizations. In the chapters that follow I explore the extent to which FEMUPROCAN has managed to establish itself as a successful, autonomous women’s organization representing the interests of smallholding rural women producers.

Although FEMUPROCAN and MEC appear to share the same basic trajectory and face some similar obstacles and challenges to the achievement of their objectives, there are also important differences between the organizations. For example, FEMUPROCAN works with rural women, which presents additional obstacles to women’s organizing in a number of important ways. Firstly, their members are dispersed over a wider area and live in more remote communities than the maquila workers who form MEC’s base, leading to greater challenges regarding maintaining sufficient contact with the grassroots, organizing meetings and communicating information quickly and effectively. Secondly, rural women are often some of the poorest and most disadvantaged groups in Nicaraguan society (Lanuza 2005, 20). Typically they have some of the lowest rates of literacy and education levels and least access to services. This presents further difficulties in organizing the women, training them in new skills and techniques and

---

1 According to Lanuza, the Nicaraguan government produced a “Poverty Map” in 2001 in which 80.2% of the rural population were classified as poor and 52.6% as living in extreme poverty (compared to national figures calculated by the United Nations in 2002 of 48% of the population as poor and 17% as living in extreme poverty.)

2 For example, Lanuza (2005, 27) states that only 22% of the rural population of Nicaragua has access to electricity
collecting membership dues. Third, rural communities are often characterized by more “traditional” views of gender roles that restrict women’s mobility and limit their self-confidence. FEMUPROCAN’s members face triple discrimination – for being women, for being rural and for being poor. Finally, the MEC decided to become an official NGO, whereas FEMUPROCAN, although undergoing NGO-ization to a significant degree, has not accepted the NGO label, preferring to assert its identity as a trade association. By examining the experience of FEMUPROCAN, in the light of that written about organizations such as MEC, I hope to draw some tentative conclusions about the extent to which successful, independent women’s organizations can emerge from class-based mass organizations in post-revolutionary Nicaragua.

I begin with a general overview of the development of women’s movements in the country following the Sandinista revolution of 1979. Particular attention is given to the role of the Women’s Secretariat of the ATC during the Sandinista period, and the emergence of autonomous women’s movements after 1990 and how these developments affected the position of rural women.

Chapter 3 explores the phenomenon of NGO-ization in greater detail. After a brief explanation of the reasons behind the hyper-NGO-ization of Nicaraguan society in the years following Hurricane Mitch (1998), I examine the advantages and drawbacks of the process for the construction of successful, autonomous women’s organizations. This is essential to understanding the way in which FEMUPROCAN has developed, as well as some of the pressures facing women’s organizations today.

Chapter 4 provides an account of the history of FEMUPROCAN and explains the reasons behind the decision to break away from UNAG and the difficulties faced by the
women in setting up and strengthening their own organization. Given that many of
FEMUPROCAN’s founders were among the most prominent leaders of the Women’s
Secretariat in UNAG, this chapter expands on the brief summary of the work of the
Secretariat provided in Chapter 2. Since FEMUPROCAN’s founding in 1997 it is
possible to identify three main phases in the development of the organization: First they
focused on building self-esteem and personal development; next they concentrated on
strengthening the organization and developing new production techniques; and finally,
they are now devoting the majority of their attention to developing entrepreneurial
capacity among their members and improving the organization’s advocacy work. The
last part of the chapter provides a brief snapshot of the organization today and some of
its main structures.

One of the questions raised by Bickham Mendez is where to draw the line
between a social movement and an NGO. She argues that the MEC is attempting to
incorporate elements of both, and break down the boundaries between the two terms.
FEMUPROCAN, I argue, could be seen to display a number of characteristics normally
associated with NGOs in combination with others usually attributed to social movement
organizations, and still others typical of trade or membership organizations. Chapter 5
examines the differences between these organizational forms and asks the question
“when does a social movement organization become an NGO?” I demonstrate that the
terms are not mutually exclusive and that organizations like FEMUPROCAN are blurring
the boundaries between traditional definitions.

The next part of my thesis analyzes in detail the extent to which FEMUPROCAN
could be considered an example of a successful organization. In order to do so it is first
necessary to define how success can be measured. I discuss some of the main contributions on this subject from the literature and argue that the success of FEMUPROCAN can be measured using two main components: Firstly the extent to which the organization is capable of influencing government policy and public opinion in order to achieve its goals and improve the lives of the members at the grassroots and secondly, the degree to which FEMUPROCAN has been accepted as a legitimate representative of rural women producers in Nicaragua. This acceptance is discussed using Gamson’s (1975) four indicators of consultation, negotiation, recognition and inclusion.

FEMUPROCAN states that its overall objective is to achieve the greater participation of rural women in the economic and social affairs of the country. They aim to achieve this by increasing their leadership and lobbying capacity at both the local and national level, in order to promote and participate in the formulation of economic policy that benefits rural women producers and entrepreneurs in Nicaragua. These overarching goals have been broken down into a series of institutional objectives: to be a strong organization with leadership capacity; to facilitate the training of capable, empowered women leaders; to strengthen the entrepreneurial capacity of women producers; and to influence the processes of promotion and formulation of policies related to the countryside and women producers. In turn, FEMUPROCAN has identified a whole series of specific components necessary for the achievement of these four objectives. I take each one of these components in turn and discuss the record of FEMUPROCAN to date, highlighting those areas in need of improvement and those where they appear to have enjoyed considerable success.
Vital to FEMUPROCAN’s ability to successfully put pressure on the government are the linkages they have built with other organizations and groups. In Chapter 6 I thus devote significant time to exploring the alliances they have forged and spaces in which they cooperate with other organizations. To date, FEMUPROCAN appears to have focused more on coordinating their efforts with others in the cooperative movement than constructing relationships with elements of the women’s movements not specifically concerned with improving the economic position of rural women. They have especially refrained from coordinating with more radical feminist groups and women working on such controversial issues as abortion and reproductive health. They have focused on those currents within the wider movements with which they feel a particular sense of identification and with those directly related to their previous organizing work within UNA-G.

Next, in Chapter 7, I consider the degree to which FEMUPROCAN has gained acceptance as a legitimate representative of rural women. I argue that although they appear to have made considerable progress in terms of acceptance by the Nicaraguan government, particularly by those policy makers concerned with formulating policy related to the cooperative sector, they have been less successful in gaining acceptance among the general public.

The final chapter, Chapter 8, addresses the other main theme of the thesis, autonomy. I examine the meaning of the term in some detail and identify four main dimensions of autonomy relevant to an organization such as FEMUPROCAN. These are political autonomy, economic autonomy, organizational autonomy and autonomy within FEMUPROCAN. The autonomy of FEMUPROCAN is then analyzed in regard to
each of these interrelated dimensions. The federation appears to have achieved a high degree of political autonomy at the national level and grants their individual members a significant amount of individual autonomy. The organization’s main weakness is in regard to their economic autonomy. Completely dependent on funding from their NGO partners, FEMUPROCAN does not look likely to achieve economic self-sufficiency any time soon. I argue that this is a common dilemma for many women’s organizations operating in Nicaragua today and investigate what represents the best balance between autonomy and dependence for such organizations. In many cases total autonomy does not seem either the most feasible or the most desirable arrangement. In this chapter I also discuss the autonomy of the NGO partners, and illustrate that they too are dependent on governments and donations from civil society in the developed world. This means that, indirectly, FEMUPROCAN is dependent on the continued good will of these actors and the importance they attach to international aid to the region.

The remainder of this introduction is devoted to a consideration of the research sites and methods used for the collection and analysis of data. However, before doing so I feel it is necessary to briefly discuss my background as a student and motivations for doing the research, in order to draw attention to any possible biases in my work. There is, in my opinion, no such thing as an objective researcher, and I began this project with a clear sympathy for the goals of the organization to improve the position of rural women in Nicaraguan society. Given the long tradition of feminist scholar-activists, I feel I am in good company here. Part of my aim in writing the thesis was to draw attention to the important work being done by organizations such as FEMUPROCAN and increase awareness of rural women’s movements among those interested in the
study of Nicaraguan women’s movements. Taking various courses on gender and development, gender and cultural politics, and anthropology of development, reaffirmed my belief in the importance of studying women’s activism as an integral part of the development of a society and my faith in the abilities of third world social movement organizations to bring about real, meaningful changes in the countries in which they work. Coursework focusing on the role of NGOs in the development process also enabled me to begin my research with an awareness of the power imbalances inherent in relationships between northern NGOs and their southern partners and to examine the ways in which FEMUPROCAN negotiated these relationships. However, sympathy for the cause of an organization does not preclude the identification of its weaknesses and areas for improvement. Throughout my research I attempted to listen to all points of view on a subject, including those I did not agree with. Whilst some elements of subjectivity are unavoidable within any research project, I attempted to follow Strauss and Corbin’s (1990, 43) advice about the need to “‘give voice’ to respondents, be they individuals or organizations.” In practice this means “hearing what others have to say, seeing what others do, and representing these as accurately as possible. It means having an understanding, whilst recognizing that researchers’ understandings often are based on the values, culture, training, and experiences that they bring to the research and that these might be quite different from those of their respondents.”

The Research Sites

Managua

The vast majority of my field research was carried out at the national office of FEMUPROCAN, located in the Bolonia district of Managua. The Nicaraguan capital is home to approximately 1.8 million people, or roughly 30% of the total population of the
country. It is a sprawling and chaotic city located on the southwestern shore of Lake Managua, and rests on a fault line that has, periodically, resulted in a number of devastating earthquakes. Hot all year round, the winter months see bursts of torrential rain that often threaten to flood certain areas of the city and cause localized power cuts. The Bolonia district was once considered one of the most prestigious residential areas of Managua, although during my time there I was informed that it had gone downhill in recent years. It is still the location of many foreign embassies and the headquarters of a large number of nongovernmental organizations. FEMUPROCAN’s head office is located on the same street as the Canadian embassy and is a fairly unassuming building from the street. Inside it opens up into a number of air conditioned offices, a sparsely furnished room for workshops and meetings, a small kitchen and a shady outside patio. When the promotoras or other members come to Managua to participate in training workshops or programs they stay overnight in the office, sleeping on the floor. FEMUPROCAN has a full-time staff of six working at the headquarters, although the members of the national leadership also try and get out to the countryside and visit the cooperatives as often as their schedule allows. During the time I was there, the atmosphere in the office ranged from calm and relatively relaxed days with few visitors to times when the building was full of people- members of the base level cooperatives, children and babies of FEMUPROCAN members, relatives of members of the national team and employees of partner NGOs. There were periods when everybody was extremely busy, working past their scheduled hours in order to get everything done and other times when the women were able to take a leisurely lunch break and relax a little
more. I arrived during the rainy season and power cuts were a frequent problem. Some of these lasted just a few minutes whereas others went on for hours.

**Terrabona and San Juanillo**

Terrabona is a small community located in the department of Matagalpa. There is a daily, direct bus connection to Managua (the journey lasts approximately three hours) and various buses from the community to Matagalpa. The landscape is hilly, with narrow valleys and rocky soils. Farming is made more difficult because of the scarcity of rainfall. There is little employment in the area and significant outmigration of people unable to make a living off the land. Most of these migrants are headed for Costa Rica, although they may come back at certain times during the year to sow or harvest their crops. When I visited in August 2009 the road leading into Terrabona was in the process of being paved, but at the time of my visit the last part of the journey was a bumpy, uncomfortable ride. There was a small general store, a shop selling vegetables and an internet café located in the main square. The health clinic was undergoing renovations and had been moved to a temporary location in one of the houses. FEMUPROCAN has around 300 members in this area organized in agricultural production cooperatives.

The community of San Juanillo is also in the department of Matagalpa. It is reached by way of an unpaved track leading off from the Carretera Norte just before the turning to Ciudad Darío. Here too drought and unreliable rainfall make farming difficult and this community is on the verge of disintegration as a result of the high level of outmigration. The women in both San Juanillo and Terrabona were mostly engaged in the production of basic grains – corn, beans and sorghum but had recently begun to branch out into the cultivation of vegetables thanks to the installation of drip watering
systems by FEMUPROCAN. I stayed overnight in Terrabona, in the house of María Elsa, the regional coordinator for FEMUPROCAN’s cooperatives. She showed me around the community and introduced me to some cooperative members. Whilst there I conducted individual and group interviews with representatives from the grassroots cooperatives. The following day I caught the bus with María Elsa to the roadside market, where I met Ana Julia, the coordinator for Sébaco. Ana Julia took me to San Juanillo, where I spent the morning conducting more interviews.

**Nueva Guinea**

Founded in the 1960s, Nueva Guinea is a rapidly expanding town located in the Autonomous Region of the South Atlantic (RAAS). The climate here is tropical, with ample rainfall throughout the year (averaging approximately 2,245mm annually (FEMUPROCAN 2006)) and the vegetation lush. Soils range from low to medium fertility and the area produces basic grains, yucca, taro as well as bananas and plantains. Recent years have seen the introduction of a number of nontraditional crops such as cinnamon, black pepper and cacao. FEMUPROCAN’s members mostly live in small, recently settled communities of agricultural colonists. They grow a variety of different crops and many of them also raise cattle.

**Methods**

This thesis is primarily an ethnographic case study of a particular organization, FEMUPROCAN. As such it is primarily descriptive. However, using a grounded theory approach to data collection and analysis allowed me to identify patterns within my data to tease out an answer to my question on the extent to which FEMUPROCAN had been able to establish itself as a successful, autonomous women’s organization.
My field research was carried out from late June to late August 2009. I spent a total of eight weeks in Nicaragua, the vast majority of which time was spent in Managua. However, I also accompanied members of the national team on visits to Sébaco, the roadside market owned by FEMUPROCAN and located near the turnoff to Ciudad Darío, and spent three days attending a workshop for young people organized by FEMUPROCAN in Nueva Guinea. I carried out a series of interviews and stayed overnight in the town of Terrabona before travelling to San Juanillo the following day for more interviews.

**Participant Observation**

Participant observation formed one of the core components of my research. From Monday to Friday, 8:30am to 5pm, I helped out in the Managua headquarters of FEMUPROCAN, where I shared an office with Martha Valle (FEMUPROCAN’s President) and Matilde Rocha (Vice President). This involved summarizing reports of meetings, and performing a number of administrative tasks. I was able to participate in a number of training sessions held by FEMUPROCAN on topics such as women’s economic and political rights, self-esteem and business networks. Through these training sessions I was able to meet a large number of FEMUPROCAN’s *promotoras*, who ranged in age from teenagers to women over sixty. However, the bulk of my time was spent with the six-person national team, allowing me to gain an understanding of how the leadership of the organization worked and develop close personal relationships with members of the team. These relationships and the conversations I had with both leaders and *promotoras* over the course of my stay proved at least as useful and revealing as many of my interviews. I made field notes to record my experiences, key
points of conversations, observations and feelings on issues that I thought might be relevant to my research question.

**Semi-structured Individual Interviews**

I carried out a series of twenty-two individual semi-structured interviews which lasted from just half an hour to approximately two hours. I interviewed members of FEMUPROCAN's national team, two of their regional coordinators, six *promotoras* and four of the members from the grassroots. I also identified representatives of the three NGOs with whom FEMUPROCAN work most closely; Oxfam Canada, VECO MA and El Centro Cooperativo Sueco and conducted interviews with their leadership. For each interview I prepared a basic interview guide with the themes I was planning on addressing during the interview. Semi-structured interviews provided the respondents with enough freedom to expand on topics should they choose and allowed the interview to proceed in a more natural manner, with the possibility of exploring certain unexpected topics mentioned by the respondent in greater detail. However, the interview guide also provided a structure for the interview and helped to keep both me, the researcher, and the respondent from going too far off topic and ensured we covered all the necessary areas. Respondents were identified in a number of different ways. For the national leadership it was simple: given that there are only six members of the team I was easily able to interview all of them. The *promotoras* were selected during workshops in which they participated at the Managua office. I was able to make a short announcement about who I was and what I was hoping to do. I asked the women when the best time

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3 Oxfam Canada is based in Canada and focuses on grassroots development, VECO MA is the Central American team of the Belgian NGO Vredeseilanden (VECO) which focuses on sustainable rural development for small farmers and El Centro Cooperativo Sueco was created by the Swedish Cooperative Movement in 1958 and works with cooperative organizations around the world.
would be to carry out the interviews and at the appointed time I explained that their answers would be kept confidential and asked for volunteers, specifying that I wanted to hear from people from different parts of the country. The women at the grassroots and the regional coordinators I managed to interview during my visits to Terrabona, San Juanillo and Nueva Guinea. The grassroots respondents were selected almost by accident — I had arranged for group interviews with cooperative members as described below. However, more women than intended turned up and some arrived much earlier or later than the others. Rather than making these women wait to participate in the group interviews and take up more of their time I decided to interview them individually. I recorded these interviews onto a digital recorder and transcribed them word-by-word to use in my analysis. The names of the members of the grassroots cooperatives have been changed to protect the anonymity of the women. Names of the leaders of FEMUPROCAN have been retained with their permission.

**Group Interviews with Women at the Grassroots**

My original plan had been to conduct all of my interviews on an individual basis. However, after some discussions with FEMUPROCAN’s leadership I realized that this might not be the best strategy. The women at the grassroots of the organization live scattered across remote areas of the countryside, often having to walk for hours to attend FEMUPROCAN meetings and workshops. It would be incredibly time consuming and difficult for me to visit each one of these members in their homes and difficult to coordinate all of the interviews at times that were convenient for the women. Therefore I made the decision to organize a series of group interviews during my visits to Terrabona and San Juanillo. These three interviews were arranged with the help of the regional coordinators who called the women together and established the most appropriate time
and place for these to be held. Thus in Terrabona they took place in the house of the coordinator, whereas at San Juanillo I held the interview outside, under the shade of a tree in the center of the community. Given the difficulties in contacting many of the members at the grassroots, I left it up to the regional coordinators to select the respondents. I was aware that this might lead to a bias towards those members most enthusiastic about the organization but felt that in the circumstances this was unavoidable. The first interview comprised six women, the second four, and ten women participated in the last session in San Juanillo. This was rather more than I would have initially liked to have per group but the women made sure that everybody spoke their piece about the topics under discussion.

**Grounded Theory**

I used grounded theory to analyze my data as it was being collected, and thus was not primarily attempting to test a particular hypothesis, but rather allowing the theory to emerge from the data I was gathering (Strauss and Corbin 1998). I felt that qualitative methods would provide me with a more nuanced and complex understanding of the concepts of success and autonomy than I would have been able to capture using quantitative techniques. Thus I began to analyze and code my data as soon as I collected it, trying to identify patterns and relationships in the data which would explain why FEMUPROCAN had succeeded in certain areas but not in others and the extent of FEMUPROCAN’s freedom of action on a wide range of topics. I then grouped these codes into concepts which helped to guide the direction of my research as it progressed, identifying those areas in which I needed to gather more data as well as those topics that appeared redundant or unimportant in answering my research question. Following Strauss and Corbin (1998) as these concepts began to build up I
was able to start grouping them together into categories. Over time I developed ways in which to organize these categories around the central concepts of autonomy and success. Along the way, I periodically checked what I was finding with my respondents, to see if they agreed with my analysis and if not, why not. By constantly comparing my findings to those reached by Bickham Mendez in her study of MEC, and those reached by FEMUPROCAN in the many documents to which they generously gave me access, I was able to draw some conclusions about the ability of successful women’s organizations to emerge from class-based mass organizations.

Figure 1-1. Location of Research Sites, Nicaragua. Source: http://mapsof.net/uploads/static-maps/nicaragua_political_map.jpg
CHAPTER 2
THE WOMEN’S MOVEMENT IN NICARAGUA

The participation of Nicaraguan women in the Sandinista revolution has been well documented in the literature. The end of the brutal Somoza dictatorship and the triumph of the FSLN ushered in a new era in Nicaraguan history. Women were granted new rights and the revolutionary government pledged its commitment to achieving greater gender equality in the country. The period of Sandinista government (1979-1990) saw women make some important advances, but failed to put an end to women’s subordination. As the Contra war dragged on, defense of the revolution took precedence over the struggle for women’s rights and gender equality. After the Sandinista electoral defeat in 1990, a strong and vibrant autonomous women’s movement developed in Nicaragua, gaining international recognition as one of the most dynamic in all of Latin America (e.g. Aguilar, et al. 1997). Particularly after the devastation of Hurricane Mitch (1998) the NGO sector in Nicaragua mushroomed and many women’s organizations underwent a process of NGO-ization. In recent years observers have drawn attention to the increasing fragmentation and lack of coordination of the women’s movements (Disney 2008). The current Ortega administration’s conservative shift and alliance with the Catholic Church is also a serious problem for women’s organizing in Nicaragua today. This chapter provides an overview of the development of the Nicaraguan women’s movements from the Sandinista triumph of 1979 to the present day, with particular attention given to rural women’s organizing.

Before the Revolution

The rise of large capitalist agribusinesses and the introduction and expansion of first coffee (1870-1945), then cotton (1950-1960), then cattle (1970 onwards) industries
in Nicaragua in the century preceding the Sandinista revolution transformed the
countryside, pushing large numbers of peasants off their land in the Pacific region of
Nicaragua (Pérez Alemán 1990). They either settled new lands on the agricultural
frontier (leading to increased deforestation and environmental degradation) or joined the
swelling ranks of landless agricultural workers. Increasing numbers of women were
forced to work as laborers as they could no longer rely on their subsistence plots alone
to feed their families. Collinson (1990, 39) observes that before 1979 up to 40% of
coffee pickers were women. However, their integration into the workforce was shaped
by their subordinate position relative to men. Perceived not to produce as much or work
as hard, they were paid half the amount their male counterparts received, and often
were only given temporary jobs around harvest time. The man, in his role of “provider,”
was given priority, and women were often not paid directly for their efforts, but rather the
money was given to the man as “head of household” (Chavez Metoyer 1999, 20).
Women’s work was not valued, and women were expected to obey their husbands in all
matters. Furthermore, “Somocista society recognized only men as property owners,
therefore single women rarely held land titles or tenants’ rights and could be evicted and
exploited at their landlords’ whim” (Collinson 1990, 40).

The processes of expansion of large landholdings did not go uncontested, despite
the fierce repression of the Somoza regime. Rural men and women began to organize
to fight for land and against the dictatorship. Pérez Alemán notes that although women’s
participation in these struggles was significant, there is a lack of literature on the
subject, and thus a tendency to underestimate the political contribution of these women
(1990, 29). When the guerrilla war began, many of these same women actively
participated. Although not all were guerrilla fighters themselves, rural women often played a vital role in the success of the revolution. However, their activities are often described as “support” and not “political,” so they frequently fail to feature in accounts of peasant revolutions. As Kampwirth (2002) and Pérez Alemán (1990) note, women and men often participated in the revolution for similar reasons but women’s participation was limited by patriarchal ideologies and traditional gender roles.

In 1977 the FSLN created AMPRONAC (Association of Women Confronting the National Problem) which was largely concerned with denouncing human rights abuses and opposing the dictatorship. However, the creation of a women-only space was important in mobilizing women and suggested recognition of the special interests and problems shared by women as a group on the part of the FSLN. This organization would subsequently be renamed AMNLAE (Luisa Amanda Espinoza Association of Nicaraguan Women) after the revolutionary triumph in 1979.

The FSLN Government 1979-1990

Although the revolution was not able to end the drudgery of life in the countryside for women, it “at least tried to ensure that rural people are supported, valued and treated as human beings, which was not the case before 1979” (Collinson 1990, 38). One of the first priorities of the Sandinista government when it came to power was to improve conditions in the countryside. Major social programs were enacted, and women were the main beneficiaries of the new housing, health programs and infrastructure, education and literacy campaigns and the provision of electricity and potable water in rural areas. Women were allowed to receive their own pay packets, and the minimum wage in the countryside was drastically increased (though this would be cancelled out
by spiraling inflation by the end of the 1980s) (Ibid. 40-41). In 1987, the new constitution affirmed the equality of men and women in the eyes of the law.

Perhaps one of the most important advances for rural Nicaraguans in general, and for rural women in particular, was the Sandinista Agrarian Reform. A significant share of cultivable land was redistributed, privileging cooperative forms of production and, initially, state farms. Very importantly for women, the 1981 Agrarian Reform “was the first in Latin America to include the incorporation of women among its initial objectives. The 1981 agrarian reform law stipulated that neither gender nor kinship status would hinder someone from becoming a beneficiary of the reform. Moreover, the 1981 agricultural cooperative law established that a goal of the cooperatives should be to encourage the active participation of women, stating that they should be incorporated into the cooperatives under the same terms as men, with the same rights and duties” (Deere and León 2001, 95-96). However, despite this provision, the reforms did not deliver the expected results in terms of female participation and the allocation of land titles. A 1985 report by the ATC concluded that many rural women simply did not know what their new rights were, and that when women were incorporated it was usually on unequal terms. They were often assigned the most menial jobs, the worst land, and suffered from discrimination and opposition from both their husbands and the male cooperative members. In fact, Deere and León note that the level of female beneficiaries from the agrarian reform law in Nicaragua was not that much different to those in neighboring countries, where there was no specific gender equitable language in the legislation.
Much of the international aid to Nicaragua during this period came from groups sympathetic to the Sandinista cause, in an attempt to show international solidarity with the revolutionary government. This aid was largely administered by the FSLN administration itself, or was directed to the Sandinista affiliated mass organizations. Independent organizing was very much discouraged during this period, and loyalty to the revolutionary cause was seen as of paramount importance. This affected women’s organizing as much as it did the other sectors, with the FSLN’s women’s organization, AMNLAE, regarded as one of the only legitimate spaces for women to organize as women (although as the eighties progressed the women’s secretariats in other mass organizations, especially that of the rural workers union, the ATC, became much more vocal in attempting to voice the concerns of the female members of these organizations). The Sandinistas were certainly more progressive than the previous regime when it came to matters of gender equality, and provided opportunities for many women to gain valuable leadership experience through their associations. However, the focus was very much on unity (often at the cost of diversity), and everything, including women’s concerns, was seen as of secondary importance to ensuring the survival of the revolution. The mass organizations, although they certainly carried out some important functions, were characterized by a fairly rigid and hierarchical structure. In these conditions, and partly due to prevailing machista attitudes from male colleagues, many women became increasingly dissatisfied with the Sandinista unions, and began to look for spaces of their own in which to organize (Bickham Mendez 2005). Nevertheless, during the Sandinista period, it was the women’s secretariats of the mass organizations that formed the basis for much of the most successful women’s organizing and
produced many of the most important policy changes for rural women. Of these, the secretariats of the Rural Workers Union (ATC) and, later, the National Union of Farmers and Ranchers (UNAG) are widely regarded as the most dynamic and influential, certainly with regard to making changes relevant to the lives of rural women.

The ATC

Established by the FSLN in 1978, the ATC maintained strong links to the government throughout the 1980s. The vast majority of its members tend to be Sandinista supporters, limiting conflict with the government but not, according to Collinson, precluding “Lively and open discussion, nor does it prevent the ATC from lobbying state farm managements or MIDINRA on behalf of workers” (1990, 44). The organization provided agricultural workers with a channel to get their demands heard by the FSLN leadership and a space in which to discuss and elaborate new ideas and strategies. As Collinson continues, “these functions have been particularly important in promoting the specific interests of rural women” (Ibid, 44).

During the Contra war, and in the context of increasing female participation in the paid agricultural labor force, and in skilled positions normally only open to men, women flocked to join the ATC. By 1983 they made up 40% of the organization’s membership, a figure high enough to worry the male leadership (at that time, 99% of the ATC leadership). As Collinson points out, their main priority during this period was increasing production to aid the Sandinista war effort. The influx of women was seen as a potential problem in that women were perceived to be less productive than men, and it was only when leaders debated how best to raise productivity that they realized that they knew almost nothing about rural women (Ibid, 44). To rectify this situation, the ATC leadership organized the 1983 National Assembly of Women Workers, attended by 100
representatives from all the major areas of agricultural production. They then decided to carry out an in depth investigation of the situation of rural women at the time.

The results of the study emphasized the need for a separate section of the organization dedicated to fighting for women’s rights (Murguialday 1990, 197).¹ The idea was that “the women’s secretariat would fight for women within the ATC, and the ATC would fight for the rights of campesinas within the FSLN, an idea predicated on the assumption that there is only one system in which they all operated and which had to respond to the needs of women and peasant men” (Isbester 2001, 72). This form of operating had the advantage that the ATC already had the support of the government assured and could therefore get action taken quickly to address its demands. No other organization for rural workers was permitted this level of access to government channels.

The researchers initially focused on the concept of the “work norm.” Collinson argues that this was a strategic decision on the part of the authors designed to limit opposition within the organization and with the hope that “discussions about work would inevitably raise all other specific issues relating to women. This approach also helped to establish the principle within the union that every labor issue should be considered from a women’s point of view” (Collinson 1990, 45). Workshops were held at regional and local levels to allow grassroots members to express their opinions and relate their experiences. A picture emerged of the multiple ways in which women experienced discrimination, from rape and physical violence to macho attitudes from the men (Murguialday 1990). Women were able to meet and talk about a wide range of issues of

¹ ATC “Los Trabajadores del Campo y el Impacto de la Reforma Agraria sobre el Empleo Rural”. March, 1984
special importance for them, including reproductive rights, lack of childcare facilities and lack of local infrastructure, including corn mills and drinking water. These sessions laid the groundwork for the formation of a gender identity by enabling women to compare experiences and identify common barriers to their participation (Isbester 2001, 73).

In September 1986, the ATC convened a Second National Assembly of Rural Women. This time, hundreds of delegates attended, and among the most important decisions taken, they agreed to accept the same work norm as men. To enable them to do this, however, the women explained that they would need childcare centers, paid maternity leave, paid leave to care for children who were unwell, drinking water and corn mills. These measures would reduce women’s domestic burden and enable them to raise their productivity. There was a recognition that men ought to help women with household tasks, and a resolution was put forward for the union to encourage male members to take some responsibility in this area. The delegates took the ideas from the national assembly back home with them and began to raise the same issues at a local and regional level.

As in most agricultural systems, the burden of work does not fall evenly throughout the year in Nicaragua. Harvest time was by far the busiest time for rural women, and Collinson (1990, 46) notes that visible results of the passage of the resolutions included an increase in the provision of childcare facilities (from 30 farm crèches in 1985 to 500 in 1986-7), public washing sinks on some state farms, and the provision of corn mills. Productivity subsequently increased, convincing many male members and leaders of the benefits of the women’s resolutions (Isbester 2001). In the wake of the 1986 assembly space was set aside in the ATC newspaper for women’s issues. The articles
were largely written by volunteer female agricultural workers who found the process to be empowering, and a boost to their self confidence.

The growing recognition of and support for women within the ATC was reflected in leadership statistics. In 1983 just 1% of the leadership positions were held by females. By 1995 this had jumped to 30% (Aguilar, et al. 1997, 385). The levels of attendance at union meetings and the resultant commitment to the ATC as an organization and their cooperatives were high among women members. Women worked hard to show that they deserved their new position within the organization and by 1988 90% of female workers had managed to surpass established work norms (Murguialday 1990, 169). These advances also helped to consolidate support for the Sandinista government among the female beneficiaries (Isbester 2001, 75).

The women of the ATC began to formulate new understandings of their situation based on these experiences and debates. They argued that men ought to respect women’s ways of doing things, and that the sexual division of labor should be considered when analyzing any and all issues (Criquillon 1995, 217). This developing gender consciousness expanded to include an acknowledgement of women’s subordination in society and that “women’s issues needed to be understood within a wider social context of inequality and structural discrimination and thus could not be adequately examined separate from the broader political process” \(^2\)

The ATC Women’s Secretariat was one of the most forward-thinking organizations on women’s issues at the time in Nicaragua. It played a vital role in opening up debates among many other groups of women about the unequal power relations and systems of

\(^2\) Chuchryk cited in Isbester 2001, 74.
domination with which they lived. It was certainly more progressive than the FSLN itself, and placed reproductive health, sexual abuse and working conditions firmly on the agenda of women around the country, from different socioeconomic statuses.

When attempting to explain the reasons behind the success of the Women’s Secretariat of the ATC, Isbester (2001) points to the role played by male leaders, and the political and economic opportunities of the period. It was the male leadership that first identified the need to bring the women together. They then subsequently provided significant resources to foster women’s participation and place within the organization (both material and organizational), and already had the ear of a sympathetic Sandinista government to obtain these resources.

The political opportunity arose with the realization on the part of the FSLN administration that fostering women’s participation in the ATC in this way would most likely be a win-win situation: “The government wanted to increase production; the women wanted the equality of opportunity to do so. The government wanted political support; the women wanted a different organization of labor. The government wanted a political solution to its economic problem; the women wanted justice. The two complemented each other. At least in the short term, the government and the women both got what they wanted” (Isbester 2001, 75).

The fact that the interests of the government happened to coincide with that of the women is crucial to understanding the women’s success within the ATC. In this instance we see an example of the benefits of close ties to the ruling power. However, there are also drawbacks. To a large extent the FSLN determined the scope of what could be on the agenda. Opposition by the government to a particular demand would lead to
opposition within the ATC, and a lack of progress towards achieving that goal (or even the opportunity to discuss it in depth). The government was also able to cut off resources at any time should it choose to. This had implications for the sort of gender consciousness that emerged from the ATC. Overwhelmingly restricted to those issues related to economic productivity and in accordance with Sandinista ideology, it failed to explore fully the notion of patriarchy and the myriad ways in which unequal power relations affect the daily lives of rural women in Nicaragua. Other Sandinista-affiliated (or “semi-autonomous”) organizations would encounter similar difficulties in their fight for women’s rights and greater social democracy.

Despite these (admittedly serious) limitations, the relationship between the ATC and the FSLN was not always as cozy as is sometimes made out. They were able to “radicalize and politicize issues long after the government had tried to shut the discussions down. They forced the government into formal decision-making and activated resolution mechanisms on issues that the government would have preferred not to deal with” (Isbester 2001, 103). The achievements of the ATC would form a model for others to follow and build on with varying degrees of success.

UNAG

The importance of the ATC declined after UNAG emerged as an umbrella organization representing the interests of a variety of rural people in 1981 (Luciak 1990, 59) with many small farmers and experienced cadres leaving the ATC to join the new organization. Before 1984, capitalist producers were excluded from participating in UNAG and it primarily addressed the needs of small producers and the cooperative

3 See also Chapter Four for a description of the leaders of FEMUPROCAN’s experiences within UNAG
sector. After 1984 membership was extended to larger landowners, provided that they affirmed their commitment to the goals of the revolution. Whilst representing an important step in the construction of Sandinista “national unity,” this development made it difficult for UNAG to balance the demands of its constituents (who ranged from poor peasant producers to wealthy landowners) and it has come under fire for privileging the interests of its wealthier members, to the detriment of its poorer peasant constituents (Luciak 1987, 44).

UNAG has been praised for its “bottom-up” approach to policy formation, based on popular consultation with the grassroots of the movement and, though it shared the ATC’s commitment to Sandinista ideology, it seems to have been able to gain a greater degree of autonomy from the FSLN and was more ready to oppose government policies it perceived to be against the interests of its members (Luciak 1990, 66). It made some important advances in the area of women’s rights within the organization but performance on this matter was uneven and women still experienced discrimination from their male colleagues.

UNAG, the main organization representing the cooperative sector in Nicaragua, failed to address the issue of women’s low participation in agricultural cooperatives. The 1982 National Cooperative Census revealed that only 44% of cooperatives in Nicaragua contained at least one female member, and women made up just 6% of total cooperative membership (Valle 2009, 223) It was not until 1986 when members voted to approve a measure that would require cooperatives to “promote the full integration of

4 Although the women at FEMUPROCAN questioned this assumption, as when they were in the UNAG Women’s Section they had fought a tough battle with the organization’s leadership who resisted their attempts to gain greater decision making power.
women in the productive tasks of the co-operative, incorporating them as members in the same conditions as men” (Collinson 1990, 52). A women’s secretariat was founded this same year, and began by following the model of the ATC and conducting investigations at the grassroots of the organization. Workshops on women’s issues also included the participation of male members to reinforce that these are matters relevant to all members, and to limit the possibility of male opposition to the proposals of the Women’s Secretariat. UNAG also highlighted how women’s increased participation would bring benefits for the entire family thanks to increased productivity and higher incomes. The women’s secretariat would become one of the most dynamic sectors of the Nicaraguan women’s movement in the later years of the Sandinista government. However, women within UNAG still faced considerable discrimination by their male colleagues. This contributed to the leaders of FEMUPROCAN’s decision to form their own federation, comprised entirely of women. The history of the women’s secretariat and the tensions within UNAG are expanded upon in Chapter 4, which deals with the history of FEMUPROCAN.

**Rural Women’s Participation in Other Organizations**

There is not space here for an in-depth analysis of all of the other organizations in which rural women participated in significant numbers after the 1979 Revolution but it must be emphasized that rural women were not passive apolitical victims eking out a miserable existence and suffering horrific abuses in silence.\(^5\) Rather they were active subjects, capable of a wide range of political actions and methods of resistance to unequal power structures. They were able to make strategic decisions in important

\(^5\) For a more detailed discussion see Perez Alemán 1990
areas of their own and their families’ lives and acted to protect these interests when they were threatened. Different rural women organized in different ways. Pérez Alemán, writing in 1990, identified four main modes of rural women’s participation in organizations:

- **Women’s integration within a masculine vision – UNAG.** The sphere of action is limited to the public. Women were taken into account but it was male leaders who determined the priorities for action and attempted to control the agenda of the women’s sections within the organization.

- **Participation anchored in “traditional roles” of women – Communal Organizations, AMNLAE.** This entails mobilizing women around the practical needs of their daily lives, but can also provide spaces for women to share “private” experiences and develop a sense of common problems and a shared identity as rural women. This type of participation is unlikely to lead to a transformation in gender roles or bring an end to women’s subordination, although these organizations may fulfill a “consciousness-raising” role.

- **Participation with the possibility of empowerment - Women’s participation in educational organizations.** Through involvement in such organizations women were able to acquire skills and knowledge that would, potentially, enable them to contest their situation of subordination and take greater control over their own lives. Reading and writing not only gives women self-esteem but allows them to access a whole range of technical training programs and financial assistance, without having to ask a (literate) man to accompany them.

- **Conserving the old patriarchal framework in religious organizations, (excluding some progressive wings of the church such as Liberation theology) Women participated in great numbers in the local organizations affiliated with the church. However, many of these organizations discouraged women from attempting to transform the status quo and emphasized women’s role as self-sacrificing mothers and obedient, subservient wives. Having said that, church organizations did provide many poor women with much needed material and spiritual assistance, and helped to sponsor community activities.**

**The Contra War**

The Contra war had both benefits and drawbacks for rural women in Nicaragua. The economic crisis caused by the conflict made survival difficult for many rural women. Those organized into cooperatives found that they were now the target for much Contra aggression and were forced to defend their newly won lands. Social programs were...
scaled back, and women’s issues took a backseat to increasing production in the countryside and national defense. With many men needed to fight in the war (including those who participated on both sides of the conflict) women found themselves having to “hold the fort” at home as the sole providers for their families. On the other hand, the conflict opened up opportunities for female employment in areas previously considered the exclusive domain of men, and increased women’s self-confidence and desire to be recognized and valued as producers in their own right: “The longer the war lasted, the more opportunities women had” (Murguialday 1990, 218).

Sometimes the employers discovered that they actually preferred female workers. Collinson (1990, 42) quotes a farmer in Boaco who explained to her in 1987 that: “In this farm, we’ve got 75% women workers…Really women are almost 100% effective because they’re not like us men, who go out on the streets, to live it up, perhaps end up with a hangover or get wiped out. The woman is a top achiever.”

Having said this, the war took a huge psychological and emotional toll on many rural women. They lived with the constant threat of aggression and violence, and had to suffer the loss or injury of their loved ones. The image of the grieving mother was a powerful one, and the FSLN realized the importance of this symbol of feminine identity in the Asociación de las Madres de los Héroes y Mártires. It is not surprising that support for the Sandinista government was among the lowest among rural women in the 1990 elections when the amount of emotional and material distress they suffered during the conflict is taken into account.

**Neoliberal Governments 1990-2007 and Structural Adjustment**

The election of Violeta Chamorro to the Nicaraguan presidency in 1990 threatened to destroy the progress made by women and by rural people under the Sandinista
government. Chamorro began to steer Nicaragua onto a neoliberal course and implemented harsh structural adjustment measures. Characterized by a much more conservative ideological stance towards women and the development of Nicaragua, Doña Violeta’s administration favored a return to more “traditional” roles of women focused on images of motherhood and caring (Kampwirth 1996). Rural people no longer enjoyed a privileged position in the ideology of the government either (as the figure of the peasant had during the Sandinista period), and the neoliberal administrations tended to neglect the rural areas in favor of the cities. With the opening of the economy to international trade, large agribusiness was again promoted over the protection of the interests of the small producers.

Structural adjustment and the neoliberal policies implemented by the subsequent administrations in Nicaragua hit rural women hard and they struggled to survive. Aguilar et al. (1997) note that households headed by women were more affected than those with male household heads, and that rural households suffered more than urban ones. In order to make ends meet, women across Nicaragua took on more work (adding to their already arduous timetable) and devised a variety of coping strategies (Babb 2001). In times of economic crisis women will often sacrifice their own interests, and even their health, in order to ensure the well being of their family. The lack of a state safety net and the emphasis on traditional gender roles threatened to undo some of the progress made under the Sandinistas.

For rural women, of special concern was the question of land titles. The Sandinista agrarian reform had distributed a significant proportion of available land but had been slow and inefficient at awarding legal titles to the land. This generated conflict and
insecurity: “The fact that almost 70% of agricultural properties acquired during the Sandinista period were not legalized with property titles has generated insecurity and instability in the countryside…It is estimated that about 40% of families find themselves in conflict about the tenancy of their property” (Aguilar, et al. 1997, 371).

Isbester (2001) writes that the 1990 election results took many in the women’s movements by surprise. They had not prepared a strategy or discussed a plan of action for this outcome and the initial response of many activists was largely one of disappointment and disillusionment. Despite the limitations of the Sandinista administration’s gender policy, many within the women’s movement identified more with the goals of the FSLN than those of Violeta Chamorro’s UNO coalition, which proposed a return to more traditional gender roles. According to Isbester, it took two years for before the women’s movement had recovered from the shock and restructured itself in the light of the new political context. This was a difficult process and women’s organizers discussed the future of their relationship with the FSLN and whether to adopt a decentralized network structure or create a central coordinating body. These questions provoked fierce debate and disagreement between activists, and tensions rose to the point that the movement fragmented and threatened to disintegrate entirely. Consequently, the movement achieved very little in the period immediately following the 1990 elections: “During this period, the women’s movement was sufficiently disarrayed that it was as ineffectual and unproductive as a social movement can be” (Isbester 2001, 124).

Membership declined in many organizations, partly due to increased economic hardship, and the activists were faced with a government much less sympathetic to its
demands. Not only that, but the Sandinista government had been the principal source of funds and other resources for the organizations, which suddenly found themselves scrambling to identify new financial backers after the FSLN’s loss in the polls.

On the other hand, this period provided time for much needed reflection and revaluation among the women’s movement and marked an important turning point in the growth of an autonomous women’s movement in the country. The women’s secretariats, despite having been the main “catalyst for change” in the 1980s failed to adapt well to the new political context and “in the 1990s the women’s secretariats of unions and other mixed organizations retreated into the background of the women’s movement, ceding the role of catalyst to autonomous women’s groups” (Isbester 2001, 138).

The ATC

After the electoral defeat of the FSLN, the ATC also faced a crisis. Its membership contracted sharply, falling from 15,000 to 8,000 women, largely due to increased unemployment. Of the remaining members, 5,000 were employed only on a temporary basis and “by 1992, nearly 80% of the female members who had been in the union in 1989 were unemployed” (Isbester 2001, 125). The pace of change from the FSLN to the Chamorro government left women leaders struggling desperately to keep up. They wasted valuable time and energy on disagreements over internal reorganization and suffered from a profound sense of disorientation and disillusionment. Nevertheless, despite their weakened position, the ATC retained its Women’s Secretariat and continued to provide opportunities for its female members to channel their demands to the leadership of the organization.
UNAG

UNAG experienced a similar process of disorientation and disorganization after the Sandinista electoral defeat in 1990, although given the organization’s greater degree of autonomy it was better able to weather the storm than the ATC. Women’s issues have remained firmly on UNAG’s agenda, and in 1994 the size of the women’s secretariat was increased. In fact, Isbester argues that “in the 1990s, mixed organizations in the rural areas organizing women to increase productivity continued to be more successful than autonomous women’s groups or AMNLAE” (Isbester 2001, 138)

Having said this, many of the problems identified throughout the history of the organization have not yet been fully resolved within UNAG and although discrimination has diminished, it still exists. A report presented at the Second National Meeting of Women Producers held in 2004 identified the following difficulties:

- Weak communication, which limits the ability of women to keep themselves up to date and participate better
- A lack of specific resources for the functioning of the Women’s Sector
- Mistreatment and discrimination against women inside the organization, which expresses itself through control, overloading with work and substitution of municipal and departmental representatives
- Little or no participation by women in the decisions of the association
- Lack of cohesion between groups of women at different levels of the organization.

(Montenegro and Cuadra Lira 2006, 17)

Similar problems, and the desire for greater autonomy from the FSLN and from the concerns and prejudices of male members would contribute to the decision made by an important section of the leadership of the Women’s Secretariat of UNAG to break away
from the main organization in 1997 to form a women only association called FEMUPROCAN. This history is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4.

**The Autonomous Women’s Movement**

In fact, women’s organizations took advantage of the decline of Sandinista affiliated mass organizations and the space that this left to form autonomous women’s groups not linked to any political parties. There was a growing recognition of the diversity of women’s experiences and struggles and a proliferation of groups to reflect the breadth of these experiences. Babb notes that this diversity is still one of the most striking features of Nicaraguan feminism, and has proved to be a double-edged sword: “it ranges from a small but influential intellectual current and a strong NGO presence to a popular base in a variety of women’s organizations. This diversity has been both a strength and, at times, a cause for consternation as social class and other differences have been pronounced” (Babb 2001, 207).

During this period there were some groups who maintained the hierarchical organizational structures favored by Sandinista mass organizations, but many other groups replaced these vertical, top down structures with more horizontal structures. There was a growing tendency towards decentralization and the growth of the network as an organizational form. This development can be seen as an important step towards the internal democratization of the women’s movement.

The Festival of the 52 Percent, a gathering of autonomous women’s groups organized to coincide with the official conference being organized by AMNLAE on March 8, 1991, attracted over eight hundred women (Babb 2001, 38). This represented

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6 The figure represents the percentage of women in the Nicaraguan population.
the first public declaration of the existence of an autonomous women’s movement in
Nicaragua. It also saw the “coming out” of the Nicaraguan gay and lesbian movements,
who had been obliged to maintain a low profile during the Sandinista period.\(^7\)

“While a few gay and lesbian rights organizations had existed as early as the mid-
eighties, they had occupied a precarious space during the revolution, having been
ordered by FSLN leaders to lie low and refrain from making waves. It wasn’t until after
the Sandinista loss in 1990 that the groups became large and vocal” (Kampwirth 2004,
57).

The First National Feminist Conference was held the following year with the theme
“Diverse but United,” a clear demonstration of the growing awareness of, and respect
for, the differences between women and the search for common goals. The opening
statement set the tone for the rest of the conference:

To recognize difference as a fundamental fact of our existence is to
incorporate politically the reality that we women live multiple dimensions of
subordination and exploitation through the mere fact of being women. We
are daughters, mothers, wives, or grandmothers, with a class, an ethnicity,
a culture, a political option, a religious belief or a sexual option. And all of
these have a concrete expression of discrimination. (Thayer 1994 quoted in
Isbester 2001, 141)

The conference settled the debate about coordination and structure of the
movement in favor of decentralization. Eight networks were formed on a range of issues
including economics, environmentalism and sexuality, of which only two, the network
against violence and the network for women’s health, were still active by the late 1990s.
These two, however, have been widely applauded in the literature as examples of
successful social movements. Kampwirth writes that in the late nineties “both had formal

\(^7\) For more on this movement see Babb (2001; 2003), Randall (1994) and Kampwirth (2004).
office space from which they coordinated the work of a significant number of member organizations: one hundred twenty to one hundred fifty in the case of the network against violence, and ninety-six alternative clinics, collectives and women’s houses in the case of the network for women’s health” (Kampwirth 2004, 64).

So, despite their differences, many women’s groups were able to find shared objectives around which to unite. After much debate and discussion the ethos of care, embraced by the overwhelming majority of the women’s organizations, emerged as the unifying principle for the movements at the time, and questions relating to the body formed the basis for action and organizing (Isbester 2001, 145). Thus, although the period 1990-1992 was indeed characterized initially by disagreement and disarray, by the end of the two years the foundations had been laid for what was soon to become one of the most dynamic women’s movements in all of Latin America: “as a result of this fragmentation and alienation, the women’s movement acquired the elements necessary for a successful social movement: autonomous identity based on a Utopian ethos, control over resources, and a locus of conflict on the body” (Isbester 2001, 153).

However, the identification of shared themes and struggles did not lead to unity at the expense of diversity. By contrast, the women realized that they could celebrate both their similarities and their differences. Their debates and discussions led many to re-evaluate their opinions about the intersections of party, class and gender interests. As a result, “some members of the emerging autonomous feminist movement made alliances that would have been unimaginable in earlier decades” (Kampwirth 2004, 67). Kampwirth cites the establishment of Women’s and Children’s Police Stations (Comisaría de la Mujer y la Niñez) and the National Women’s Coalition (Coalición
Nacional de Mujeres) as some of the most prominent demonstrations of the willingness of women to build these cross-party and cross-class alliances. Chavez Metoyer identifies this as the key to the women’s movements’ success, allowing the different organizations to recognize diversity but also identify common objectives: “The women’s movement has accomplished what no other social movement has done in the 1990s: It developed a national women’s network in which all women’s groups, regardless of different objectives, ethnicities, ideologies, and economic experiences have set aside political loyalties to identify common objectives” (Chavez Metoyer 1999, 110).

However, a number of other factors also contributed to the movements’ success. The harsh structural adjustment policies and more traditional views on women’s reproductive rights espoused by the Chamorro administration gave the women’s movement a clear, common enemy against which to unite: “each time services for women were cut further, women’s activists were energized and united around a common opponent: the Chamorro administration” (Kampwirth 2004, 52). In addition, Kampwirth observes that many of the leaders of the autonomous women’s movement were, by this time, highly skilled political activists owing to their long history of organizing within the Sandinista mass organizations.

These factors combined to give the women’s movements many of the tools necessary for success. Thus, despite the more conservative stance of the Chamorro government, the women’s movements managed to bring sufficient pressure to bear on the administration that it was forced to “make at least rhetorical promises, to cooperate with the women’s movement internationally, and to pass some important pieces of legislation concerning women” (Isbester 2001, 107-108). This success began to be
recognized not only within Nicaragua, but also by women’s groups in neighboring countries, who would look to the Nicaraguan movements for inspiration.

But, while these achievements cannot be denied, it should also be remembered that the position of many women in Nicaragua worsened under the Chamorro government, as a consequence of neoliberal economic policies and economic crisis, as well as a revival of conservative values on women’s role based around the functions of wife and mother. Struggling to survive, many women did not have the time to organize and still suffered from considerable discrimination and machismo in their homes, their communities and in Nicaraguan society in general. In light of this Isbester (2001, 123) argues that the Chamorro government, on balance, represented a “setback for women’s status and the women’s movement.”

The subsequent neoliberal administrations of Alemán (1997-2002) and Bolaños (2002-2007) in many ways went even further than Chamorro. The women’s movements’ found themselves facing increasingly hostile governments, which threatened to chip away at their hard-won achievements. Alemán, for example, refused to acknowledge that discrimination on the basis of gender was even a problem in Nicaragua and made it very difficult for the women’s groups to engage the administration in dialog, let alone consider working together on initiatives designed to increase gender equality. Under these conditions, the ability of women’s organizations to influence policy and decision-making processes was severely restricted. Furthermore, Alemán abolished the Nicaraguan Women’s Institute (INIM), which had been the source of much of the legislation advancing women’s rights, and replaced it with a kind of “super-ministry” dealing with issues related to the family (MIFAMILIA). One of the duties assigned to this
new ministry was to “oversee and coordinate the actions of all governmental and nongovernmental organizations that work with children, women, youth, the family, elderly people, and disabled people” (Kampwirth 2004, 72), thereby increasing government control over women’s organizations and the resources they received, including funding from international NGOs. However, Kampwirth argues that this was used more as a threat, as a warning to the women’s organizations not to go too far, rather than actually being used to instigate a wholesale crackdown on the movements.

Despite the ever more hostile political context, this time around the women’s movements were better prepared. Sufficient work had been done to strengthen to movements internally that the prospect of another unsympathetic government did not provoke the same kind of disorder and soul-searching as did Chamorro’s election. The women’s groups felt that they were capable of weathering yet another storm, and felt confident in the ability of the movements to survive and to keep women’s rights in the public eye:

The women’s movement, however, did have assets going in to Alemán’s period of governing. The women’s movement was well organized internally, knowledgeable about what it was facing, and experienced in dealing with an uncaring government. It has kept the organizational structure it developed in the early 1990s of identity-based groups at the local level intersecting through nationwide networks to agitate in public spaces for a specific social and political change. (Isbester 2001, 212)

It was during the period of neoliberal governments, especially after the devastation wrought by Hurricane Mitch in 1998, that the women’s movement underwent its next important transformation. With the increasing influence of nongovernmental organizations in Nicaragua, many women’s groups faced pressure to professionalize and adopt more formal organizational structures. In other words they began to bear more resemblance to NGOs in a number of important ways. Chapter 3 deals with this
phenomenon of “NGO-ization” in more detail, examining the reasons for the NGO-
ization of Nicaraguan civil society, and drawing attention to some of the benefits and
drawbacks to this process for women’s movement organizations.

The Women’s Movements In Nicaragua Today

Recently, observers have worried that the Nicaraguan movements have diversified
to the point of fragmentation. Many of the networks established at the 1992 conference
no longer function and there has been a lack of coordination at the national level on
many issues. In 2005, only the Network of Women Against Violence was still functioning
(Disney 2008, 208). Pluralization has reached the point of atomization, with individual
women’s organizations sometimes competing against one another for international
funds and a tendency for groups to pursue the specific interests of a small group of
women, rather than seeking to join forces with other organizations to achieve common
objectives.

Any hopes that the return of the FSLN to power would usher in new era of
cooperation between women’s movements and the government were quickly dashed.
Daniel Ortega’s alliance with the hierarchy of the conservative Catholic Church may
have helped him regain power, but it also meant that the new administration adopted a
much more traditional outlook on women’s issues.

Ortega himself was the subject of a political scandal in 1998 when his adopted
stepdaughter, Zoilamérica Narváez, published a 48 page report accusing him of
systematic sexual abuse, beginning in 1979, when Zoilamérica was 11 years old, and
continuing for twenty years. Ortega and his wife, Rosario Murillo, denied the allegations
and, as a sitting member of parliament, he was immune to prosecution in Nicaragua.
Narváez then took her case to the Inter American Human Rights Commission, which
recommended an amicable settlement to the case. This was accepted by the Nicaraguan government in 2002, but Narváez has not withdrawn her allegations of abuse, and Ortega continues to deny the charge.

In 2006 the women’s movement suffered a major setback with the passage of a bill banning therapeutic abortion in Nicaragua. This bill, supported by all major parties (including the FSLN) made abortion illegal under any circumstances, even in cases of rape or when the life of the mother is in danger. It has been widely condemned by international institutions, human rights groups, and some foreign governments, but to date the administration has refused to budge on this issue. Although some women’s groups in Nicaragua mounted public protests and campaigned against the passage of the bill there was a lack of concerted, coordinated action by the women’s movements. Many leaders of grassroots organizations failed to mobilize their members to protest the bill, or hold meetings to discuss the implications of it for their members. This fragmentation and polarization has also affected women’s groups and contributed to a general sense of confusion among many in the women’s movements. Thus, at a time when they needed to join together they failed to do so, and, in recent years, they have lost much of their ability to make an impact on government policy.

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8 María Rosa Renzi, regional director for UNIFEM (the United Nations Development Fund for Women), pointed to the fact that abortion remains a very divisive issue in Nicaraguan society. Many poorer women considered the debate on therapeutic abortion as an elite topic of discussion which had little relevance to their daily lives. She added that there is a currently lack of dialogue between women’s groups in the country and argued that Nicaraguan civil society in general has become more fragmented and polarized over recent years (Interview with María Rosa Renzi, Managua, July 15th, 2009).
CHAPTER 3
NGO-IZATION AND NICARAGUAN WOMEN’S MOVEMENTS

It wasn’t until the closing years of the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua that international NGOs began to expand their operations into Nicaragua. Today it is one of the most “NGO-ized” countries in the world, with over 4,000 registered organizations active in a country of 5 million people in 2004 (Briones 2004). The NGO sector generates around one quarter of the country’s GDP (O’Neill 2004, 40). After the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas women’s organizations had to find new sources of funding and new ways of operating. They increasingly relied on international development agencies and NGOs for the majority of their funding. Gaining access to such funding, and the conditions attached to the assistance provided, translated into increasing pressure to professionalize and construct formal organizational structures for many Nicaraguan women’s movements at this time. Thus, there was a tendency for women’s groups to undergo a significant degree of NGO-ization in their competition for funding. This chapter will explore the phenomenon of NGO-ization in more detail, highlighting some of the possible advantages and drawbacks of the process for Nicaraguan women’s movements. In subsequent chapters I will attempt to show how FEMUPROCAN has also undergone a similar process and resembles an NGO in several important ways.

A Brief History of NGO-ization

Prior to the Managua earthquake of 1972 relatively few NGOs were active in Nicaragua. The devastation caused by the earthquake, in which over 10,000 people lost their lives, brought the small Central American country to the attention of the international development community. However, when it became clear that much of the
assistance money was lining the pockets of the ruling Somoza clan (and those close to them) rather than reaching the victims, foreign donors began to look for alternative channels for the funds, which would be less susceptible to governmental corruption (Fogarty 2009). The first nongovernmental organizations operating in the country thus initially focused on immediate disaster relief, but later shifted to providing humanitarian aid to people in poor rural and urban communities.

As discussed in Chapter 2 on the women’s movements in Nicaragua, when the Sandinistas came to power in 1979 international aid to the country was largely channeled through the government and went to the FSLN-affiliated mass organizations. Women made important gains in the period, but the movement was, to a large extent, controlled by the government. The mass organizations linked to the party were the only legitimate space open to women’s activists to voice their concerns, and, as the Contra war progressed, women’s concerns were seen as secondary to the need to defend the revolution.

The electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in 1990, and the inauguration of a more conservative, neoliberal regime, helped to create the conditions for the NGO-ization of Nicaraguan society. The Chamorro administration cut funds from the FSLN affiliated organizations, and drastically slashed public spending on services. AMNLAE was no longer affiliated with the state, and therefore lost its privileged position as the only ‘legitimate’ women’s organization. Many of the women who had been active in these associations were faced with the prospect of losing their jobs and responded by setting up their own, independent, NGOs. But it was not only Sandinista women’s leaders that stood to lose out, as the introduction of user fees for health and education
disproportionally affected poor and rural women (Caivano and Hardwick 2008, 279).

There was an urgent need for the provision of these services, which previously had been free, and it was left to the private sector, or “civil society” to find a solution. Thus NGOs, largely financed using international funds, appeared to provide a potential solution to the different problems facing middle class and poor women in Nicaragua at this time: “NGOs provided much needed services to poor women, while at the same time creating jobs for educated, middle class women who previously had worked for the state” (Caivano and Hardwick 2008, 279).

The experience these women had gained during the Sandinista years, and the links they had forged with international organizations, helped to ensure that these NGOs survived, and developed linkages both within Nicaragua and on an international scale. The fact that it remained one of the poorest nations in Latin America (second only to Haiti in terms of per capita income by 1988 according to IMF data), and the obvious poverty experienced by many Nicaraguans on a daily basis played a part in keeping the country in favor with international funders.

Sally O’Neill (2004) argues that the importance of the personal relationships forged between solidarity activists from the Global North and the Nicaraguan people continues to this day, and helps to explain why Nicaragua consistently received much more in aid than its Central American neighbors.¹ These people, many of whom came to Nicaragua on solidarity trips organized through student associations or organizations linked to European socialism, subsequently found jobs with bilateral development agencies of NGOs in their home countries. She maintains that it is mainly these “affairs

¹ Although much official development assistance, such as that from the European Union has now been suspended following controversy over the lack of transparency at the latest round of municipal elections.
of the heart" that explains why so many NGOs were able to find donor agencies willing to fund their Nicaraguan projects, even during periods of considerable governmental corruption and attempts to control the operations of NGOs, as happened under the Alemán administration (O'Neill 2004, 44).

The advent of another natural disaster, Hurricane Mitch, in 1998, and Alemán’s refusal to modify the harsh measures imposed by structural adjustment in the wake of the crisis once again put Nicaragua high on the priority list of countries requiring urgent humanitarian assistance, and further encouraged the hyper-NGO-ization of Nicaraguan society, both in terms of international organizations with a presence in the country, and smaller national NGOs run and staffed entirely by Nicaraguans. Women’s organizations were not immune to these processes.

However, in order to fully understand the reasons behind NGO-ization it is necessary to look beyond Nicaragua and consider the global context which facilitated this process. After all, many other Latin American countries experienced a similar phenomenon during this period, and it is likely that pre-existing networks and connections between groups played a role in spreading NGO-ization from place to place:

The proliferation of NGOs must be understood in the context of wider global phenomena – the hegemony of the neoliberal development model, the dismantling of the welfare state, and the debt crisis in the developing world. Further, the web of connections among NGOs, social movements, government agencies, and cross-national networks of grassroots organizations involves transnational processes, as ideas, funding, knowledge, and people move through various local, national and international sites. (Bickham Mendez, 2005, 82)²

The change in focus of the international development community to models based around “governability” and “strengthening civil society” as key measures for the consolidation of democracy played an important part in shaping the way NGO-ization developed in the Global South, conditioning which types of organizations were likely to be favored, and which projects were seen as priorities. The commitment by the World Bank to civil society, rather than state-led solutions to Third World problems served to further legitimize NGOs as the developmental actors par excellence, and absolve governments of the responsibility for the problems (caused in part by the very measures designed by the International Financial Institutions). It also suggests a degree of disdain for the ability of third world leaders to improve the lives of their citizens (even as the richest countries in the world are looking to their governments, not civil society, for economic bail outs).

**Benefits to NGO-ization**

NGOs’ links with international funders and transnational advocacy networks have provided vital spaces for the influx and exchange of new ideas, technologies and links to similar organizations worldwide in order to share experiences and coordinate global campaigns (and thus more successfully pressurize governments and international organizations to acquiesce to their demands). Large organizations such as Oxfam or World Vision, active in every region of the world, have the advantage that they can share stories of best practices from different countries and devise innovative solutions to problems that local organizations might not have been able to come up with by themselves.

Christina Ewig, for example, describes how NGOs focused on women’s healthcare in Nicaragua were able to significantly improve on the models developed by the
government. She argues that “NGOs can serve as a base for innovation and a public-private exchange of improved health care models” (Ewig 1999, 98). In this sector feminist NGOs had taken a leading role in devising policies which were then subsequently copied by the Nicaraguan state. Arguably NGOs, with no formal ties to any particular administration, have a greater amount of freedom to experiment with new ways of doing things than the governing politicians, who are constantly concerned with how their actions will affect their future chances of reelection.

Given their tendency to be smaller in scale than either many popular social movement organizations or government ministries, NGOs are often able to respond more quickly and decisively than other actors. This can make them especially efficient and valuable in times of crisis (such as in providing emergency disaster relief), and able to modify programs that are not functioning as planned much more quickly. The majority of NGOs are organized along strict internal lines of command, with everybody aware of who makes which decisions and who answers to whom. Although this tendency to favor vertical structures has come in for some criticism (see the next section), it can also be an advantage in that it limits the potential for conflict and power struggles within the organization that have paralyzed popular social movements at various points in countries around the world. Within an NGO, it could be argued, there is less scope for unnecessary duplication of work (as sometimes happens in over-bureaucratized states) and more clarity about where responsibility lies at every stage.

Further contributing to their relative efficiency in comparison with popular social movement organizations is the NGOs tendency to favor a few, full time, professional staff members over a larger number of mainly volunteers from a variety of backgrounds
and levels of knowledge or education. The women employed in many of the NGOs active in Nicaragua have relatively high levels of education, which allows them to communicate better with their international funders and with government officials. They are likely to be more aware of current trends in international funding (the vocabulary in vogue at the time, existing international development targets and priorities, the types of projects likely to attract most funding and so on) and able to frame their demands in the most favorable way to secure the maximum amount of money. These women and men are very conscious of the need to present their organization in the best light possible and have become very effective media managers, both in Nicaragua and on an international scale. Conversely, popular social movements and membership-based women’s movements are likely to spend less time and effort on their “image” and on keeping the donor agencies pleased, to the possible cost of large quantities of money and press coverage.

Politicians are much more likely to listen seriously to the proposals of a smartly dressed, well spoken woman with a university degree in her field, than to the ideas put forward by a group of poorer women unused to public speaking, with lower levels of education and with no knowledge of the “correct” way to phrase suggestions. In many countries both in Latin America and in Europe, governments have been so impressed by the credentials of the professional women working for NGOs that they have actually contracted them to develop policy on behalf of the state (Lang 2000, Ewig 1999, Alvarez 1998). NGOs are often seen as less confrontational and “political” than their social movement counterparts (they rarely threaten to revolutionize society but rather to work within existing structures and boundaries to foment social change), and thus are often
more appealing collaborators for government ministries: “While local government officials have often reacted negatively or skeptically to social movement actors …non-governmental organizations, which can be seen as the “professionalized” offspring of new social movement initiatives, are better locally positioned to communicate and negotiate with local authorities” (Lang 2000).

However, as Ewig rightly points out, the level of access to government officials and policy making arenas enjoyed by an NGO very much depends upon their relationship to the government in question, and to individual ministers within the administration. This is likely to vary from NGO to NGO, with those primarily concerned with providing services or humanitarian assistance much more likely to be asked to collaborate with the state than those whose demands could potentially foster social unrest, or upset powerful sectors of society (such as some of the feminist NGOs operating in Nicaragua). Precisely because of their non-governmental nature, NGOs have no formal link to the state (in contrast to the Sandinista-affiliated mass organisations for example) and therefore without the goodwill of the government NGOs are no more able to formulate policy than any other type of organisation: “the movement’s ability to shape state institutions has depended greatly on particular elected and appointed officials within the state. Without direct connections to the state or influence within its structure, the movement is subject to the willingness of these individual state officials to cooperate” (Ewig 1999, 98).

Another area in which the professional nature of NGOs serves as an advantage is in their relationships to the media both in Nicaragua and abroad. Transnational NGOs have the money and skills to mount high profile global campaigns and gather extensive
mainstream media attention to their causes. It would be extremely difficult for a small, autonomous women’s group in Nicaragua with no links to international funding agencies to get their concerns into the pages of European or North American newspapers.

It is difficult for the social movements to do what they want such as mobilize people, come into Managua for meetings, pay for educational materials and have some core people dedicated 100% to the movement. They lack the funds for these activities. The NGOs, on the other hand, have access to funding and therefore can pay someone to work full time on an issue; they can produce their own materials; they can pay travel expenses for networking and attending meetings; they can pay for radio and TV spots. So NGOs working on any issue that the social movements are working on have huge advantages over the movements in the formation of public opinion and in the ability to advocate. (Quandt 2005)

Thanks in part to their access to monetary resources, NGOs in Nicaragua have proven themselves adept at publishing and distributing informative material, and opened up discussion among populations on a wide range of important issues:

It is undeniable that without the NGOs’ “professional” work it would have been difficult for certain sectors of society to learn about the true implications of issues such as the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) with the United States, the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas and Plan Puebla-Panama. The same goes for such important issues as therapeutic abortion, sexual and reproductive rights and even the defense and promotion of human rights. (Grigsby 2005)

The monetary resources available to NGOs have been advantageous in improving women’s lives in Nicaragua in other ways as well. Particularly important for poor women is the fact that NGOs do not collect dues from the people they claim to represent. Even a small deduction from a salary can make a huge difference to someone living on less than a dollar a day, and consequently some unions may not include women from the poorest sectors of society. It is precisely these women that many NGOs are set up to help.
Whatever the criticisms leveled at service-providing NGOs, the benefits of clean water, adequate housing and access to education and health care are undeniable. Whether using international funds or money from within Nicaragua, the vital role played by some NGOs in helping to meet people’s basic needs and improve their immediate standard of living should not be forgotten. It is all very well to argue that these are things that the state should provide for its citizens, but in cases where the state is either unwilling or unable to do so it would seem inhumane to deny NGOs access to these areas. Some remote villages in Nicaragua (particularly in the less developed Atlantic Coast region) were simply not served by the government at all. For these people, the presence of an NGO in the area can literally mean the difference between life and death.

Lastly, the proliferation of NGOs in Nicaragua, each claiming to represent a certain sector of society, has contributed to the pluralization of the women’s movement within the country and opened up space for the articulation of the specific concerns of different groups of women within society. Nicaraguan women now have a wide range of organizations keen to be seen to represent them, in marked contrast to the Sandinista era when AMNLAE had a virtual monopoly on “women’s issues.”

**Drawbacks of NGO-ization**

The benefits mentioned above are certainly important, but there are many aspects of the process of NGO-ization of a society that are much less beneficial to the ability of women to organize in defense of their interests.

Various writers have raised concerns about who is actually represented by an NGO, and how accountable these organizations are to the constituency they claim to be representing. Very often it would appear that NGOs are far more accountable to their
funders than they are to their supposed “beneficiaries”. This is the case both for Nicaraguan and transnational NGOs, who both rely on international funds for their survival. Thus, it could be argued, women’s organizations have not become “autonomous” but rather have simply substituted one type of dependence (on the Sandinista state) for another (international funders), and distanced the women’s organization from formal political power:

Autonomy is not only a failed electoral strategy; it also diminishes the arenas in which the movement’s issues can be promoted. Women effectively marginalized themselves and their issues from political power. This led many women’s groups to become dependent on support from abroad…and thus, ironically, they put their autonomy at risk, once again. (Barrig, cited in Caivano and Hardwick 2008, 286)

This reliance on outside funding affects the types of projects the NGOs are able to implement, as they are restricted to those likely to be approved by their international “partners.” Thus in many cases, it is the organization in the Global North which sets the agenda, rather than the Nicaraguan women participating in the project. The agenda therefore reflects the interests of the funders, rather than those of the “beneficiaries.” Even “participatory” approaches to development, which claim to prioritize the demands of local communities are often designed in such a way that local participation remains largely for show, rather than an integral part of each phase of a particular project (from design and planning right through to evaluation).

International funding cannot be relied upon in the long term, and if the donor suddenly decides their money would be better spent elsewhere the Nicaraguan organization often has no effective way of putting pressure on the donor not to pull out or to fulfill any prior agreements. Due to complaints about the way in which the December 2008 municipal elections were carried out, and concerns generally about the
line the current Ortega administration appears to be taking, various donor countries withdrew all official development assistance from Nicaragua. Much of this assistance was to be channeled through NGOs, many of whom had no connection to the Nicaraguan government, but suffered nonetheless. Equally, if a project ends up having a negative impact on a community it is very hard for the local people to hold the NGO formally accountable, let alone receive any compensation.

Conversely, donors are keen to ensure that their money is being spent in the way they had intended, and often attach innumerable strings to any funds given to Southern partners, diverting precious time and money towards reassuring donors rather than improving lives:

Accountability to external funders means systems of evaluation that redirect important time and energy away from social justice pursuits and towards satisfying agencies and donors that local organizations are sufficiently accountable to their social bases (as judged by the donor or Northern counterpart) and a range of other requirements imposed by ‘global agents.’ (Mato 1998 cited in Bickham Mendez 2005, 216)

NGO-ization has thus shifted the nature of the activities undertaken by women’s movements in Nicaragua from broadly defined goals aimed at transforming attitudes and practices to a more project focused approach, with an emphasis on easily measurable results (Jaggar 2005). Organizations are under constant pressure to provide quantifiable data on their successes. No matter how impressive such data may appear the fact remains that some of the most important, long-term changes in societies are often those most difficult to represent through a neat set of statistics or graph.

Figures cannot capture changing attitudes, as Silliman observes: “the impact of an NGO trying to change power structures or dominant social values cannot easily be quantified
through standard evaluation procedures to fit neatly into a project report for a funding agency or government” (1999, 138). Thus these initiatives have fallen out of favor.

There has been considerable debate about the potential role NGOs play in politicizing or depoliticizing women. Evidence from Europe seems to suggest that NGOs can foster greater levels of political awareness and action within communities (Lang 2000), whereas the majority of articles written about NGOs in Latin America have claimed that they have served to reduce the organizational capacity of women. By adopting much of the technocratic, supposedly “apolitical” language of the international development institutions and downplaying any overtly “political” aspects, Bendaña (2006) notes that NGOs often serve to depoliticize the people they claim to represent, instead claiming to offer an “alternative to politics” and neutralizing potential activism. Former activists are now often well salaried employees in NGOs, which coordinate with the very institutions the social movements sought to transform. In many ways the NGOs owe their survival to the maintenance of the status quo, and thus it is not in their interest to rock the boat unnecessarily, limiting the range of options available to those approved by the international funding community, which are not necessarily those that promise the best results for the women they claim to serve. In some cases the women best served by an NGO are not the “beneficiaries” or “target population” but rather the women employed by the NGO themselves: “NGO-ization of politics threatens to turn resistance into a well-mannered, reasonable, salaried, 9-to-5 job. With a few perks thrown in. Real resistance has real consequences. And no salary” (Roy, 2004).

It is not surprising that many of the most talented and experienced women’s leaders have opted for the NGO sector, given the choice between a well paid position in
a comfortable office, with the opportunity to travel around the world to NGO conferences, and the prestige that comes with this, or an unpaid (or low paid) position in charge of a local social movement, with little in the way of recognition for successes achieved, but the constant threat of repressive measures from the state hanging over your head. However these coveted positions are frequently only open to a certain type of woman. She is likely to be middle class, urban, well educated and able to speak English to a high level, whereas poorer, rural or indigenous women find it harder and harder to gain a foothold in this lucrative sector. Thus NGO-ization can sometimes reproduce class and racial inequalities. The increasing professionalization of the women’s movements threatens to privilege the voices of middle class women and encourages the growth of organizations for rural women while at the same time contributing to the disappearance of organizations of rural women.

Pressure to secure funding has contributed to the increasing professionalization and bureaucratization of women’s organizations. Despite a steady rise in the amount of money destined for the NGO sector in recent years, there is not an unlimited amount of donor funding available, and yet there are more and more organizations applying for support. This leads to competition among organizations, rather than cooperation, and pits NGOs against one another in a battle for funds and for recognition as the “authentic” representative of various different groups of women. The organizations that tend to receive the lion’s share of the donors’ money are those with the most resources, and most professional staff (Alvarez 1998)

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However, it is doubtful whether the most professional organizations are those that best serve the interests of women at the grassroots. It is difficult to gain an accurate picture of the situation faced by rural women from day to day from an office in the capital city. The leaders of large, well funded NGOs run the risk of losing touch with the women they claim to represent, women who find it hard to make their voices heard at the higher levels of the organization. New social movements, and women’s movements in particular, have been widely praised for their new ways of organizing, based around the principle of “radical democracy” (Bickham Mendez 2005). They emphasized horizontal structures in contrast to the vertical models favored by traditional social movements and political parties, thus fostering participation from women at all levels in the decision making processes. Most NGOs, on the other hand, appear to have reverted to a more hierarchical organizational structure, with power concentrated in the hands of the directors and the board. These leaders are rarely from the poorer sectors of society. Ewig notes that it is often the smaller, less professionalized NGOs that foster the greatest amount of participation from the women at the base, and are more internally democratic (Ewig 1999, 97). However, it is precisely these organizations that are losing out in the battle for funding.

But NGO-ization does not just involve unequal power relations between women, but also between Northern funders and their Southern partners. This has led many to question the notion that NGOs can contribute to the wider democratization of societies, and instead simply reproduce global inequalities within a country:

NGOs are seen by many as embodying participatory democracy and presenting a solution to the top-down development strategies of previous decades. Yet NGOs do not escape the power dynamics of North-South relations in the postcolonial context. Despite the flow of ideas and
resources across national borders, a great deal of power remains in the hands of both state and non-state political actors in the North. (Bickham Mendez 2005, 215)

Some critics, (e.g. Petras 1997, Toni Solo 2007) have gone so far as to classify this as a new form of colonialism, and that far from representing an alternative to paternalistic models of development, NGOs are in fact just another manifestation of it. Deborah Mindry (2001, 1189) has shown how the discourse of many women’s and feminist NGOs operating in the third world is employed in a paternalistic manner by many donor organizations, reproducing earlier patterns of colonial domination, “constituting some women as benevolent providers and others as worthy or deserving recipients of development and empowerment”. She notes that “Poor, rural, black and brown (“third world”) women have been idealized and objectified as a worthy category of intervention. Often portrayed as innocent victims of oppression, poverty and “ignorance” (construed as something akin to political naïveté) they are represented as helpless, apolitical in their misery, and needy of representation” (Ibid., 1203).

In the eyes of some critical observers, NGOs represent a threat to the national sovereignty of third world governments, and an attempt by the hegemonic powers to increase their control over other countries via the back door. The recent Bush administration did much to further this belief by claiming that NGO relief agencies receiving funds from USAID were “an arm of the US government” and an integral part of the war on terror.4

In particular, it is the service-providing NGOs that tend to come in for some of the harshest criticisms. These organizations, despite their good intentions, are seen as

helping to let neoliberal states “off the hook” in filling the gaps in services that it ought to be the state’s duty to provide: “NGDOs [Nongovernmental Development Organizations] frequently have good intentions ‘to help the poor,’ while the state exploits this to exit stage right when nobody is looking. Sometimes the state never even makes it onto the stage” (Grigsby 2005). In this respect, Grigsby argues, part of the blame lies in the propaganda successes of the NGOs themselves. In constantly emphasizing their achievements in their publicity material and in the wider media, they have often successfully convinced large sectors of the international development community that they are more efficient than national governments. Thus it is relatively easy for states to hold up their hands, admit defeat and pass the responsibility on to the nongovernmental organizations.

So long as the NGOs are there to pick up the slack for the neoliberal state, the likelihood or organizing mass demonstrations against this model of development is severely limited. Sofía Montenegro, a prominent Nicaraguan feminist and intellectual, has observed that in this sense states can use the NGO sector as a type of safety net or buffer against social explosion. She makes a distinction between NGOs and social movements, arguing that the former try and work within existing models of development, and are vulnerable to cooptation (or are ignored by the government), whereas the latter are attempting to change the model entirely, and mobilize large numbers of people in support of their cause (Sofía Montenegro, quoted in Quandt 2005). This has contributed to a reduction in the visibility of feminism and the women’s movements as the focus has been shifted from the streets to the board rooms and conferences of government ministries and international funders. The small scale of many NGOs active in Nicaragua
limits their capacity to organize mass demonstrations, and has been seen as a sign of the fragmentation of the women’s movement in recent years.

Dependence on international funding has also caused problems for feminist NGOs in Nicaragua. They have had to contend with the accusation that feminism is a foreign import, and not something appropriate for the Nicaraguan context. Feminists have faced an uphill battle to try to change the image of the word in Nicaraguan society, which still has negative connotations for some women. The current administration has exploited these currents of thought to justify its increasing crackdown on many of the more radical Nicaraguan feminist NGOs and organizations.

**Feminist NGOs in Nicaragua Today: Agents of Yankee Imperialism?**

The current Ortega administration has capitalized on this negative cultural stereotype of the feminist movement in its recent attacks on organizations in Nicaragua. These NGOs have been denounced as an attempt by the United States to infiltrate Nicaraguan society and even described by Rosario Murillo (the wife of Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega) as forming a new type of “low intensity warfare” (a phrase with particularly strong connotations in Nicaraguan society, intended to evoke the memory of the U.S. supported Contra war in the 1980s which cost so many lives). In an article published by the Sandinista government magazine 19, Murillo accuses the feminist organizations of “political prostitution” and moral bankruptcy:

> We are faced with a political prostitution with the booming voice of a billy-goat [*macho cabrio*] and Uncle Sam’s hat. We are faced with a permanent provocation, which, in addition, takes advantage of its role as political practitioner of “rights” and uses the spaces opened for it by its rich relation in order to try and change our set of cultural values, and impose strange,

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5 Of the women I interviewed in Nicaragua, who were members of grassroots cooperatives, very few of them said they understood what feminism was or how it was relevant to their lives.
foreign social norms upon us regarding our the way in which we live together with our families and within our communities.

In this politico-cultural war, which they are carrying out in the name of women, they seek to sell their stereotypes as postmodern politics, promoting their foreign culture, alien to our way of doing things, which forms part, moreover, of a failed cultural model, destroyer of the world, which has dispossessed souls, and enthroning egoism, solitude and deep emptiness/gaps. (Murillo 2008)

Dubbing the feminist NGOs “modern day Trojan horses” sent by the USA to undermine the Sandinista government, the current Ortega administration is stepping up the pressure on nongovernmental organizations which have questioned the gender equality record of the FSLN and its increasingly hard-line stance on issues such as therapeutic abortion. Far from appearing as “apolitical” the feminist NGOs appear to have emerged as the government’s favorite opponent in recent years.

Even the service-providing NGOs run the risk of being labeled as a form of imperialism, although the Nicaraguan government is more than happy to accept international investment and money when it suits them (Mannen, 2009). This reinforces Christina Ewig’s claim that the success of the NGO model for the Nicaraguan women’s movement depends very much on the goodwill of the state, and of particular individuals working for the government. Faced with a hostile administration, a lack of official channels through which to put pressure on the government, and the increasingly fragmented nature of the women’s movements in Nicaragua, no matter how well organized and professional the NGOs may appear they are unlikely to succeed in changing the policies pursued by the state.

**Concluding Remarks**

The process of NGO-ization of the women’s movements in Nicaragua has been accompanied by its increasing atomization and professionalization. Dependency on
external funding has fostered competition rather than collaboration, and privileged some women’s voices over others. The women’s movements run the risk of becoming a middle class pursuit, and of losing touch with the very women they claim to represent. NGOs are characterized by hierarchical structures which threaten to destroy some of the main achievements of the autonomous women’s movement in Nicaragua in fostering spaces for the participation of women of all classes and backgrounds. There has been a tendency to switch from broader goals of changing gender relations in society, and influencing attitudes regarding women, towards focusing on short-term projects with easily measurable outcomes. In the vast majority of cases NGOs are much more accountable to their funders in the global North than to the poor women they claim to represent.

However, the examples provided by Ewig of the achievements of the women’s NGOs in the health sector prove that NGO-ization is not inherently negative, and indeed can help to foster innovative solutions to urgent social problems. The ability of the NGO sector to respond quickly in an emergency and to provide vital services to the most disadvantaged in Nicaraguan society can mean the difference between life and death for some poor rural women. Partnerships with organizations in the global North are problematic to say the least, but have provided NGOs with links to other similar organizations in different parts of the world, and to put certain issues on the international development agenda, and fostered discussion of difficult topics in countries all over the globe.

The process of NGO-ization appears to be largely irreversible today. However, this is not to say that the type of NGO-ization will remain the same in the future. Women’s
organizations in Nicaragua have proven themselves to be capable of a remarkable
degree of readjustment and adaptation to differing political contexts. Although NGO-
ization might thus far have contributed to the fragmentation of women’s movements in
the country, there is no reason to suggest that activists will not develop new ways of
working and new forms of coordination. They may find ways in which to establish more
equitable partnerships with their funders and ensure that the voices of poor and
marginalized women are heard and respected. What we are currently witnessing may
be nothing more than a temporary reduction in the ability of Nicaraguan women’s
movements to influence state policies, akin to the two years of disarray following the
election of Chamorro.

There are several reasons to be hopeful: some NGOs (mainly small scale, less
professional operations) which appear to have maintained a degree of internal
democracy as well as competing with other organizations in terms of efficiency, so it
would appear that the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive. More could be done
to encourage coordination among NGOs and between NGOs and popular social
movements (although there are some initiatives, such as the Coordinadora Civil, in
place at the moment which attempt to do this), as there is no reason why the growth of
NGOs should necessitate the weakening of social movements (and in fact NGOs can
play a role in strengthening organized civil society campaigns, as happened in Europe.).

Not all international funding organizations are alike, and there is growing
recognition among many of the more progressive organizations, such as Oxfam
International, that it is often local women who best understand some of the problems
they face and how to go about solving them. These international organizations are
discussing ways of working with their Nicaraguan partners to build relationships based on mutual respect and exchange of knowledge and experiences. In the case study of FEMUPROCAN described in this thesis, the relationships they have built with Oxfam Canada and, to some extent, El Centro Cooperativo Sueco, show that international funders can work together with Nicaraguan women’s organizations in ways that allow the women to voice their opinions about priorities for action and develop their own strategies. However, as I will demonstrate throughout this thesis, the relationship is still marked by power imbalances between the two “partners.”
CHAPTER 4
THE HISTORY OF FEMUPROCAN: A BASTION OF STRUGGLE FOR THE UNITY AND DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN PRODUCERS

We were the women’s secretariat in UNAG. I am talking as if the child is an embryo in the mother’s stomach, you see? Afterwards we were María Castil…we were constituted as María Castil, and this stomach continued to grow. Then we were the Federation, and the baby was born when we put a name to FEMUPROCAN.¹

This chapter presents a brief outline of the history of FEMUPROCAN from its roots in the Women’s Secretariat of UNAG to the summer of 2009, when I carried out my field research. I discuss why the women found it necessary to set up their own organization and break away from UNAG and describe some of the main obstacles and dilemmas they encountered along the way. In order to be able to assess the extent to which FEMUPROCAN has become a successful, independent women’s organization it is also necessary to outline some of the main organizational structures of the federation today and their functions.

**Within UNAG**

**Phase One: Disappointment and the Roots of Organization 1980-1983**

FEMUPROCAN traces its history back to 1984, when the first collectives of rural women producers were created within UNAG- Matagalpa and women began to press for a space of their own. It was another three years before the Women’s Secretariat of UNAG was founded at the national level, in 1987. However, the history of women’s organizing within UNAG goes back even further. The Sandinista rhetoric of equal rights for men and women, and the new legal framework that followed the revolution’s triumph in 1979, inspired many of FEMUPROCAN’s leaders to fight for the reduction of gender

¹ Leticia, President of a FEMUPROCAN cooperative, Terrabona, July 21, 2009.
inequality in the countryside. The new laws on Agrarian Reform (1980) and the cooperative sector (1981) formally established equal rights for men and women, an important step forward, and the future leaders of FEMUPROCAN were filled with optimism about the future. However, as discussed in Chapter 2, formal recognition was one thing, but actually ending discrimination in practice proved much more difficult. Machista attitudes could not be swept away overnight and after the National Cooperative Census was carried out in 1982 women such as Martha Valle, already active within the mixed sex organization, were shocked to discover that women comprised only 6% of total cooperative membership (Valle 2009, 223). These women realized that rural women producers were not getting the recognition they deserved or being given the same opportunities to participate in organizations as their male counterparts. Rural women encountered resistance on all sides, even within their own families and including from those responsible for implementing the agrarian reform: “We would work extremely hard but we had no importance, no value for the men. They saw us as garbage, we were worth nothing. We worked in the countryside, raised cattle and everything but in the men’s eyes we did nothing, men did everything and women only worked in the kitchen.”

They thus began to discuss the idea of forming a women’s section within UNAG. However, when they proposed this to the male leadership “they stared at each other and said something on the order of, ‘Women are already represented in UNAG; there are thousands of women who participate in our activities’” (Valle 2009, 223). Despite this rejection the women who had raised the issue were not prepared to abandon the

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2 Ana, member of a grassroots cooperative affiliated with FEMUPROCAN, Terrabona, July 21st, 2009
idea so hastily, and continued to press for the national organization to meet their demands. The leaders of these women, many of whom had risen to positions of some status and responsibility repeatedly demonstrated that women are producers and they have a long history of working the land in Nicaragua. They began to denounce machismo as the main obstacle preventing the integration and participation of women, in conditions of equality, in the process of agrarian reform as established by law (FEMUPROCAN 2006, 26-27):

We had the laws in our favor but they served little purpose due to the machismo that reigned at all levels. Their own husbands were the main obstacle preventing women from joining and participating in the organization…the leadership were not clear on the obstacles to women’s participation…women were subordinated…in order to go to a meeting they had to ask their husband’s permission…they had no one to look after the children…they had no time to do all of their household tasks…They [the national leadership] did not understand this situation.3


According to FEMUPROCAN, the formation of the coffee picking brigade María Castil Blanco marked a turning point. They describe the experience of this brigade as providing the “launch pad” which made the creation of the Women’s Secretariat possible (FEMUPROCAN 2006, 28). By this time, the ATC had already created a women’s secretariat, putting further pressure on the male leadership of UNAG to follow suit. Valle described to me the difficulties that they had in forming the brigade in the first place. At first the proposal was dismissed as unworkable, but gradually, through a great deal of hard work and effort by the women organizers, enough of the male members of UNAG came around to the idea and agreed to look after their partners’ homes whilst they were

3 Benigna Mendiola, FEMUPROCAN member, in an interview carried out during the mid 1980s and cited by FEMUPROCAN 2006, 27
busy picking coffee. Even so, many of the participants had no choice but to bring their children with them, carrying the younger ones on their backs. The brigade served to visibilize the presence of women within the organization and prove to the male members that they were quite capable of organizing themselves efficiently and assuming leadership positions. Its main objective was to “create a space for solidarity among rural women” through the sharing of experiences and opinions (Ibid, 29). This was especially important to the campesina participants who were sometimes quite isolated on their cooperatives and wanted to inform themselves about other women’s lives and struggles (Collinson 1990, 54). In 1986, 45 women were mobilized for a period of forty days in these brigades. One year later this number had increased to over five hundred. The brigades did not go unnoticed by those outside the movement, receiving significant media coverage and support from prominent feminist journalists and activists, publicizing the existence of discrimination against rural women.

However, women still faced difficulties in reaching positions at the higher levels of the organization and were not trusted with many positions of responsibility. Some posts were reserved for women, but these were overwhelming those of secretaries and not those that challenged pre-existing conceptions about the gender division of labor or the unequal power relations between men and women.

Phase Three: The Creation of the Women’s Secretariat

The success of the brigades resulted in the First National Meeting of Peasant Women and played an important role in persuading the male leaders of UNAG to agree to the formation of the Women’s Secretariat in 1987. However, other factors also contributed, as Martha Valle explained in 2009:
There were several factors that facilitated the creation of the Women’s Section at that time, among them the fact that the FSLN’s leadership had just adopted the position that women should be integrated in all aspects of the revolution; that AMNLAE had begun encouraging the formation of women’s secretariats within the various unions and organizations; and that the women’s movement was pushing for “absolute equality between men and women” in the discussions over the country’s new constitution. (FEMUPROCAN 2006, 7 cited in Valle 2009, 224)

The fact that UNAG’s leadership had controlled the process of creation of the Women’s Section seriously limited its power within the organization. Just as in the case of the CST described by Bickham Mendez (2005) it was the male leaders of UNAG who determined the priorities and objectives of the women’s section, named its leaders and allocated them a budget. Thus, as Morena Diaz, (currently head of training and advocacy in FEMUPROCAN but formerly active in UNAG) explained to me, within UNAG women were only able to advance as far as the men wanted them to and no further. The men were keen to keep control over the women and worried that the creation of a women’s section would lead to stronger linkages to the women’s movement and a desire to distance themselves from the main organization. They were uncomfortable with many of the more radical demands being made by some women’s organizations at this time and felt that their positions of power and privilege might be under attack:

We created the Women’s Section with the objective that it would be the body that worked to organize lines and actions directed towards peasant women. We were very clear that the idea was not to create a separate women’s movement within the organization, because, as a trade association, we are a union of men and women and we have to fight for the interests of all producers and not for the interests of any particular group.  

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4 Interview with the leadership of UNAG, carried out by María Angelica Faune and cited in FEMUPROCAN 2006: 32.
Despite these limitations, the Women’s Section continued to question the subordination of women within the organization, resulting in an escalation of tensions within UNAG and an increasing tendency to demonize talk of women’s liberation as a deviation from the correct role of the organization and a result of penetration by dangerous “foreign feminist currents” (FEMUPROCAN 2006, 33). In order to dissipate this tension somewhat the Women’s Section found it necessary to subordinate the specific demands of women to the priorities of the organization as a whole. However, the women had by no means abandoned their fight.

The first National Assembly of UNAG Women was held in 1989 and highlighted the range of problems women faced within their cooperatives. Despite legislation, there were reports of women being paid less than men, and that women still faced discrimination with regard to access to land. Instead of modifying many of the land titles to officially include the name of the woman as well as the man, most were simply “understood to be extended to the man’s wife or partner,” which was of little use to many women should they wish to prove their ownership of the land. Furthermore, men still received more of the better, more fertile land, whilst women were allocated smaller plots. The Women’s Section thus campaigned to increase the number of titles granted to couples, rather than male household heads (FEMUPROCAN 2006). They also raised more general, not “women-specific” concerns, reaffirming their ability and right to debate the same issues as male members.

In the years leading up to the 1990 elections events such as the National Meeting of Peasant Women Leaders, organized by leaders of the UNAG Women’s Section, saw women producers (both affiliated and not affiliated to UNAG) coming together to
formulate a common platform for struggle. A “Plataforma de Lucha” (Battle Platform) was agreed upon, which set out the main demands of the women, including but not limited to land titling in the couple’s name, the integration of women into cooperatives, the punishment of those who physically and/or sexually abuse women or children and training for women at all levels of the organization (FEMUPROCAN 2006).

The Women’s Section reoriented its objectives in the light of this meeting, adopting the platform as the basis for all of its work. Given that there were still limits to women’s participation in cooperatives, the Women’s Secretariat devised alternative modes of organization for women, mostly financed by international cooperation, including women’s collectives, Women’s Associations and mini-projects for women. These alternative modes increased female participation in UNAG but were not linked to the production plans of the cooperative and small farm sector which form the backbone of the organization. This, and the ad hoc nature of many of the women’s new forms of organizing, contributed to the persistence of the idea that women could not produce at the same level as their male counterparts and that their activities were marginal and of little overall importance. They thus served to reinforce, rather than challenge, the biased perceptions about female members held by many of their male counterparts, and did little to persuade the men that women should be recognized as “producers” in their own right.

Perhaps one of the toughest battles fought by the women of UNAG was over the right to be called “productoras.” Valle emphasized the symbolic importance this word had for the female farmers and its contribution to the development of their identity.\footnote{Interview with Martha Valle, President of FEMUPROCAN, Managua, July 17, 2009}
represented the recognition of the value of women’s agricultural work as producers in their own right (rather than as assistants to the men, or inferior workers). It also suggested that women could have control over their own land and their own production without permission from the men.

**Phase Four: After the 1990 Electoral Defeat of the FSLN – the Women’s Section Demands Greater Autonomy**

After the defeat of the Sandinistas, UNAG, like the other FSLN mass organizations, was forced to reevaluate its position and way of working. The women found that although the organization suffered from the withdrawal of financial support, they were able to find more space to define their own strategies and priorities for action.

During this period the scaling back of services formerly provided by the state and neoliberal economic policies hit rural women hard. Many struggled to survive and keep their families together in the context of increasing migration to Costa Rica and economic crisis in Nicaragua. There were increased reports of domestic violence, and the Chamorro government favored more traditional views on men’s and women’s “correct” roles.

Nevertheless, the Women’s Section was strengthened by a number of factors, including the development of a strong autonomous women’s movement in the country, as discussed in Chapter 2, which helped to keep women’s issues on the agenda; the active role assumed by the Nicaraguan Women’s Institute (INIM) in institutionalizing the topic of gender in those government bodies responsible for the formulation of policy; and the pressure from international development organizations for UNAG to develop plans and projects with a gender focus.
The Women’s Section succeeded in increasing its total membership in this period, but in an uneven fashion. Membership actually fell in some regions, with others experiencing growth rates between 30 and 50%. The largest numbers of members were found in the departments of Matagalpa, Rivas, Jinotega and Estelí (FEMUPROCAN 2006, 44).

They also encouraged their members to organize themselves into collectives based on the production of particular goods, cooperatives and second degree cooperative organizations, which grouped together around 1,400 women, or 13% of the total members, associations dedicated to specific products or groups of products and savings clubs (Ibid, 47). Again, the extent to which these alternative organizational forms were adopted by the women differed from area to area. Those regions with experienced and dynamic leaders, such as Matagalpa and Rivas flourished, whereas others made little in the way of real progress. Similarly uneven results were reported in increasing women’s access to credit through these new forms of organizing.

Perhaps one of their greatest successes in this period was their participation in the struggle to improve women’s access to land and their influence in the formulation of new governmental policies allowing property to be registered in the names of more than one person, ideally, the couple. This represented an important breakthrough although it

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6 Only four of the Department Offices managed to create second degree cooperative organizations: León, Rivas, Matagalpa and Jinotega. However 90% of the members in this type of organization were located in Rivas and Matagalpa. Of the groups dedicated to the production of specific products eight were created, but 48% of the members were concentrated in Matagalpa (FEMUPROCAN 2006, 48)

7 Only the Department Offices of Matagalpa and Jinotega managed to form their own rural savings and loan associations and only Matagalpa formed a Trading Company (comercializadora). In the case of Matagalpa, the savings association managed a total of almost US $200,000 and, according to FEMUPROCAN, had an average repayment rate of 92%. Rivas was able to diversify its sources of financing, increase the amount of funds available to their office and their capacity to manage these funds themselves thanks to help from Swissaid and agreements with local NGOs that had credit programs (FEMUPROCAN 2006, 55)
has not yet had the expected effects (see the section on women’s access to land in Chapter 6).

Despite these successes and evidence that progress was being made, the Women’s Section began to identify limitations in their abilities to achieve their objectives. One of the most serious was that there had not been sufficient consideration of the ways in which projects and policies were decided, formulated, implemented and evaluated. The women realized that the tendency to employ top down methods was perhaps not the most appropriate way of working, had only limited success and did not fit in with the overall goals and philosophy that the leaders of the Women’s Section were trying to foster. They thus strove to implement more democratic forms of working, but were still limited in their freedom to define their objectives and strategies by the subordinated position of the women’s section within UNAG.

**Phase Five: The Break with UNAG: 1997-Present**

The persistence of male resistance and opposition to the more radical demands of the Women’s Section and their subordination within UNAG gradually began to convince the women’s leaders that they would never be able to achieve their objectives if they remained within the organization. The men, particularly those at the departmental level, were especially opposed to the women’s attempts to increase their access to and participation in the leadership structures of UNAG.

The search for greater financial autonomy for the Section also touched a nerve among the men. At this time, UNAG had experienced a sharp drop in the amount of funds available to them, and some members felt that their positions were threatened by the ascent of the women’s sector. Tensions mounted to the extent that “women began to be removed from leadership positions in the organization for one reason or another;
eventually, many of us within the Women’s Section were replaced. Other women who were willing to follow the male leadership of UNAG were given our posts” (Valle 2009, 225). This history has striking similarities with that described by Bickham Mendez on the MEC’s decision to break away from the CST. They too found that those women who dared to challenge the male leadership were quickly replaced by women willing to tow the line without complaint. For both groups of women, who had endured years of discrimination and resistance from many male leaders, the loss of their positions proved to be the last straw. Men’s opposition, by this time, merely served to strengthen the resolve of the future leaders of FEMUPROCAN to break away from UNAG and set up their own organization, where they would enjoy real decision making power for the first time: “Whilst we were the Women’s Section in UNAG it is necessary to make it clear that although we were organized, in reality we didn’t have autonomy. We weren’t able to make any decisions…we understand that if you don’t have autonomy it is difficult for you to be able to be recognized as a woman…as a woman producer.” 8

The women claimed that it was never their original intention to set up an independent organization, but in the end, the men left them little alternative. The desire for autonomy grew ever stronger until, in 1997, the women formed an Organizing Committee to create a federation of women’s cooperatives. Participating in this committee were Martha Heriberta Valle, Maritza Lainez, Modesta González, Matilde Rocha López and María Josefa Martínez. At this point they still believed that it might be possible to continue their affiliation with UNAG. However, the men saw the formation of the federation, a third-level organization, as confirming their worst fears about the

8 Modesta González, one of FEMUPROCAN’s founders and current coordinator for Nueva Guinea; cited in FEMUPROCAN 2006, 62
women’s threat to existing power relations within UNAG. They stepped up the pressure on the women to back down: “They took away our vehicles, they took away our salaries, and there was also pressure from the other compañeras [fellow female members of UNAG]…basically they said to us ‘either you go with the federation with nothing or you stay within UNAG and have a salary and a vehicle.’”9 This type of ultimatum persuaded some of the women to abandon the idea of the federation and remain within UNAG, but many others were not swayed by the pressure and opted for the federation, abandoning UNAG.10 On the 20th of November 1997 they formally founded the Federation of Rural Women Producers.

In the beginning the Federation had very few resources and few supporters. The national team was comprised of three members, working out of a garage in Managua, and Modesta González described to me that the Nueva Guinea office was little more than a corner of her house with a typewriter.11 Nevertheless, after having struggled so long to achieve the freedom to make their own decisions, the women were not about to give up. The national team now operates out of an air conditioned office in the Bolonia area of Managua. They have various computers, laptops and audiovisual equipment and a permanent, full time staff of six. In Nueva Guinea the women held raffles and other events and, after a lot of effort and perseverance, they managed to buy the land on which the office sits today. By the second anniversary of the Federation (1999) they

9 Interview with Matilde Rocha, Vice President of FEMUPROCAN, Managua, August 6th, 2009.

10 The women of FEMUPROCAN felt that since their split from UNAG, the Women’s Section of this organization had been marginalized even further. They described how it was confined to a tiny office, hidden behind the kitchen in UNAG Headquarters and that women were hardly ever seen to be taking on leadership roles or positions with a high public profile

11 Conversations with Modesta González, Regional Coordinator for FEMUPROCAN Nueva Guinea, Nueva Guinea, July 29th 2009.
had inaugurated the regional office. Half of the cost was covered by Fundación PRODESA (The Foundation for Promotion and Development) but the women, in addition to raising money, provided many materials and their labor.

González went on to say that in the beginning they didn’t even know what to call themselves as, at the time, Nicaraguan law prevented two federations from operating in the same sector. With the help of some lawyers sympathetic to their cause, the women embarked on the long struggle for legal recognition. The women realized that, although they had broken away from UNAG, the government institutions and the way in which they treated women remained the same. The federation was determined to change the machista ways in which these bodies worked, as they realized that they could not just sit there passively and hope that changes would take place. If this was their strategy, they argued, they would be waiting forever. With this in mind the women decided that they would have to actively work towards reducing women’s discrimination by government institutions and policies and engage policymakers and government officials in debates at every opportunity to try and change their machista attitudes. On top of this, they still faced opposition and harassment from some of the men in UNAG, who attempted to divide the women and provoke fights among the members of the new federation: “Often we went looking for our women and we held our meetings in the road because we couldn’t do it in the houses as the men, angry and upset interfered and tried to persuade us to split up, but we continued…”

When these kinds of tactics did not appear to be working the men declared that it didn’t really matter as the organization would not survive long: “First we were “idiots.”

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12 Clara, President of a FEMUPROCAN cooperative, Terrabona, July 21, 2009
Then we were “putas” [prostitutes]. Then we were “lesbians.” Then, when finally they realized we were serious they said it would never last.”¹³ But FEMUPROCAN did survive, and found support from several international development organizations, such as Oxfam Canada and El Centro Cooperativo Sueco (CCS), which provided them with vital financial and technical assistance to help them get the organization off the ground and keep it running. One of the first dilemmas faced by the new federation was how to decide on which issue to tackle first. Ending rural women’s subordination and improving their standard of living would not happen overnight and would require work on many different aspects of the problem. After some discussions, and with the support of their NGO partners, the leaders decided that their first priority needed to be raising the women’s self-esteem and confidence in their own abilities. This would be the foundation, they argued, that would make everything else possible.

Diaz explained that the history of FEMUPROCAN since their independence from UNAG could be roughly divided into three phases. The first, as mentioned above, focused a lot on personal development, self-esteem and “empowerment”. The leaders received training on various administrative, methodological and leadership techniques and activities focused on creating bonds of solidarity among the members. The second concentrated more on production techniques and strengthening the organization, with little real attention given to advocacy work. The third and current phase emphasizes the development of entrepreneurial skills among the members. FEMUPROCAN is attempting to turn the cooperatives into “cooperative enterprises”. They are branching out beyond production into processing and marketing and more attention is being given

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¹³ Morena Diaz, Head of Training and Advocacy, FEMUPROCAN, Nueva Guinea, July 30, 2009
to advocacy work and lobbying. They are trying to create more linkages with other organizations in Nicaragua and the region, in order to influence decisions made by policy makers, and have begun a training program for advocacy promotoras at the local and regional levels.

**FEMUPROCAN Today**

FEMUPROCAN today is comprised of 1,767 members belonging to sixty-eight base level cooperatives. Of these cooperatives, 58 have full legal status, and the remaining ten are all in the process of legalization. These base level cooperatives are organized into nine unions of cooperatives and are located in six different departments of the country; Managua, Granada, Matagalpa, Jinotega, Madriz and RAAS. The organization’s stronghold is in the North and interior of the country, particularly in the areas of Matagalpa and Jinotega. Leaders are elected democratically and the Federation is organized through the following structures:

- **General Assembly**: this is FEMUPROCAN’s highest decision making body. Its mandate is to determine the overarching policies of the organization and approve its short and medium term plans, provided that these have been formulated in accordance with FEMUPROCAN’s internal regulations. It is comprised of 200 delegates elected via assemblies carried out by the Unions of Cooperatives. Delegates from the base level cooperatives in all of the regions in which FEMUPROCAN works participate in these assemblies. Nominally, a General Assembly must be held every year, with the objective of examining what was achieved during the past 12 months and approving the plans for the upcoming year as well as approving the budget for that year and discussing the organization’s finances. This annual meeting is timed to coincide with FEMUPROCAN’s anniversary in November, but can also be convened at other points should the need arise.

- **The National Board of Directors**: This is the executive body of FEMUPROCAN, charged with its administration and management. It is comprised of a President, a Vice President, a Treasurer and a Trustee who are elected every five years by the General Assembly. Currently these positions are held by Martha Heriberta Valle (President), Matilde Rocha López (Vice President), Modesta González Amador (Treasurer) and María Elsa Soza Obando (Trustee). Its mandate allows it to
manage the socio-economic activity of the federation in accordance with the criteria and directives set out by the General Assembly.

- **Supervisory Council**: this is the body responsible for the auditing and supervision of FEMUPROCAN and, like the Board of Directors, is elected for five year periods by the General Assembly. It is made up of members who occupy the positions of Administrator, Secretary and Trustee. Those elected cannot belong to any other administrative body (such as the Board of Directors).

- **Unions of Cooperatives**: At the time of my research many of FEMUPROCAN’s members were organized into one of the nine unions of cooperatives affiliated with the organization. These were comprised of base level cooperatives, and democratically elected their representatives in a similar fashion to that described above for FEMUPROCAN.

- **Grassroots or Base Level Cooperatives**: individual rural women producers join together to form cooperatives in order to either produce collectively, or gain collective access to credit and services. Each cooperative periodically holds elections for the positions of responsibility, (President, Vice President, etc.).

- **Work Councils**: are elected within base level cooperatives if deemed appropriate. They are designed to increase the level of self-sufficiency and ability of the cooperatives to manage their own affairs.
CHAPTER 5
NGOs, SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND TRADE ASSOCIATIONS: WHERE DOES FEMUPROCAN FIT IN?

When breaking away from UNAG the women in FEMUPROCAN had a number of options regarding the type of organization they could become. This chapter will investigate why they have chosen to define themselves as a women’s trade association instead of opting to become an NGO and examine the benefits and drawbacks of this decision. Does FEMUPROCAN form part of a social movement in Nicaragua or have they reduced the strength of their rhetoric about social transformation after breaking away from the Sandinista party? Have they been reduced to an interest group seeking to maximize benefits for their members or are they aiming for larger, more fundamental changes?

During the 1990s, the NGO-ization of social movements, and women’s movements in particular, across Latin America became the focus of much concern and scholarly research. For women’s movements this phenomenon has been translated into pressure to professionalize and develop good relationships with foreign NGOs and donor agencies. This can lead to accusations that the leadership loses touch with the grassroots and that the organization becomes more accountable to its foreign partners than to its membership at the base level. Many scholars have pointed out that the lines between social movement organizations and NGOs are becoming ever more blurred (e.g. Bickham Mendez 2005). It is increasingly difficult to draw a line between the two, and some scholars have argued that it is no longer appropriate to even attempt to do so.

Although FEMUPROCAN does not portray itself as an NGO, it has faced some of the same pressure to professionalize and engage with transnational discourses of
feminism and international development. Part of my research therefore aimed to analyze the extent to which they have been affected by the processes of NGO-ization, and the nature of the contact the leadership maintains with the women at the base level. As with the case of the MEC, I expected that this process would have led to certain disagreements within the organization, and had an effect on the strategies, discourses and programs employed and carried out by FEMUPROCAN. However, just as the women of the MEC placed strict boundaries on the degree to which they were prepared to accommodate the desires of their foreign partners, FEMUPROCAN also has certain beliefs and areas about which they refuse to compromise, and others in which there is some room for negotiation and modification.

Firstly it is necessary to define some of the main terms to be used in this chapter, to examine to what extent NGOs, social movements, trade unions and trade organizations overlap, and in what fundamental ways they differ. It will then be possible to examine the development of FEMUPROCAN in the light of these definitions and explain why they have chosen the path that they have, and how this affects their ability to achieve their aims.

**Defining Social Movements**

Many of these terms are still the subject of fierce debate amongst scholars, and social movements are no exception. There appear to be almost as many definitions as there are social movements, and there is not space here to go into the intricacies of all of the arguments, but it is worth mentioning a few of the most prominent thinkers in this field before arriving at the definition to be used in this thesis. Perhaps one of the most widely cited early definitions of the term comes from Herbert Blumer (1939) who writes that social movements are “collective enterprises seeking to establish a new order of
life. They…derive their motive power on one hand from dissatisfaction with the current
form of life and, on the other hand, from wishes and hopes for a new scheme or system
of living” (Blumer 1969, 99).

The concept was theorized in much greater detail by the French sociologist Alain
Touraine. He emphasized that social movements “represent conflicting efforts to control
cultural patterns (knowledge, investment, ethics) in a given societal type” (Touraine
1985, 776). Writers pointed to the fact that participants in social movements were
normally those individuals lacking access to and influence in formal decision making
spheres (Smith, Pagnucco and Chatfield 1997, 59). From these definitions it is clear that
the idea of “struggle” and transformation of the status quo is generally accepted as a
common characteristic of social movements. Related to this, Sidney Tarrow introduced
the concept of “contentious politics” as the key to differentiating social movements from
other types of collective action. He sees social movements as a modern phenomenon,
whose emergence is due to a change in political opportunities:

Contentious politics occurs when ordinary people, often in league with more
influential citizens, join forces in confrontations with elites, authorities, and
opponents. Such confrontations go back to the dawn of history. But
mounting, coordinating, and sustaining them against powerful opponents
are the unique contribution of the social movement, an invention of the
modern age and an accompaniment to the rise of the modern state. I
argue… that contentious politics is triggered when changing political
opportunities and constraints create opportunities for social actors who lack
resources on their own. They contend through known repertoires of
contention and expand them by creating innovations at their margins. When
backed by dense social networks and galvanized by culturally resonant,
action-oriented symbols, contentious politics leads to sustained interaction
with opponents. The result is the social movement. (Tarrow 1998, 2)

Charles Tilly, in addition to recognizing that contentious politics form a major
component of social movements, also pointed to the importance of attachment to a
particular set of beliefs or particular types of actions in the creation and maintenance of
these movements. He thus expanded the definition of what constitutes a social movement to encompass more than merely the participants and their organizations and identified a number of important dilemmas for students of social movements around the world:

The notion of a 'movement' is more complicated than the ideas of groups and events. By a social movement we often mean a group of people identified by their attachment to some particular set of beliefs. In that case, the population in question can change drastically, but so long as some group of people is still working with the same beliefs, we consider the movement to survive. Thus the Women's Movement survives major changes in composition and internal organization. But the movement also commonly means action. People writing histories of the women's movement are quite likely to include past heroines who were quite different in beliefs and personal characteristics from current activists, just so long as their actions were similar or had similar effects. The fact that population, belief, and action do not always change together causes serious problems for students of social movements. When they diverge, should we follow the beliefs, whatever populations and actions they become associated with? Should we follow the population, whatever beliefs and actions it adopts? Should we follow the action, regardless of who does it and with what ideas? (Tilly 1978, 9-10)

According to Tilly, social movements are made up of a number of essential elements. The first, campaigns, refers to an organized, public, sustained appeal to the relevant authorities to hear the collective claims of the movement participants.

Repertoire describes the range of types of action from which social movements can choose. These include a wide variety of techniques, from the formation of special-purpose associations to public meetings, processions, demonstrations and media spots.

Finally, and an essential component of the repertoire of any social movement, is what Tilly defined as WUNC displays. These are related to representations of the social movement by the participants, which help to define its public image and take the form of displays of worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitments.
Resource mobilization theorists, on the other hand, explained that social movements were nothing more than “organizations that help rational actors participate more effectively in the political system than in other kinds of organizations or in purely individual capacities” (Finger 1994, 54). These scholars believed that the emergence and success of these social movements was related to political opportunity structures at the moment in question.

Scholars of New Social Movements emphasized the cultural in the struggles of social movements. The idea that social movements were acting in order to transform cultural symbols and practices was nothing new, but New Social Movement theorists linked these cultural struggles to the processes of development, the spread of global capitalism and neoliberal ideologies, and the expansion of the reach of the state. Drawing on poststructuralist theories these scholars argued that “conflicts arise not only over the distribution of goods and power, hence not only as conflicts of interest, but over socially shared meanings as well, i.e., over the ways of defining and interpreting reality. These conflicts arise in areas previously considered typical of the private sphere, involving problems of self-definition and challenges to the dominant lifestyles” (Lebon 1996, 590-591). These conflicts of meaning are also evident in the differing definitions of what constitutes a social movement. Different individuals construct their own meanings for the term and who are we to judge which definitions are more valid than others? After all, as Jelin observes, one must not forget that “it is the researcher who proposes the reading of a set of practices as a social movement…Social movements are objects constructed by the researcher, which do not necessarily coincide with the
empirical form of collective action. Seen from the outside, they may present a certain
degree of unity, but internally they are always heterogeneous, diverse." ¹

With this consideration in mind, for the purposes of this thesis I decided to adopt a
similar approach to that taken by Bickham Mendez in her ethnography of the MEC. She
recognizes the importance of finding out how the women in MEC view their actions, and
in taking their definitions of social movements and collective action into account when
analyzing the organization:

In my view the diverse theories on social movements demonstrate that
these movements cannot be reduced to their organizations, goals, and
practices. A structural yet culturally informed approach to social movements
reveals other cultural, subjective and identity-based dimensions. ...if,
however, we take an approach that legitimates the subjectivities and
perspectives of participants in social movements, then we cannot ignore
how these participants interpret their own actions... My analysis takes
seriously how the women of MEC see their collective actions. (Bickham
Mendez 2005, 65)

Thus, when I arrived in Managua I was keen to find out not only about the goals,
actions and practices of the organization, but also to discover how the women viewed
their own participation. I attempted to understand the nature of the struggles in which
they were involved and the ways in which they were “doing politics.” I would incorporate
these insights into my definition of what constitutes a social movement.

**Difference Between a Social Movement and a Social Movement Organization (SMO)**

Many scholars have questioned the idea that a social movement is no more, or
less, than the organizations which participate in it. For me, the term social movement
implies a shared identity, beliefs and practices related to how an excluded or
marginalized group aims to transform society. Any organization or individual who shares

¹ Jelin (1986, 22) cited in Alvarez and Escobar (1992,6)
these characteristics may be considered part of the social movement. Therefore, in my opinion, FEMUPROCAN cannot be a rural women’s social movement, but it can participate in the rural women’s social movement. These participating organizations can be defined as social movement organizations. Lofland summarizes the difference between the two concepts quite well:

SMOs [Social Movement Organizations] commonly but not always have an office, phone, publication, list of members, and other accoutrements of explicit association. Because of such features one can literally telephone and physically visit SMOs…In contrast, as a broad bracketing of hundreds or thousands of such movement organizations and other persons and activities, SMs [Social Movements] cannot be located in any single place or simply dialed. (Lofland 1996, 12)

However, I disagree with Lofland’s contention that social movements consist of hundreds or thousands of organizations. They may, or they may consist of a few individuals and groups. For me it is not a question of numbers but rather a matter of the difference between a set of ideas and the organizations formed to promote these ideas, as Smith et al. observe: “Social movement organizations (SMOs) are those formal groups explicitly designed to promote specific social changes. They are the principal carriers of social movements insofar as they mobilize new human and material resources, activating and coordinating strategic action throughout ebbs and flows of movement energy” (Smith, Pagnucco and Chatfield 1997, 60).

**Defining Social Movement Organizations**

Thus, based on my interpretation of the existing literature on the subject and my fieldwork in Nicaragua, I define some of the key characteristics for social movement organizations as:

- **Contentious politics and a desire to transform the status quo** for the benefit of the participants in the movement. This can take many forms, including struggles over cultural norms (such as gender roles), but I was expecting to be able to
clearly identify the goals of FEMUPROCAN in transforming some aspects of Nicaraguan society as a whole. I was also looking for evidence of sustained opposition to the power-holders by the social movement in their desire to achieve their goals. For FEMUPROCAN I expected that the power-holders in question would sometimes be the government, sometimes be men, sometimes perhaps be big business and/or proponents of the free market. Moving up the scale, I was interested to find out whether FEMUPROCAN had extended its contentious politics to encompass international actors such as the World Trade Organization, the IMF or the World Bank.

- **The construction of a shared identity, a set of beliefs and/or practices** on which the movement is based. In the case of FEMUPROCAN I was interested to find out whether they had successfully constructed the identity of rural women producers among their members and whether this collective identity was also recognized by those outside the movement.

- **Collective actions and cooperation** among the participants in the social movement based on their shared identity and goals. The forms these actions take may differ over time but they should reaffirm the members’ commitment to the overarching goals of the movement.

**Defining Trade Associations**

*Organizaciones gremiales*, translated from now on as trade associations, can be defined as a formal association of people who have similar interests because they work in a particular field. Besides carrying out lobbying and advocacy work on behalf of their members, trade associations in the Third World often facilitate the acquisition of technical skills and knowledge by their members. Requirements for membership may vary but, at least in the First World, there is normally an annual membership fee and a commitment to maintain a certain standard of work. Membership dues, certification exams, publications and events provide sufficient funds for the effective functioning of many of these organizations in the Global North. As can be seen by FEMUPROCAN, however such organizations located in the South may not collect enough money from subscriptions to sustain themselves without the assistance of international donor NGOs.
Defining NGOs

The term Nongovernmental Organization (NGO) was coined by the United Nations after the Second World War and has now slipped into popular usage (Tinker 1999, 89). The problem seems to be that although many people profess to have at least a vague understanding of what the term means, the definitions given by most international bodies remain precisely that, vague. The matter was further complicated by the rise of so-called INGOs (International Nongovernmental Organizations), BONGOS (Business-Organized Nongovernmental Organizations), BINGOS (Business Interest NGOs) and GONGOS (Government-Organized NGOs). 2 Indeed the literature has become crowded with endless acronyms poking fun at this very phenomenon (e.g. MONGOs, my own NGOs and, perhaps best of all, FLAMINGOs, Flashy Minded NGOs for the rich (Gotz 2008)). However, despite these word games, many of the articles written fail to provide a precise definition of exactly what the term NGO means today.

It seems logical to start one’s research by going to the original source of the word, the United Nations. According to the UN Economic and Social Committee an international NGO was defined as “any organization that is not established by an agreement among governments” (Iriye 2002, 2). Since then the UN has elaborated on the first definition, in an attempt to clarify their understanding of the concept:

A non-governmental organization (NGO) is a not-for-profit, voluntary citizens’ group, which is organized on a local, national or international level to address issues in support of the public good. Task-oriented and made up of people with common interests, NGOs perform a variety of services and humanitarian functions, bring citizens' concerns to governments, monitor policy and programme implementation, and encourage participation of civil

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2 This proliferation of NGOs of all shapes and sizes, reflecting a wide variety of interests, raised questions about the motives behind their formation and was neatly satirized by Gino Lofredo in his essay “Help Yourself by Helping The Poor” (1995).
society stakeholders at the community level. They provide analysis and expertise, serve as early warning mechanisms, and help monitor and implement international agreements. Some are organized around specific issues, such as human rights, the environment or health. (United Nations n.d.)

However, despite the apparent thoroughness of this definition, when one analyzes it carefully one realizes that it could be applied to a wide range of vastly different groups (and indeed NGOs may differ greatly from one another), including some unexpected types of organizations. Tinker observes that; “as a residual category, the term covers a wide range of groups that are not commonly thought of today as nongovernmental organizations: trade union federations, business councils, international unions of scholars, lay religious councils, and professional associations” (Tinker 1999, 89).

The task of defining “NGOs” is further complicated by the differences in legal regulations designed to govern these types of organizations in different countries (European Commission 2000). Not only that but NGOs range from tiny organizations staffed by a few volunteers or part time employees to huge, multinational organizations with thousands of members and hundreds of salaried staff. So it is clear that size cannot be a defining characteristic of an NGO.

If one turns to look at the ways in which NGOs work, their areas of focus, and their objectives, one finds a similar problem. Willetts identifies two main types of NGOs in functional terms; operational and/or advocacy organizations: “Operational NGOs contribute to the delivery of services (such as in the field of welfare), whereas the primary aim of advocacy NGOs is to influence the policies of public authorities and public opinion in general” (Willetts n.d.).
Such complications have not, however, precluded attempts to identify common characteristics shared by the vast majority of NGOs. These can be summarized as follows:

- **Voluntary** – most NGOs are organizations that were formed voluntarily, allow at least some degree of voluntary participation by individuals, and are open to all those who wish to join (Iriye 2002; Willetts n.d.; European Commission 2000).

- **Non-state and non partisan** – independent of all governments, political parties or groups attempting to take control of the state.

- **Nonprofit** – NGOs are not designed to generate personal profits for their founders or members: “Although they may have paid employees and engage in revenue-generating activities they do not distribute profits or surpluses to members or management” (European Commission 2000, 3).

- **Nonreligious** – organizations affiliated with churches and other religious institutions form another group of international development organizations, normally termed faith-based organizations.

- **Nonmilitary and nonviolent** – NGOs refrain from direct intervention using the force of arms, although at times they may play an important role in mediating peace negotiations and monitoring the activities of armed forces/paramilitary groups to ensure that human rights are upheld, or in providing humanitarian assistance to victims of armed struggles.

- **Some formal organizational structures** – e.g. Statutes, Mission Statements, Objectives (although NGOs may vary greatly in terms of their internal organization and ways of working).

- **Accountable to members and donors** – NGOs must provide reports on their activities to their members and donors. However they have sometimes been criticized for their lack of accountability to the “target populations” or participants in their projects. (Pearce 1993, 223)

- Not linked to particular commercial organizations (European Commission 2000)

- **Independent from criminal groups** – NGOs refrain from criminal activity and normally abide by the regulations of the country in which they operate.

- **Altruism** – NGOs’ aim is “to act in the public arena at large, on concerns and issues related to the well being of people, specific groups of people or society as a whole. They are not pursuing the commercial or professional interests of their members” (European Commission 2000, 4)
DeMars argues that “NGOs are private actors pursuing public purposes... As private actors, NGOs do not seek to control the levers of public power. Therefore they neither organize for elections like political parties, nor use violence to seize power like terrorists and insurgents. In contrast to firms, NGOs do not pursue the private profit of their owners or shareholders. Instead, they articulate and claim to serve a broad, public purpose based on universal (or species) rights and needs” (DeMars 2006, 41-42). He then goes on to point out that one of the main sources of controversy when discussing NGO theory and practice is the ways in which “private actor” and “public purpose” are defined, by whom and on what basis. He rightfully points out that these are contested concepts, whose meanings are not fixed, changing with time and from society to society. Again, this highlights the importance of understanding how the women of FEMUPROCAN define NGOs and considering their opinions in analyzing the extent of FEMUPROCAN’s NGO-ization. Given that boundaries between public and private can sometimes be unclear and the source of disagreement within a society, it is not surprising that one can find a whole range of self-styled “NGOs” with obvious links to a particular political party, engaged in a wide range of commercial income generating activities (e.g. producing publications or providing consultancy services to other organizations) (Willetts n.d.). On the other hand there are certain activities and organizational forms, such as government bureaucracies, political parties, companies, criminal organizations or guerrilla groups, which are almost universally seen as unacceptable for an NGO (Ibid.).

My analysis of FEMUPROCAN examines the extent to which they fit the model of an NGO by using the ten criteria outlined above and incorporating the viewpoints of my
informants, who tended to define NGOs as organizations staffed by professional, well-educated women and funded with international money. Internally NGOs were regarded as undemocratic, with a tendency towards top-down leadership and little accountability to the women involved in their projects. For these reasons it was hardly surprising that the women of FEMUPROCAN were quick to reject any suggestions that their organization had undergone any of the effects of NGO-ization.

**Difference between an NGO and a social movement or social movement organization**

Now that definitions for both social movement organizations and NGOs have been established, it is useful to highlight the differences between the two. There has been a tendency in the literature to write off the actions of NGOs as inherently less political than those of social movement organizations. NGOs are seen to focus on “quick fixes” to immediate problems, whereas SMOs attempt to bring about long term changes. James Petras, for example, argues that the main difference between NGOs and social movements is that NGOs, although they adopt much of the same rhetoric used by social movement participants, attempt to be non-confrontational, and thus often fail to address the underlying reasons for structural inequalities in a society:

NGOs emphasize projects, not movements; they “mobilize” people to produce at the margins but not to struggle to control the basic means of production and wealth; they focus on technical financial assistance of projects, not on structural conditions that shape the everyday lives of people. The NGOs co-opt the language of the left: “popular power,” “empowerment,” “gender equality,” “sustainable development,” “bottom-up leadership.” The problem is that this language is linked to a framework of collaboration with donors and government agencies that subordinate practical activity to nonconfrontational politics. (Petras 1997, 11)

This approach seems rather narrow and overly simplistic. Petras focuses on only one type of NGO, ignoring the fact that there are huge differences among NGOs. Some
do seek primarily to address basic needs or provide services without much consideration of why the people need the services in the first place, or how to stop people from finding themselves in a similar situation in the future. On the other hand, advocacy NGOs seek to bring about policy changes, and challenge current government practices or existing regulations. Many NGOs combine aspects of service provision and advocacy, mixing short term projects with longer term objectives.

Much depends on what is defined as “political” or “contentious politics.” Women’s organizations, for example, were often seen as inherently “apolitical,” and thus women’s movements were not considered to be social movements in the same way as labor movements (Bickham Mendez 2005, 66). The reality, as always, depends on the meanings we give to certain words, and how these words are interpreted by others, especially those in positions of power and responsibility.

Bickham Mendez (2005) cautions against the construction of a false dichotomy between NGOs and social movement organizations, writing that “reducing social movement organizations to an objective view of “contentious” politics and NGOs to their “information politics” runs the risk of reifying the revolutionary versus reformist dichotomy” (64). She illustrates that the boundaries between the two are blurred and shift over time. Many organizations combine certain characteristics normally associated with NGOs, with others generally attributed to social movements. As organizations develop over time, they constantly adjust these combinations of characteristics, meaning that a group such as the MEC may easily be considered a social movement organization one day, and NGO the next, depending on the moments, and who is doing
the asking. In the case of the MEC, Bickham Mendez views this as a deliberate strategy on the part of the leaders:

As MEC leaders commit to “rompiendo esquemas,” the breaking of patterns, they are attempting to create an organization that merges the commitment to populism practiced within the mass organizations of the Sandinistas with the bureaucratization and professionalism that are increasingly necessary for social justice organizations, and perhaps democratic politics, in a context of the developing world under conditions of globalization. (Bickham Mendez 2005, 122)

Peter Willets (n.d.) also disagrees with the tendency to contrast nongovernmental organizations and social movements, but for different reasons. He points out that the term “social movement” implies coordination and cooperation among a number of different groups with shared objectives. Often some of these groups are in fact NGOs. For Willets, NGOs form an essential component of social movements because:

If an idea is to catch the imagination of people, it has to be articulated by leaders through speeches, pamphlets or visual images. If the idea is going to reach large numbers of people, resources have to be mobilized and allocated to communication processes. If demonstrations are to occur, they have to be organized. If a movement is to achieve change, priorities have to be selected and targets designated. If a protest lasts more than a few days to become a movement, existing organizations or new organizations will provide the skeleton that transforms an amorphous mass into a strong body. (Willets n.d.)

I therefore expected to find that although FEMUPROCAN may appear to fit the definition of social movement organization, popular membership organization or NGO described above, they were likely to have incorporated elements traditionally associated with other organizational forms. Whether they emerged looking more like an NGO or an SMO, they were likely to participate in the broader women’s movements in Nicaragua.
So where does FEMUPROCAN fit into all this? The leaders repeatedly reaffirmed that the movement was not an NGO, but rather a trade association for women producers.

**FEMUPROCAN as Trade Association**

On paper, certainly, the organization seems to fit the profile of a popular membership organization better than that of most definitions of NGOs. Its membership is comprised of women engaged in the same types of economic activity, namely agriculture and raising livestock, and organized into cooperatives. Theoretically the members of FEMUPROCAN pay monthly dues to belong to the organization, which is primarily designed to further the interests of its members. Both the national and local leadership are elected democratically by the membership. Many of these leaders were once producers themselves, and come from relatively poor backgrounds. They asserted that they too were “women from the grassroots” and that they maintained a connection to the countryside and the base of the organization despite being based largely in Managua. Having an office in the Nicaraguan capital allows the national leadership to engage in lobbying and advocacy work to advance the interests of their members. In this way, FEMUPROCAN could be seen as an interest group or popular organization.

On the other hand, although FEMUPROCAN’s membership is supposed to pay monthly dues for the upkeep of the organization, the reality is that less than twenty percent of members actually contribute. In most membership-based organizations in the developed world, failure to pay would lead to automatic dismissal from the organization. In FEMUPROCAN, not paying subscriptions appears to lead to nothing more than
exasperation from the national leadership and a reminder of the importance of contributing to the organization. Many of the members may genuinely not be able to afford even the small amounts required by FEMUPROCAN, but one can’t help but wonder how successful the leadership is going to be in encouraging more members to pay if those who don’t appear not to be penalized in any way. The money comes from external sources, from FEMUPROCAN’s international NGO partners.

**FEMUPROCAN as Social Movement Organization**

However, when one examines the goals of the organization, it becomes clear that FEMUPROCAN is not just seeking to secure benefits for its members but it is also fighting to transform Nicaraguan society in a number of ways. This involves working towards gender equality and for recognition of the importance and value of rural women producers to the country. The vision of FEMUPROCAN is stated as: “to achieve the greater participation of rural women producers and entrepreneurs in the economic and social affairs of the country” (FEMUPROCAN n.d.). These women currently face triple discrimination due to their rurality, their gender, and their poverty. FEMUPROCAN has fought hard to construct this shared identity among its members and for recognition of this identity as rural women producers by the wider Nicaraguan population. They are involved in contentious politics in that they are challenging the mainstream discourses about gender roles and the position of rural people in modern Nicaraguan society.

FEMUPROCAN’s workshops on women’s rights and stated aim to train capable, empowered women leaders is evidence that the organization shares certain beliefs and practices with other organizations of women working in Nicaragua. In this way FEMUPROCAN forms part of the wider women’s movement in the country, and in particular, is a major player in the rural women’s movement. So is FEMUPROCAN
actually more of a social movement organization? The answer is not that simple. In fact, in a number of important ways FEMUPROCAN fits the profile of an NGO.

**FEMUPROCAN as NGO**

Like many other organizations in Nicaragua over the past two decades, FEMUPROCAN has not been immune to the processes of NGO-ization sweeping across the region. They have faced pressure to professionalize their organization, expanding their Managua team of full-time paid employees and moving the headquarters from its original location, in a garage, to an air-conditioned office in the Bolonia area of Managua.\(^3\) This office is equipped with four desktop computers, all with access to the internet, a phone line and fax numbers. FEMUPROCAN also owns two laptop computers and various other items of audiovisual equipment, allowing them to show PowerPoint presentations and videos during the workshops. Not only have the Managua team learned how to use a number of different computer programs to produce a wide range of printed materials, they have also trained in a number of different methodologies required by their NGO partners. For example, the system of planning, monitoring and evaluation being implemented at the moment uses logical frameworks to identify goals and indicators at each stage of the process.

Each member of the national team has a clearly defined role and area of expertise, (although they admitted that everybody helps one another out as much as possible when the workload is heavy). Further evidence of increasing specialization of FEMUPROCAN’s leadership can be found by analyzing the ways in which the national

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\(^3\) This area, fashionable and expensive a few years ago, and the location for many embassies and consulates, has recently experienced a period of decline. Nevertheless it is still described in travel guides as “Managua’s finest residential neighborhood” (Arghiris & Leonardi, 2008)
team talk about their work. The women at the headquarters have all become fluent in “developmentspeak,” adapting their vocabulary to reflect fashionable trends in international development discourse. These discourses have not only served to alter the way in which the women talk about their work, but they also seem to have influenced the whole structure of the organization and its stated goals. For example, FEMUPROCAN talks about “mainstreaming gender” and identifies four “cross-cutting themes”: Gender and Development, Cooperativism, Women Entrepreneurs and the Environment (noticeably absent from this list is any consideration of race). They claim that they integrate these four topics into all of their actions.

Many social movements are identified by their active opposition to the status quo in some form or other, and the engagement in a number of forms of contentious politics (e.g. mass demonstrations, protest marches, petitions and, sometimes, acts of civil disobedience). NGOs, by contrast, are normally seen to be less overtly confrontational. FEMUPROCAN, although it has educated its members about their rights and encouraged them to participate in politics, has, on the whole, shied away from organizing and/or officially participating in many of these highly visible forms of protest or vocal opposition to particular policies. Although they claim to be fighting to end rural women’s subordination in Nicaragua they have remained silent (as an organization) on the more controversial aspects of women’s rights (such as abortion and women’s reproductive rights) and focused instead on the less “risky” issues of rural women’s economic rights.

The projects implemented by FEMUPROCAN and its provision of credit and training services to its members also appear to fit in better with the role normally
assigned to nongovernmental organizations, rather than social movements. Their primary aim appears to be to improve the material well-being of their beneficiaries, not to pressure power-holders into changing policies or transforming systems. Could it be that FEMUPROCAN, in its determination to distance itself from party politics, has chosen to refrain from all political protest as an organization and focus on encouraging their individual members to participate in actions organized by others on an individual basis? This may well be the most prudent strategy, given the current Ortega administration’s crackdown on more radical women’s groups protesting the ban on therapeutic abortion. Nonetheless, this sort of reluctance to take a public position on many issues is not what is normally associated with social movement organizations. FEMUPROCAN, in this regard, could be seen to be concentrating on the provision of services (a role usually carried out by NGOs) rather than the mobilization of its members.

In keeping with the definition of NGOs outlined above, one could argue that the goals of the organization are altruistic and that it is a private organization pursuing a public purpose. They aim to improve the lives of some of the poorest people in Nicaragua, both economically and with regard to their position in society. FEMUPROCAN seeks not only to achieve change at the macro level, but also at the level of the individual, through a process of personal development and leadership. At the same time they are helping to ensure the basic needs of their members are met. Few could argue that these are not examples of altruism.

Aside from the desire to generate enough money to pay for the administrative costs of FEMUPROCAN (including the salaries of the leadership), the training programs
and the projects formulated by the organization, FEMUPROCAN is not geared towards the pursuit of profit. They seek to increase the profits made by their members, but the overwhelming majority of this money would remain with the producers at the grassroots (with a small percentage being reinvested in the individual cooperative to pay for future initiatives and projects). The members of the national leadership do not earn high salaries, and the promotoras are provided with a very minimal amount of money for the amount of time and effort some of them put into their work. Thus, overall FEMUPROCAN could be classified as a nonprofit organization.

They do not maintain any official ties to political parties (for more information on this please refer to the section on autonomy), religious organizations, commercial enterprises or groups engaged in illegal and/or violent activities. Although they sometimes are consulted about policy decisions by institutions linked to the Nicaraguan government, FEMUPROCAN is not employed by the state and is not dependent on the state for funding. Many of the members were active participants in the Sandinista revolution of 1979 but this has not translated into any form of military or armed action by FEMUPROCAN.

Membership is entirely voluntary, and open to all who fulfill the criteria outlined by the individual cooperatives at the grassroots. However, although members and cooperatives may leave the organization at any time, it is up to the individual cooperatives to determine the rules regarding re-entry into the cooperative. In this way FEMUPROCAN differs from many NGOs who allow people to join, withdraw their support and then subsequently rejoin as many times as they please.
Perhaps some of the most important contrasts between NGOs as defined above and FEMUPROCAN are related to the question of organizational structure and accountability. Both in much of the literature and in many of my conversations with members of FEMUPROCAN NGOs were characterized as top down, hierarchical organizations led by unelected professionals with little accountability to the participants in the projects implemented by the organization. Whilst FEMUPROCAN does indeed have a clear chain of command, and various hierarchical tendencies remain, the leadership (both the national and the local) are elected by the membership and can be held accountable by the grassroots for the projects implemented and strategies chosen. As explained in the section on autonomy, FEMUPROCAN is also accountable to its donors, as are all NGOs, but it differs in that all of the grassroots women interviewed responded that they felt that the FEMUPROCAN’s national leadership was willing to listen to the concerns of women at the base. These women form both the “target group” and the membership of FEMUPROCAN, and they feel confident that any complaints or problems they encountered with the projects would be addressed quickly and without many objections from those responsible for its design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

Like many NGOs, FEMUPROCAN has sought to formalize its organizational structures and procedures. They produce a range of promotional literature in which the mission statement and vision of the organization are clearly identified, and the principal objectives are described. They have introduced standardized methods for the formulation, monitoring and evaluation of the projects implemented by the various cooperatives. Regular meetings are scheduled and clear job titles (and associated
responsibilities) are defined. In this way FEMUPROCAN appears to more closely resemble an NGO than the more informal relationships often found in studies of social movement organizations.

However, once we remember that the women in FEMUPROCAN associated NGOs with urban, well educated and professional women, it again becomes clear that the organization should not necessarily be described as completely NGO-ized. Many of the national leadership had been farmers themselves, or come from rural areas. Martha Valle did not learn to read until the Sandinista literacy campaign in the 1980s, and Blanca Torres still tried to return to her home in Matagalpa as often as she could at the weekends. She had first become involved in FEMUPROCAN by joining her local cooperative, and had risen through the organization to become a vital member of the Managua team. Torres was now being paid to study Gender and Development at the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) in her time off and acted as FEMUPROCAN’s official representative at the meetings of the women’s economic agenda organized by UNIFEM. She was clear evidence of the pressures for professionalization and specialization identified by Alvarez (1998) as key components of the NGO-ization of women’s organizations. However Blanca also supported FEMUPROCAN’s assertion that they were not an NGO and that their leadership maintained contact with the grassroots of the organization, being grassroots women themselves.

Cooperative Organizations and FEMUPROCAN

In contrast to the MEC the members of FEMUPROCAN are organized into cooperatives and unions of cooperatives affiliated to the national organization. Cooperatives range from loose associations of people who come together to gain access to a particular resource or service to groups in which all resources are pooled
among members and every stage of production and marketing is organized collectively. Some cooperatives require membership fees or enforce strict regulations about conditions for entry and continued membership whereas others are more informal, looser groups of people with members who come and go over time. There are cooperatives that were formed by governments, social movement organizations and NGOs, but there are also those founded by the members themselves on their own initiative. The degree of internal democracy may also vary, but many cooperatives hold periodic elections for the posts of President, Vice-President, Treasurer, Secretary and other leadership positions. These people often represent the cooperative in its dealings with other organizations and government institutions, coordinate meetings and manage the day to day business of running the cooperative. Normally all members of the cooperative are given a chance to express their opinions and participate in important decision making processes. Cooperatives are likely to hold periodic general assemblies to which all members are invited, organize work councils to focus on specific tasks or activities and hold training sessions open to members (including the dissemination of training and skills learned by cooperative representatives at regional or national meetings of larger organizations).

In Nicaragua, the FSLN encouraged the formation of cooperatives after the 1979 revolution in both the urban and rural areas by a combination of economic pressure and persuasion (Bugajski 1990, 54). The mass organizations affiliated to the Sandinista party in the countryside, the ATC and, later, UNAG played a key role in mobilizing the peasantry and forming cooperatives. The vast majority of land redistributed under the FSLN agrarian reform was allocated to the cooperative sector and many peasants
realized that their best chance of accessing land and credit was to organize as a cooperative (Ibid.). For the FSLN, the objective of cooperative organizations should have been to produce and manage resources collectively and, initially, private sector initiatives in which members maintained an individual stake in profit sharing were discouraged. The growth and development of cooperative farms was further encouraged throughout the period of Sandinista government by the provision of significant state subsidies and government resources to campesinos organized into cooperatives, even if these cooperatives were not economically self-sustaining or functioning properly. This tended to create a degree of dependency and expectation of handouts among cooperative members.

There were two main kinds of cooperatives founded by the FSLN: Credit and Service Cooperatives (CCS) and Sandinista Agricultural Cooperatives (CAS). In the case of the CCS, credit and technical assets were held collectively but land remained in the hands of the individual producers. Members were able to make their own decisions about which crop varieties to cultivate, but were expected to sell their production through the state marketing agency, the Nicaraguan Enterprise of Basic Foodstuffs (ENABAS). Any government assistance or subsidies granted to the cooperative were administered by the cooperative leadership and benefits shared among members.

The production cooperatives (CAS) represented the next level up in terms of collectivism and were regarded as “more advanced forms of socialization” (Bugajski 1990, 56). Members shared all resources, land was held collectively and all income was administered by the cooperative leadership, who determined how it was allocated. These cooperatives initially attracted mainly poor peasants and rural workers but
expanded to represent over a third of all agricultural cooperatives in Nicaragua by the end of the 1980s.

Many women remained some of the poorest peasants in the country, which may help to explain why the vast majority of FEMUPROCAN’s cooperatives are organized as production cooperatives (which tended to attract the poorer peasants) rather than credit and services cooperatives (which often appealed most to the middle peasantry). All cooperatives active in Nicaragua today are required to abide by the General Law of Cooperatives passed in 2005 and amended in 2007. This law prohibits discrimination on the grounds of gender, race, social class or political or religious views. It also establishes a number of regulations and structures designed to ensure the cooperatives function democratically and that all members are able to participate in decision making processes and share in the benefits. Membership is voluntary and cooperatives are required to maintain a degree of autonomy and independence from other organizations and political parties. Having said that, they are encouraged to coordinate with other cooperatives by forming second and third degree organizations. FEMUPROCAN can therefore be classified as a third level cooperative organization (comprised primarily of production cooperatives organized into unions of cooperatives). Each level of the organization is required to follow the requirements set out in the General Law on Cooperatives and function democratically. In addition, each level maintains a degree of independence and is not totally subsumed into the larger organization. Interestingly, although FEMUPROCAN declares itself to be an organization of rural women, given that they are governed by the aforementioned General Law on Cooperatives, they are actually unable to refuse to accept men into the cooperatives affiliated with the
organization. Consequently, a very few men have been incorporated into FEMUPROCAN’s membership. Unlike NGOs, SMOs and Trade Associations, many of which allow individual membership, cooperative organizations require all their members to be organized into cooperatives, and it is the entire cooperative that is affiliated with the higher level organization, rather than the individuals.

Conclusions

To summarize, it seems fair to say that FEMUPROCAN has undergone similar processes to those experienced by the MEC as described by Bickham Mendez. Both of these organizations could be seen to portray characteristics often associated with Trade Associations, as well as many of those outlined in definitions of both NGOs and Social Movement Organizations. This begs the question about whether it is necessary, or even useful, to define them as one or the other. However, in the light of FEMUPROCAN’s opposition to the idea that they be considered similar to an NGO, I have opted for the following statement: FEMUPROCAN can be best described as a social movement organization participating in Nicaraguan women’s movements and in the rural cooperative movement. They are fighting to transform the position of rural women producers in the country. They are also clearly a cooperative organization, although I was to discover that this did not necessarily mean that all of the cooperatives were functioning as they should and in accordance with the General Law on Cooperatives. Whereas cooperativism certainly provides the organizational structure for FEMUPROCAN and guidelines for the operation of the organization at all levels I discovered that the base level cooperatives displayed an uneven commitment to the practice of cooperativism. For example, despite the fact that many of the cooperatives are production cooperatives, one of the most frequent complaints I heard from the
women I interviewed was that the majority of the members still produced and marketed their products individually.⁴

During their struggle to establish themselves as a strong, autonomous organization they have undergone a process of partial NGO-ization, notably reflected in an increasing professionalization and specialization of members of the national leadership. However, this has not led the national leadership to completely lose touch with the members at the grassroots, and FEMUPROCAN can be held accountable for its actions to both the international donor agencies and, crucially, its members.

⁴ Some of the problems encountered by FEMUPROCAN’s cooperatives are discussed in greater detail in the Chapter 6.
CHAPTER 6
ASSESSING FEMUPROCAN’S SUCCESS

The second part of my main research question concerns whether successful organizations can emerge from class-based mass organizations. In order to answer this question it is first necessary to consider how to define the success of a social movement, and how this success can be measured. This chapter analyses the extent to which FEMUPROCAN could be described as successful, highlighting the areas in which they appear to have secured considerable advances, as well as those where they have not managed to make much progress.

What Constitutes Success and How Can It Be Measured?

The concept of success when analyzing social movements and social movement organizations is still the source of some scholarly debate. Perhaps one of the most important issues in this debate is that of subjectivity. Success means different things to different people, and “the same action may be judged as successful by some participants and as failed by others” (Giugni 1998, 383), which makes it difficult for the researcher to justify why their version of success should be any more valid than anybody else’s. Thus, as Gamson observed in his influential study of social protest (1975), success remains “an elusive idea” to this day:

What of the group whose leaders are honored or rewarded while their supposed beneficiaries linger in the same cheerless state as before?...Is a group a failure if it collapses with no legacy save inspiration to a generation that will soon take up the same cause with more tangible results? And what do we conclude about a group that accomplishes exactly what it set out to achieve and then finds its victory empty of real meaning for its presumed beneficiaries? (Gamson 1990 [1975], 28)

Thus it seems clear that one should not judge the success or failure of a movement merely on whether they achieve their objectives, although this remains an
important component of the definition of success. What Gamson is arguing for is that we do not accept the achievement of stated objectives at face value, but that we examine whether these achievements have translated into real improvements for the people the SMO is supposed to represent. With regard to the dilemma he poses about groups which collapse without having achieved any tangible results, but serve as inspiration for later generations, it seems that there is no easy answer. These groups would appear to have failed in their objectives, but are apparently successful in sustaining ideas of the social movement and disseminating them to future generations of activists. If the movement subsequently achieves the goals laid out by the original organization, can they be described as successful?

The work of Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward (1979) can perhaps help to shed some light on this matter. Responding to criticisms that the gains of the movements they analyzed were insufficient they suggest that these critics had failed to identify the most crucial questions with regard to the success of social movements: “The more realistic question whether the gains made were intrinsically important, and thus worth winning, is not addressed. Nor do the critics say why more was possible, how larger gains might have been made” (Fox Piven and Cloward 1979, xiii). They highlight the importance of judging the success or failure of social movements in terms of what was possible. This necessitates a consideration of the wider political and social context at the time of the social movement’s existence. Social movements should be assessed in the light of the analysis of the “institutional conditions which both create and limit the opportunities for mass struggle” (Ibid, xv) to ascertain whether things could have been done differently. Strategies that are successful in one context may be ineffectual in
another. With this in mind, the success of FEMUPROCAN cannot be gauged without an examination of Nicaraguan society in the period following the 1990 electoral defeat of the FSLN and, in particular, from 1997, when FEMUPROCAN was founded, until today. An analysis of this period can be found in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

One of the most commonly used measurements of the success of social movements is that of government policy changes (Wong 2007). This is based on the argument that government authorities and institutions form the primary target of social movements, whose general goal is to affect some type of governmental policy change. However, whilst this is indeed a key objective of many social movements at a national level, Giugni points out that this is not a sufficient measure of success. Many social movements active around the world today may be as, if not more, concerned with changing the attitudes of the general population, or a key sector of that population in order to provoke changes in government policy (Giugni 1998, 385). He cites Melucci (1996), who cautioned readers about the “dangers of restricting our attention to the political side of new social movements, as they have identity-related goals that do not necessarily require a political target” (Ibid., 385). Therefore it seems clear that only analyzing policy changes is not enough. What is less obvious is how to measure success in terms of these identity related goals.

Tilly (1996) raises another question with regard to the analysis of the effects of social movements. He observes that there are often both intended and unintended consequences of social movements' actions. These unintended effects may even be contradictory to the objectives of the movement. He queries the usefulness of the terms “success” or “failure,” given the complexity of the consequences of social movements:
“This range of effects far surpasses the explicit demands made by activists in the course of social movements, and sometimes negates them. By any standard, “success” and “failure” hardly describe most of the effects.” (Tilly 1998, 268)

Instead, he conceives the problem as a set of three, overlapping circles, namely:
1. All movement claims, 2. All effects of movements’ actions, and 3. All effects of outside events and actions. The ways in which these circles overlap produces different analytical categories (see Figure 6-1).

To measure the success or failure of a social movement organization such as FEMUPROCAN one would want to consider the area of overlap between the effects of movement actions and the movement’s claims (identified as area A on the diagram). However, as Giugni observes this does not do away with the problems caused by differing evaluations of what constitutes success. For some this success might entail the achievement of the movement’s goals, even if this was not a result of the movement’s actions (area C). Some outcomes are the result of both social movement actions and those of outside influences bearing directly on movement claims (area B). Thus, while this diagram provides us with a neat illustration of the complexity involved in assessing social movement organizations in terms of “success” or “failure,” it does not provide us with any methods of distinguishing the causes of a particular effect. It may not always be obvious what happens as a result of social movements’ actions and what is the result of external forces. This problem of correctly identifying causality has no easy solution.

In my analysis of FEMUPROCAN I have attempted to investigate the reasons behind the changes in policy that have benefitted rural women and changes in attitudes
about rural women’s position in society since FEMUPROCAN’s foundation in 1997. I therefore investigate how other groups, whether the government, other civil society organizations and international organizations, may have also played a role in the introduction of these changes, and attempt to identify whether these changes could be seen to be a result of FEMUPROCAN’s activism or not. To be labeled as a successful organization, it is my contention that there must be convincing evidence to support the argument that FEMUPROCAN has influenced and/or is influencing changes in policy or societal attitudes towards achieving its objectives. If changes are the result of work done by some other actors or external influences, rather than due to FEMUPROCAN’s initiatives then progress towards these goals should still be celebrated, but FEMUPROCAN could not be described as a successful social movement organization. FEMUPROCAN should thus be assessed on the basis of their specific contribution as an organization in affecting changes and progressing towards their goals and this contribution should be compared with that made by other actors. To illustrate my point, if FEMUPROCAN states that one of its goals is to improve the education of its members and reports that one year later 99% of its members have passed the equivalent of tenth grade this should not necessarily be taken as evidence that FEMUPROCAN is a successful organization. If we were to analyze the situation in more detail we might discover that FEMUPROCAN created an educational training program that only covered 2% of its members, half of whom dropped out after a week, and managed to graduate only 5% of its initial intake. This could hardly be described as making a significant contribution to the increase in the educational level of its members. On the contrary, it would provide evidence to suggest that FEMUPROCAN was not a particularly
successful organization. The success would have to be attributed to other actors. On the other hand, if, on closer inspection, it appears that FEMUPROCAN implemented a highly effective educational training program for all of its members (which graduated all of its students and retained the vast majority of its initial intake etc…) the organization therefore would have played an important role in the overall improvement of the education of its members and the initiative could be taken as a sign that FEMUPROCAN is a successful organization.

So how do we attempt to attribute causality to these changes? Gamson’s two measures of success may be useful here. These are defined as the acceptance of challengers as legitimate claimants and the obtaining of new advantages for constituents (Gamson 1990 [1975]). For Gamson, acceptance “involves a change from hostility or indifference to a more positive relationship” (Ibid., 31). He proposes that this more positive relationship can be identified from four main indicators: consultation, negotiation, formal recognition, and inclusion (Ibid., 32). Consultation must be instigated by what Gamson terms “movement antagonists” (i.e. those who have the power to make the changes demanded by the social movement and who form the movement’s main targets for their contentious politics) and must be carried out in a manner in which the challenge group are treated as “a legitimate spokesman for a constituency.” Negotiations should be undertaken over a sustained period of time and provide evidence that the antagonists are “dealing with the challenging group’s negotiators as representatives of a constituency.” Formal recognition “is characterized by the antagonist making explicit, typically in writing, that it recognizes the challenging group as a legitimate spokesman for a designated constituency.” The final indicator, inclusion,
entails the “inclusion of challenging group leaders or members in positions of status or authority in the antagonist’s organizational structure” whilst retaining the members of the social movement organization as members (Wong 2007, 63).

Gamson’s other measure of success is “new advantages” that benefit the organization’s participants and/or desired beneficiaries. It is here that the problem of subjectivity resurfaces: “what is perceived as a gain from the activists’ perspective may not be so for the alleged beneficiaries; and achievements considered to be a gain from the activists’ perspective may turn out to be less meaningful and even useless for the movement group” (Wong 2007, 63).

To try and minimize this problem I interviewed both the leaders of FEMUPROCAN and women from the grassroots to find out what they considered to be the greatest successes of the organization, and its biggest weaknesses. I attempted to find out what impact the “new advantages” gained by the leadership had had on their members at the base of the organization.

For the purposes of this thesis I define success as having two main components; firstly, the ability of FEMUPROCAN to influence the government and the general public, in order to achieve their objectives and benefit their members at the grassroots, and secondly, the extent to which FEMUPROCAN has been accepted as a legitimate representative of rural women producers. I will use Gamson’s indicators of consultation, negotiation, recognition and inclusion to analyze whether FEMUPROCAN has successfully gained acceptance by the government, by international organizations, and by the general public.
Has FEMUPROCAN Been Able to Influence the Government and the General Public in Nicaragua to Achieve their Objectives and Benefit their Members at the Grassroots?

FEMUPROCAN states that the mission of the organization is “to develop our leadership and lobbying capacity at the national and local level, with the aim of promoting and formulating economic policy that benefits all rural women producers and entrepreneurs in the Nicaraguan countryside” (FEMUPROCAN n.d.). Their vision is described as to “achieve the greater participation of rural women producers and entrepreneurs in the economic and social affairs of the country” (Ibid.).

In order to work towards achieving these overall goals, FEMUPROCAN has identified four principal institutional objectives. These are: 1. to be a strong organization with leadership capacity; 2. to facilitate the training of capable, empowered women leaders; 3. to strengthen the business and entrepreneurial skills of women producers; and 4. to influence the processes of promotion and formulation of policies related to the countryside and women producers. They also have pinpointed four cross-cutting themes to be integrated into all their actions: gender and development, cooperativism, women entrepreneurs, and environmental protection.

FEMUPROCAN has also developed strategic components linked to these institutional objectives which explain the actions the organization will take in each of the aforementioned areas. They have constructed lists of indicators and set targets for the organization as a whole. Each cooperative is also expected to have formulated their own targets (with assistance from the national team) and to report on their progress periodically as part of FEMUPROCAN’s System of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (SPME).
A Strong Organization with Leadership Capacity?

The specific objectives relating to organization and leadership are found under the headings association and community leadership, formulation and management of projects, growth and subscriptions, legality of the cooperatives, and planning, monitoring and evaluation. It includes assessment of the legality of land, internal regulations, the payment of dues to the cooperatives and control and monitoring of the growth in members. To monitor this FEMUPROCAN maintains a system of planning, monitoring and evaluation, financed by the Centro Cooperativo Sueco, which identifies the needs of each cooperative, formulates the Annual Operational Plan (POA) of each cooperative, and tracks progress (UNIFEM Central America 2007).

Association and community leadership

FEMUPROCAN states that it is keen for its members to assume leadership positions within the organization and their communities and it appears that although the president and vice-president of FEMUPROCAN have remained the same since the organization was founded (1997) this does not mean that there are no opportunities for promotion for those at the grassroots. Torres, for example, began by participating in her local cooperative in Matagalpa. Her talent was identified and she quickly rose through the ranks to become a full-time member of the national team, in charge of the system of planning, monitoring and evaluation.

In the years immediately after FEMUPROCAN’s foundation, the national organization was keen to focus on the development of their human resources and the construction of a strong organization. They were supported in this goal by El Centro Cooperativo Sueco, which financed training workshops for the leaders of FEMUPROCAN. It seems that this initial focus is reflected in the knowledge and use of
a number of methodologies and analytical tools by the national team. Torres, in particular, is keen to continue to develop her skills and sharing what she has learned with the members of the organization:

In my own case, it has been one of my goals to always be training myself, always be updating myself, always be studying because the more updated knowledge we have the more we have to give to the organization, right? This is a benefit- if you personally, satisfactorily, fill yourself up with knowledge that contributes to your personal growth then you can share what you have been taught with other members. Right now I am going to university and I want to share this knowledge, to replicate what I have been taught with the two thousand and something women members of FEMUPROCAN through training programs.

FEMUPROCAN hopes that this sort of training will enable its members to feel capable of assuming leadership positions within their communities, and improve their leadership capacity within their cooperatives and FEMUPROCAN. According to FEMUPROCAN’s 2008 Annual Report 508 women had leadership posts or positions of responsibility within their communities. These included Health Brigadeiras, Environment Brigadeiras, Members of Councils of Citizen Power (CPCs), members of Municipal Development Committees, members of regional committees, Health and Education Coordinators and members of Sandinista committees. Many of the women I interviewed were proud of their position within their communities and attributed part of their recognition as community leaders to the work they do with FEMUPROCAN and the training they had received. Denis Medina, from the Centro Cooperativo Sueco seems to agree, noting that FEMUPROCAN “increased the ability of women to produce and to exercise greater leadership, leadership at the level of the cooperatives as well as leadership at the level of their municipality. The women leaders of FEMUPROCAN also

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1 Interview with Blanca Lidia Torres, Managua, August 3rd, 2009
have community leadership in the municipalities and are taken into account in the municipal development plans.\textsuperscript{2}

I was interested to find out whether this community involvement was seen as adding even more responsibilities to the women’s already overloaded schedules. However, despite the extra work involved in carrying out these leadership roles, it appeared that the women saw this as a worthwhile sacrifice. They enjoyed the status that these roles gave them within the community and they relished the opportunity to take part in decision making processes. They thus worked hard to fit these new responsibilities into and around their other work and had been encouraged by the progress they had made and the feeling that they were contributing to the development of their communities:

I know that one day I will not exist but as long as I live, as long as I have strength to give to the community I will continue to help the community…as part of the school governing board I negotiated the land for the construction of a school and we achieved it. So, everything I have learned about organizing has been of great use to me, not only to help my family or myself, but also to help the community, to the children who are studying, of course. To administer a project is something that is remembered in the community, in the town so even when I die people who see the school are going to say “Look, Doña Chepita did that, when she was on the board of governors” and that makes me feel good.\textsuperscript{3}

The women at the grassroots are thus not only receiving training in leadership, but they are putting this training into action and winning recognition within their communities. This has not gone unnoticed by local governments, who would call the women in order to define some proposals, and even to discuss some budgeting decisions. It thus seemed that FEMUPROCAN’s national team, the grassroots members

\textsuperscript{2} Denis Medina, CCS, Managua, August 1\textsuperscript{st}, 2009

\textsuperscript{3} Clara, President of a FEMUPROCAN cooperative, Terrabona, July 21, 2009
and CCS all agreed that FEMUPROCAN’s women had developed a strong local leadership capacity. However, there were some problems also reported at the local level due to political differences. Sometimes local governments only took those leaders who supported the same political party into account. This had led to some frustration among FEMUPROCAN’s members.4

It could be argued that the women who participate in FEMUPROCAN are “natural leaders” and that their leadership is the cause, not the effect of their membership. However, I heard numerous cases where women explained that before they joined FEMUPROCAN, they had been afraid to speak in front of anybody and thought that people would laugh at them. As a result of their experiences with the organization, however, they had become more confident in their dealings with other people and developed their ability to present their opinions on a wide range of topics. It therefore seems fair to say that FEMUPROCAN is making progress in achieving this objective, and that this progress is, at least partially, a result of FEMUPROCAN’s efforts.

**Formulation and management of projects**

As mentioned in Chapter 8, which analyzes the extent of the organization’s autonomy, FEMUPROCAN’s members show uneven progress in their ability to formulate and manage projects. Some regions, such as Nueva Guinea, appear to be relatively successful in this regard, whereas other areas are still very dependent on the national team. Women from the more successful areas praised the freedom granted to the regional and local levels of the organization to design and manage their own

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4 For more details on this problem, see the chapter on autonomy.
projects whereas some members from less successful cooperatives lamented their lack of “development” or that their “projects” were determined by the national leadership.

In order to address the uneven level of success and capabilities, FEMUPROCAN has produced a number of printed materials and held workshops on how to do a feasibility study and how to design a project. However, there has been a tendency for the women to base their project ideas on the cases discussed in these workshops, with the result that they all appear to want to do the same things (and have not fully considered whether the case would work in their area or what the implications would be if all of the cooperatives in a region suddenly began to produce the same thing). Raising chickens for eggs appeared to be by far the most popular project, as the women themselves commented “everybody wants chickens.”

It was also unclear as to the success that the women had in getting their projects funded. Often they lacked the technical writing skills necessary to secure money from international development organizations, and still faced discrimination (because they were women) when it came to getting an appointment with various other funding institutions (both public and private). Even when their proposals were accepted the women often felt that they were allocated less money than similar initiatives proposed by mixed sex organizations. María Luisa, daughter of Modesta González, FEMUPROCAN’s regional coordinator for Nueva Guinea, commented that FEMUPROCAN Nueva Guinea had just applied for funding for a project and been granted C$4,900. This was certainly an achievement, but the women felt aggrieved that a similar project not targeted at women had recently received C$25,000 from the same funding organization. She saw this as a clear demonstration of the gap that exists
between men and women, even when dealing with international development organizations.

It seems that although FEMUPROCAN is attempting to train its members in project formulation and management, there is still much work to be done on this matter. For example, in 2008, FEMUPROCAN reported that they had formulated and administered just eight projects at the level of grassroots cooperatives, unions and the federation (FEMUPROCAN 2008). Especially considering that most of these projects were formulated at the national level, this does not suggest that FEMUPROCAN is succeeding in their aim of enabling women to devise and manage their own projects.

**Growth and subscriptions**

FEMUPROCAN’s objectives in this area are twofold; firstly they are attempting to increase the number of members in the organization, to increase their national presence; and secondly they aim to increase the percentage of members who pay their dues, generating resources vital for FEMUPROCAN to function without the support of donor organizations. However, progress on these two areas appears to be slow and uneven. Their 2008 report states that they increased membership by 112 women, and collected a grand total of C$11,352.00 in dues.\(^5\) According to their website FEMUPROCAN’s current membership stands at 4,200 members, of whom 1,767 are attended to directly.\(^6\) Therefore, in 2008, less than 13% of the total members paid their subscriptions, or approximately 30% of members attended to directly. This has been a problem since the beginning of the organization and does not look likely to drastically

\(^5\) This equates to approximately $540 at March 2010 rates.

\(^6\) The number attended to directly refers to the number of women cooperative members who participate in FEMUPROCAN. The other, larger number includes family members of FEMUPROCAN members who benefit indirectly from the organization’s programs.
improve any time soon. Most of my informants put this down to the lack of a "cultura de cotización" (or dues-paying culture) in Nicaraguan cooperatives. This was, according to Diaz, mainly due to the fact that the cooperatives were formed by groups to defend their land in the Sandinista period, in the context of the fierce Contra War that plagued parts of the countryside, rather than to work together. Others were formed because Sandinista programs favored cooperatives when distributing grants or in formulating new policies. This means that now, even when individual members of the cooperatives are doing well economically (sometimes because of projects implemented by FEMUPROCAN) they do not give any of this profit to the cooperative. Changing mentalities about the need to begin contributing to the organization and to their cooperative will not be easy, especially when there do not, at present, appear to be sanctions for failure to pay.

Moreover, even if the number of members increased in 2008, overall membership does not seem to have expanded much over the last five years. Measuring membership in FEMUPROCAN is complicated, with some sources citing the total number of members and others the lower figure of the number attended to directly. For example, between 2006 and 2009 FEMUPROCAN appears to have lost 300 members. However, they have increased the number attended to directly by 400. Does this represent a success in increasing membership?

Nor has the process been uniform across the organization and whereas some cooperatives did increase their membership, others experienced a decline in the number of members: “Listen, we have experienced a huge decrease as a cooperative.

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7 Interview with CCS, Managua, August 1st, 2009.
When the cooperative was started there were 88 women involved…and now we have just 18 members. So, it’s a huge decrease.”

There also appears to be some disagreement about the importance of increasing membership at this point (although all members of the national leadership agree about the need to improve the collection of subscriptions). Whereas it is clearly outlined in the Annual Operational Plan that increasing the number of members is one of FEMUPROCAN’S goals (they state that by the end of 2009 FEMUPROCAN aimed to have added 16 new cooperatives), Diaz told me that FEMUPROCAN believed that bigger was not always better. She said that FEMUPROCAN had enough trouble trying to attend to all of the cooperatives they have at the moment and are attempting to make them more self-reliant before the national leadership can contemplate expanding the organization any further.

Thus, overall, while the organization appears to have met with limited success in this area in terms of maintaining a fairly steady number of members and the addition of some new ones, the problem of convincing members to pay dues still plagues the organization, and they have not managed to significantly increase their number of members. So FEMUPROCAN cannot be described as particularly successful in this regard.

**Legality of the cooperatives**

Whatever their lack of success in achieving their objectives with regard to membership FEMUPROCAN can take some comfort from their resounding successes in other areas. One of the most important of these for the strength of the organization,

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8 Adela, President of a FEMUPROCAN Cooperative in Rio Blanco, Managua, July 15, 2009.
and for the women at the grassroots, concerns the legality of the cooperatives.

FEMUPROCAN is, it seems, close to achieving its targets in this area, with all of its cooperatives legalized or in the process of legalization.9

This is no mean feat, as legalization can be a long and complicated process requiring a great deal of time and effort from the cooperative’s leaders. Often the women at the grassroots were reluctant at first to dedicate so many hours to something they did not regard as particularly important for improving their own lives. For FEMUPROCAN’s national team, therefore, the first step was to educate the women about why complying with all the regulations was important and then to guide them through the process from start to finish. This dedication on the part of the national team was acknowledged and praised by the women at the base, the vast majority of whom now seemed to grasp why legalization was necessary.

However, it is not just the length of the process that discourages women. It is clear that the complexity of the process means that the base level cooperatives really are dependent on the expertise of the Managua office, consulting them in detail about every step of the process. This, and legalization in general, requires resources, which sometimes the women do not have. FEMUPROCAN, suffering from a reduction in funds from its international partners (an effect of the economic crisis) can no longer support the women throughout the entire process in the way that they used to:

Sometimes it’s not how long the process lasts but rather that it incurs mobilization costs. It is necessary to spend money and sometimes you don’t have the resources…the first ones cost us a lot, as we were calling Matilde repeatedly and Blanca would go to the ministry…yes it cost a lot for them to give you legal status. Now perhaps they give them more quickly,

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9 As of 2008, 55 cooperatives were fully legalized in accordance with Law 499 and 16 were in the process of obtaining their personería jurídica, or legal status.
but there are always paperwork expenses. You have to open bank accounts and produce legal documents, and save so that they will grant you legal status. It is a difficult process, which requires money to keep going. And there is a crisis right now isn’t there? So FEMU doesn’t have money to continue supporting people in obtaining their legal status right now…perhaps in the future.¹⁰

The complicated, drawn out and expensive nature of the process makes the fact that all of FEMUPROCAN’s cooperatives are either legalized or working towards it even more impressive. This achievement has not gone unrecognized by the National Institute for the Promotion of Cooperatives (INFOCOOP) and other cooperative organizations. Torres informed me that there is “a strong demand for FEMUPROCAN to provide this service to cooperatives who are not affiliated with FEMUPROCAN, but who recognize this experience that FEMUPROCAN has as an organization and as women’s cooperatives. So there is a demand, with people requesting these services and the experience of FEMUPROCAN.”¹¹

To summarize, it appears that FEMUPROCAN has achieved an indisputable success with regard to this objective and gained recognition from their membership, government institutions and other organizations. This has been achieved only through the dedication and determination of the national team, in conjunction with the cooperatives themselves.

**Planning, monitoring and evaluation**

When FEMUPROCAN broke away from UNAG the leaders realized that they needed to define their work strategy and devise specific objectives. So, one of the first

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¹⁰ Tania, FEMUPROCAN Cooperative Member, San Juanillo, July 22, 2009.

¹¹ Blanca Lidia Torres, Director of FEMUPROCAN’s System of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, Managua, August 3, 2009.
things that they did was to carry out a census of their members in order to know where the members were located, how many members they had, what they did for a living, and what level of education they had etc. The census was designed to allow the members of FEMUPROCAN to get to know one another and in order to define what exactly it was that FEMUPROCAN was going to do. The biggest obstacle to carrying it out was money, as FEMUPROCAN lacked the resources necessary to hire professional census takers. Undeterred the women decided they would do it themselves, as Rocha explained:

Our census was homemade [de manera artesanal]. When I say homemade it was because we didn’t have the money to hire people. So all the women and the coordinators from the cooperatives made a card with a question guide and everybody took the cards to use in their cooperatives. It was massive. Afterwards the boxes came here, filled with all of the information.

We were already half crazy from carrying out the survey, so we said well we’ll probably have to look for a sociologist to help us. And we looked, and they said to us, OK I will give you a cheap price – 1,500 dollars. We didn’t have that, but we told them to do it anyway.¹²

Luckily for FEMUPROCAN, they were in contact with the representative from CCS. They explained the situation to him and he agreed to support them, providing the money for the sociologist to carry out the work and produce a document containing the findings. In this way FEMUPROCAN was able to find out how many of their members were illiterate, how many had access to land and under what tenure system, how many were single mothers and so on and so forth. However, there were still large blank spaces in the information they had collected. In order to fill these in FEMUPROCAN decided to do a socio-economic diagnostic with a gender focus. On the basis of the

¹² Matilde Rocha, Vice President of FEMUPROCAN, Managua, August 4th, 2009
information from the census and the diagnostic FEMUPROCAN was able to establish detailed baseline data and define their organizational strategy and objectives.

With the help of CCS FEMUPROCAN has implemented a detailed system of planning, monitoring and evaluation (SPME), which Torres administers. This system is used both at the level of the national organization and for each of the affiliated cooperatives. The members are given training sessions and assistance on how to use this system to develop their own, individual targets and monitor and evaluate their performance. This is part of FEMUPROCAN's drive to make the cooperatives "self-managing" whilst simultaneously improving data collection across the organization. At the time I was carrying out my fieldwork only the planning and some monitoring reports for the first part of that year (2009) had been completed, and these were collected in a computer database in the national office.

However, FEMUPROCAN was having some difficulty in convincing the members to complete the monitoring reports and hand in their paperwork outlining targets and progress towards these. Of the reports that were returned, many were missing important information or provided little detail. This is not just a problem confined to the SPME reports, but rather something that affects data collection within the whole organization. For example, I accompanied Valle to FEMUPROCAN’s roadside market near Darío. She needed to collect information about how the watering project was going. However, it soon becomes apparent that some of the monitoring sheets had not been filled in. FEMUPROCAN’s coordinator at the roadside market explained that the same women who never turn up for interviews are the ones who haven’t handed in their sheets. Later in the same visit Valle asked the coordinator to provide her with the
receipts she had collected from the women, detailing their expenses. Again, some of these are missing and, according to the coordinator, this is because the women claim not to have been given receipts or only have part of the receipts. Some of those that have been turned in simply state the total amount, without describing what it was for.

This is not to say that there is no progress being made, and the information collected, however incomplete or imprecise, will still help the national team to formulate strategies to improve performance, and highlight areas of success and weakness. The more information FEMUPROCAN has about their members the better they will be able to design programs and lobby for policies that will benefit the grassroots. The 2008 report states that a total of 30 cooperatives, four unions of cooperatives, one business network and the Credit Window at the roadside market complied with the SPME. That year FEMUPROCAN did manage to devise, monitor and evaluate 57 production plans for members involved in the watering systems project and eight unions (who represented 67 cooperatives and an individual cooperative) presented their Departmental and/or Local Advocacy Plan.

Not only does FEMUPROCAN expect its members to provide periodic updates on their progress towards their goals but the national leadership also carries out interviews with producers and diagnostics and appraisals that attempt to evaluate the work done so far. In August and September of 2008, for example, they held evaluation meetings with every single base cooperative affiliated with FEMUPROCAN to assess the functioning and legality of the cooperatives as well as identify the main problems and advances.
Finally, FEMUPROCAN is also required to fulfill the various planning, monitoring and evaluation requirements demanded by their international NGO partners. Each organization has different requirements, using different methodologies. For example CCS hires external consultants to periodically evaluate the success of initiatives funded by the Center and carried out in conjunction with FEMUPROCAN. The results are then discussed by the two organizations, providing FEMUPROCAN with the opportunity to discover how the organization is assessed by independent analysts and what analytical tools were used to produce the report. Thus it is definitely a learning exercise for FEMUPROCAN, even if they do not always agree with all of the conclusions reached by the consultant.

So, it appears that whereas FEMUPROCAN is attempting to construct a detailed and up to date database on all of their cooperatives the reality is that although some progress is being made, the most effective monitoring exercises and evaluations so far have been those carried out either by the national team, or by external consultants specifically hired for the task. Perhaps this mixed performance on reporting by the grassroots women is linked to low literacy levels and a lack of understanding about why this information is important. Furthermore, there does not appear to be any punishment for those cooperatives that do not provide information, or any rewards for those that do. Thus, with regard to planning, monitoring and evaluation FEMUPROCAN could be said to be partially successful, although there is much room for improvement.

**Training Capable, Empowered Women Leaders?**

FEMUPROCAN also works on issues related to technical assistance and training. The topics of the training sessions are varied, from personal growth and self-esteem to more technical topics (formulation of projects, how to do diagnostics, marketing etc.).
They are also trained in how to do advocacy work. For each cooperative they identify what the training needs are by asking the members which workshops they would like to receive in the future, and to name the most convenient place and time for this to happen. In fact, there are so many different topics to address that one woman joked that they were “highly workshopped on everything” (“bien talleriadas de todo”).

In 2008, FEMUPROCAN reported that they had trained 510 cooperative members, leaders and grassroots *promotoras* in the following topics:

- Strategic Planning of Organized Political Lobbying
- The formulation of Annual Operational Plans
- Functioning and Legality of Cooperatives
- Methodology for the Formation of Business Networks with a Gender Focus
- Agro-business and product quality in Darío, Nandaime and San Francisco Libre
- Post-harvest in Nueva Guinea
- Sanitary measures and Artisanal Processing of Foodstuffs in Darío
- Large Livestock in San Francisco Libre and Nueva Guinea
- A workshop with the Business Networks to formulate the Networks’ Operational Plan

The training process is directed to 508 *promotoras* from the unions of cooperatives or base-level cooperatives. These *promotoras* attend workshops in Managua and are then expected to pass on the knowledge they have learned to the members of their cooperatives, so that every member of FEMUPROCAN can benefit from the knowledge and skills taught in the workshops. However, FEMUPROCAN requires that not just one, but two *promotoras* from each cooperative attend these sessions at the national office. In this way, if one person is sick or leaves the cooperative there is still another person there who has also attended the same workshops.

I now turn to examining some of the principal training topics tackled by FEMUPROCAN.
Agroecological techniques

It is here that the FEMUPROCAN’s supposedly cross-cutting theme on the environment is most evident. Not only is the leadership of FEMUPROCAN concerned about ensuring their members can continue to farm their land for many years to come in ways that do not destroy the environment, they also link environmental issues to health. Reducing the use of industrial chemicals and educating their members about the health risks involved is therefore a key component of FEMUPROCAN’s commitment to promoting organic farming. They have carried out workshops on the production of organic fertilizer and the benefits of re-forestation, and the land owned by the roadside market is all managed organically. Martha Valle appears to be genuinely concerned with promoting environmental awareness among the members and implementing innovative techniques designed to reduce environmental damage.

The roadside market (which appears to be very much Valle’s responsibility) provides her with an opportunity to showcase some of these new techniques and to demonstrate to the members the results of organic farming and re-forestation. There is even a small wind turbine providing power to some of the offices on the site.

Now, whereas a wind turbine is certainly beyond the reach of most of FEMUPROCAN’s members, some of the other environmental protection measures are much more affordable and feasible. Some cooperatives are making much more progress than others on this front. Others, unable to get the support of their entire cooperatives for their project have formed business networks in order for the production of organic fertilizer. Nueva Guinea, for instance, has (finally) been able to get its organic fertilizer business up and running after a series of failed attempts and is now
investigating expanding into other areas. Pastora Amador, 59, explained the history of the network:

At the beginning of the project to produce organic fertilizer, we did a survey of producers in the municipality of Nueva Guinea and the results were positive. In the survey we found support for our plan because in Nueva Guinea there is nobody who produces and sells organic fertilizer, and there is a need for the supply of this product.

Six of us began the project, we met in FEMUPROCAN and we agreed to invest a total of C$2,500.00 initially for the construction of the shed. This involved the purchase of: wire mesh, containers for the worms, fences, nails, zinc, pillars etc.\textsuperscript{13}

When we had already finished the shed we realized that we lacked the worms, but we also lacked money to buy them. So we looked for a loan from one of the families because we didn’t have financing. At this point two members abandoned the project and only four of us were left.

We managed to buy two kilos of worms, we brought them from Managua and this first investment was a loss because the worms died. So we had to look for worms again, but this time in Nueva Guinea. We bought another two kilos and began again from zero. After a fortnight we began producing organic fertilizer. But this time we were hit by a plague of African Bees and we lost one kilo.

With what was left we continued fighting, we lagged behind in terms of production but after another fortnight the worms reproduced and we managed to increase production to six containers from the two we had before.

In the course of all of this we lost another member of the network and so only three of us remained, and we continue working together today. We returned the money they had initially invested to those that withdrew, according to our initial agreement.

Now we are producing 20 quintals of organic fertilizer a month, with a price of C$250.00 per quintal.\textsuperscript{14} The network also maintains one manzana of reforested land, using organic fertilizer.\textsuperscript{15} Right now we are only selling 6 quintals and the rest we are using ourselves…

\textsuperscript{13} Approximately $118.54 at March 2010 rates

\textsuperscript{14} A quintal is equal to 100 lbs or 46kg.

\textsuperscript{15} A manzana is equal to 1.73 acres
The network continues working, we have a shed for hens, and we already have ten hens, one rooster and eighteen chickens. They produce 150 eggs a month. Our objective is to form a farm to produce meat and eggs and the worms from the fertilizer also serve as food for the chickens.

We decided to make this network because in the cooperative we didn’t feel that we were able to all work together and decide where to put our resources, and for this reason we joined together in the network. Each one of us has invested approximately C$12,000.00.\textsuperscript{16}

For the future we are thinking of developing a rural tourism project, where we would have a restaurant and a pool and so on. We have received visits from tourists from Belgium and Germany and they also thought this was a good idea.

All this has been possible due to the training that FEMUPROCAN has given us. The training sessions have given us strengths, skills and capabilities to develop our work, to move forward and to improve our standard of living.\textsuperscript{17}

Despite many difficulties, these women were able to create a profitable and well-functioning project, the success of which was recognized in an article in the monthly magazine \textit{El Observador Económico}, published by the International Foundation for the Global Economic Challenge (FIDEG). The network is now producing enough fertilizer to satisfy the needs of its members and provide a surplus which they offer for sale. In fact, their achievements have attracted considerable interest from other cooperative members, who have been trained by the members of the network in the techniques necessary to carry out a similar project.

However, most cooperatives affiliated with FEMUPROCAN use a mixture of organic and non-organic methods, with the organic fertilizer sometimes being supplied to the cooperatives by a representative of FEMUPROCAN, rather than the individual cooperatives manufacturing it themselves:

\textsuperscript{16} Approximately $569 at March 2010 rates

\textsuperscript{17} Pastora Amadora, Trustee of the Cooperative Los Pinitos, interviewed by FEMUPROCAN in 2008 and featured on the organization’s website.
We also use other chemicals, we buy those as well. It’s because organic fertilizer is mostly used when the plant is well established and so there is where organic should be used, at other times of its development it is better to use urea mixed with a complex...listen, at least around here, a girl used to come from Darío to leave us organic fertilizer for our cooperative. We’ve still got quite a lot left. Yes, they brought it, on behalf of FEMUPROCAN.\(^{18}\)

Some cooperatives, however, do not appear to have adopted any of the agro-ecological techniques proposed by FEMUPROCAN. This happens for a number of reasons. An important limitation on whether cooperatives are able to introduce these techniques is related to the question of land ownership. Without access to their own land, some cooperatives are simply not able to farm organically or pay for the start up costs necessary to begin production of organic fertilizer.

I was interested to find out whether the women were learning these agro-ecological techniques primarily from FEMUPROCAN, or if they were also receiving similar training from other organizations. The women in many communities responded that there were a number of government institutions and civil society groups offering projects in these areas, providing plants for reforestation programs and encouraging the women to take action to conserve the environment:

Now there are even programs from government institutions, including INTA (Nicaraguan Institute of Farming Technology), MARENA (Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources), MAGFOR (Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry) and several NGOs, one of which is called el Porvenir, all of which are concerned with strengthening the environment through reforestation, bringing plants, ensuring that the trees on the steep valley sides are not being cut down. So they are working on this. And the orientation is all in this same line of work...that the women should plant trees around the wells.

Everyone is involved. Here, last September they brought 60,000 plants and distributed them among all the communities. Now there are nurseries, to avoid transport costs...Here is a dry area, and people left without water are making pools to store water and producing organic fertilizer...this is

\(^{18}\) Beatriz, FEMUPROCAN Cooperative member, Terrabona, July 21, 2009
facilitated by INTA and an NGO, in a program called CENADE (Center for Action and Support for Rural Development).\textsuperscript{19}

In fact, in some communities there were so many organizations working on these themes that the women had sometimes been given workshops on the same topic by a number of different groups (which hardly seems an efficient use of resources). Thus, the fact that they are participating in government or NGO-run programs does not necessarily mean that FEMUPROCAN has not already trained them in this. It is less likely that FEMUPROCAN will repeat trainings already carried out by other organizations due to the simple fact that FEMUPROCAN asks its grassroots cooperatives to identify their individual training needs, rather than implementing the same sequence of workshops everywhere. Nevertheless, in the case of Nueva Guinea outlined above it seems clear that FEMUPROCAN was the main organization that enabled the women to carry out this project.

To conclude, there are a number of organizations and institutions working on agro-ecological techniques with women rural producers, and therefore not all of the changes implemented by FEMUPROCAN’s members can be wholly attributed to FEMUPROCAN as opposed to these other actors. However, it does seem that for some cooperatives FEMUPROCAN has successfully supported the introduction of these techniques, and these initiatives should therefore be counted among the organization’s successes. On the other hand there are other areas and cooperatives that still have not managed to introduce these projects, and the vast majority of the cooperatives still have not converted to using all organic methods.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{19} Tania, FEMUPROCAN cooperative member, San Juanillo, July 22, 2009.}
Formulation and management of projects

The national leadership of FEMUPROCAN have recognized the need to train the base level cooperatives in methods that will allow them to become more autonomous from the central organization, by formulating and managing their own projects. As such they have carried out a number of workshops and assisted the women in the development of their proposals. The results of this have been mixed, as discussed in the section under Organization and Leadership above, with some cooperatives needing much more assistance than others.

Gender and development (GAD)

Key to much of FEMUPROCAN’s work is an understanding of Gender and Development (GAD). To understand how successful they are in training their members on this topic it is first necessary to define what GAD is. The gender mainstreaming team at the British Department for International Development (DFID) provide the following definition: “the GAD (or Gender and Development) approach to development policy and practice focuses on the socially constructed basis of differences between men and women and emphasises the need to challenge existing gender roles and relations” (Reeves and Baden 2000, 33). In contrast to many development frameworks that had come before, GAD argues that women cannot be seen in isolation from men, and that gender equality is, fundamentally, a question of unequal power relations between men and women. GAD practitioners normally try to address women’s practical and strategic gender needs by “challenging existing divisions of labour or power” (Ibid.).

According to my interviews with Oxfam Canada and the women from UNIFEM, many women’s organizations and development NGOs in Nicaragua, although they claim to have adopted this GAD framework, in reality, still favor the “add women and stir”
approach to development. This is not what “doing gender” means, and this type of one-sided approach often leads to as many problems as it solves. I was interested to find out whether FEMUPROCAN understood the differences between these approaches, and how much they considered the women’s relationships with men in their training sessions. The overall impression I received was very encouraging. Everybody, from the national leaders right down to the grassroots of the organization, seemed to have an awareness of the need to work with men to achieve their objective of bringing about more equal gender relations in Nicaragua (rather than excluding them or failing to consider how initiatives challenging current inequalities might provoke male resistance of hostility). FEMUPROCAN argued that challenging unequal power relations does not necessarily mean that men should be seen as the enemy, but that machista attitudes and practices need to be contested and men should reconsider many of their preconceptions and prejudices regarding appropriate gender roles and relations. The work that FEMUPROCAN does affects entire families, and this is acknowledged by the leadership and the members in the design of their training programs and projects: “the fact that we propose that women should be leaders is not that we are saying that men are worthless, because the fight is for the integration of the family. In the watering systems it is the couple who are taken into account.”

In fact, FEMUPROCAN is active in promoting the participation of family members in the projects it implements (both men and women) with a focus on building a supportive family environment for its women members, whilst at the same time arguing for a shift towards more equal gender relations: “And maybe all of us as women will

20 Cristina, FEMUPROCAN cooperative member, San Juanillo, July 22, 2009.
liberate ourselves. It is not about being against men but rather about strengthening our
work within the nucleus of the family, and changing lives in this way, because at times
you can have money, but if you don’t have peace in a household it is not good.” 21

Part of the training on gender involves workshops on women’s political and
economic rights under Nicaraguan law. These were conducted by a human rights
lawyer, and former Sandinista Member of Parliament, Angela Rosa Acevedo. Whereas
the workshops were certainly very thorough they largely consisted of the participants
breaking off into small groups to read the text of the laws. Although the women
appeared to genuinely appreciate studying these laws many struggled with the complex
legal language in which they were written. Difficult even for many highly educated
people to understand, it was certainly a challenge for many of FEMUPROCAN’s
members who had fairly basic reading and writing skills. Having said that Acevedo
helped them to pick out the most important parts of the legislation and discuss its
implications.

Making women aware of their rights in this way seemed to be paying off in many
cases. Members reported that they had seen changes in the ways in which men saw
women and greater recognition of women’s work and contribution as a result of these
gender and development workshops:

With so many training sessions on gender that took men into account, men
gradually began to understand that in reality we women were very, very
important and that we do a lot of things, you understand? They have now
realized that we are the last to go to bed and the first to get up in the
morning. Men are used to coming back from work and waiting calmly for

21 Cristina, FEMUPROCAN cooperative member, San Juanillo, July 22, 2009.
their meal while we are working, and the men have begun to recognize that.\textsuperscript{22}

It seems clear that the leadership of FEMUPROCAN, unlike many in the women’s organizations and development industry understand the difference between a Women In Development and a Gender And Development Approach and were seeking to consider the implications of their initiatives on both men and women and their relationships.\textsuperscript{23} Part of FEMUPROCAN’s success in adopting a Gender and Development framework likely comes from Torres and participation in the Women’s Economic Agenda (AGEM) organized by UNIFEM. As mentioned above, funding from AGEM is paying for Torres to pursue a diploma in GAD at the Universidad Centroamericana in Managua on Saturdays.

It is perhaps worth mentioning here that FEMUPROCAN has, in the vast majority of cases, avoided stirring up large scale opposition by the men in the communities in which they are active. This may be, in part, a result of the Gender and Development approach taken by the organization and the benefits for the men of many of FEMUPROCAN’s projects. However, it may also be due, in part, to the fact that the vast majority of FEMUPROCAN’s initiatives are limited to relatively uncontroversial themes related to economic development and education. The organization does not provide a detailed analysis of problems relating to domestic violence or sexual matters (from

\textsuperscript{22} Tania, FEMUPROCAN Cooperative Member, San Juanillo, July 22, 2009

\textsuperscript{23} I asked María Rosa Renzi, regional director of UNIFEM, if she thought that FEMUPROCAN understood the difference between Women in Development (WID) and Gender and Development (GAD). She replied that although she couldn’t comment on the base of the organization, it appeared that the leadership were clear about the differences between the two frameworks, and that FEMUPROCAN tried to apply a gender focus to their work (Interview with María Rosa Renzi, Managua, July 15, 2009)
abuse to contraception to sexually transmitted diseases). These topics might well provoke a more confrontational response from men.

Overall, it appears that FEMUPROCAN is successfully training its women in gender and development but doing so by focusing on a relatively narrow set of issues mainly related to women’s economic position. They do so in a non-confrontational manner, but one in which women are encouraged to learn about their economic, political and social rights and to exercise those rights at home and within their communities. Women’s subordination to men is discussed, although it is framed mainly in economic terms (such as lack of access to land and credit). Workshop participants are encouraged to share stories of when they felt subjected to discrimination on the basis of their gender and to re-examine some of the ways in which men and women are expected to behave. However, FEMUPROCAN was also keen to emphasize that men and women are different. Unlike much liberal western feminism, FEMUPROCAN was not suggesting to its members that they should be treated the same as men, but rather that women and men should be valued for their equal, but different contributions to society. They maintained that there was something special about being a woman (a lot of this appeared to be related to women’s traditional, “natural,” role as caregiver and mother) and that in fact women could be seen as superior to men in a number of ways (they don’t drink, they look after everybody else before taking care of themselves, they work the longest hours for the least amount of pay, etc.). FEMUPROCAN is attempting to convince both their female members, and

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It is possible that some of the more controversial themes of women’s movements, such as those related to reproductive health, are tackled in these workshops on social rights (there were none held when I was there). However, I heard little mention of such topics during my fieldwork and they do not feature in FEMUPROCAN’s publications or reports. This suggests that they do not receive much attention from FEMUPROCAN.
their male partners to recognize the true value of women’s work. So, FEMUPROCAN focuses on some causes of women’s subordination much more than others.

**Leadership and empowerment**

Linked to the GAD approach, FEMUPROCAN claims that it is training empowered women leaders. As discussed above it does seem that FEMUPROCAN’s women are assuming leadership roles in their communities. In this section I want to explore whether the women feel they have developed personally as a result of their participation in FEMUPROCAN. Do they feel that it has been an empowering experience? How has their self-confidence changed? The women replied that, thanks to the skills they were obtaining in FEMUPROCAN, they did feel a sense of empowerment: “Myself, as a woman, as a person I feel that I have advanced a lot because now I can make decisions. Say what I like and what I don’t like.”

This sense of empowerment was also fostered by the environment of moral support and understanding that the organization provides. It provides women with the chance to talk about their experiences, some for the first time in front of a group of people, and to develop shared bonds of understanding and a feeling of solidarity among the members. They drew strength from being organized in this way: “We are capable, we are brave, we have the spirit of the organization, which is what keeps us going and has filled us with empowerment, from the focuses of the initiatives and from the visions of organized women.”

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25 Clara, President of a FEMUPROCAN cooperative, Terrabona, July 21, 2009.

26 Adela, President of a FEMUPROCAN Cooperative in Rio Blanco, Managua, July 15, 2009.
For some of the members, particularly those from tiny settlements in remote areas, FEMUPROCAN provided them with a chance to make new and meaningful friendships, and a reason to leave their houses and travel to different parts of the country. This was vital to the development of their self-confidence and fostered a sense of identification and belonging:

Through the organization you get to know more people right, there is more communication. Listen if you are not organized you don’t belong to anything and so you don’t go out, you spend all your time shut up inside, but through the organization and the cooperatives and all that you go out more and have more communication, you make new relationships.27

Firstly I think that I have changed because the organization has taught us how to leave behind our limitations as women. Well the organization has taught me how to be organized as a woman. One of the principles was learning how, as cooperative women, to leave behind our timidity because growing up in the countryside is very different from the city. One of the biggest things for me, and in which FEMUPROCAN has helped me is that before I didn’t used to talk in front of people because it made me nervous and then, little by little, I began to present my ideas, and when I got up to present I was afraid that it was going to come out all wrong. However, through the work I was doing in the training, through our training with FEMUPROCAN, I became more confident. For me, the organization has taught me how to learn to understand other women and that we women can get over our fears to get wherever we want to go in life.28

Getting involved in FEMUPROCAN, and having leadership positions within their own cooperatives made the women more confident about asserting themselves outside the cooperative, and convinced them that they were capable and legitimate representatives of the women with whom they worked: “every time we go and train ourselves we are going to begin doing a better job. They are going to recognize us more. And we all become empowered women, leaders who can administer our own

27 Daria, FEMUPROCAN cooperative member, San Juanillo, July 22, 2009.
28 Margarita, FEMUPROCAN promotora and president of a cooperative in Jintotega, interviewed in Managua, July 16, 2009).
things and negotiate on our own behalf. And they will listen to us, and we will not depend on other people speaking for us.”  

This self-belief was fostered by, and was instrumental in, increasing the recognition FEMUPROCAN’s leaders received from other organizations who wished to work with rural women. Many of these organizations actively sought out the women in FEMUPROCAN to act as representatives of the women in negotiations with their organization. The women had begun to realize that they too had important knowledge to share and that they deserved to be respected and valued for this knowledge:

One goes wherever they call you to because one has knowledge to share with other organizations that need it as well. I was even called by a program, one of those programs that gives credit for staple grains/pulses and I feel that I have the ability to say to them “I have this many women who are producers who need credit in order to work” and that the women are capable of working and paying off this credit. So, in this way I liked this initiative. I’m not just organized in FEMUPROCAN, but also in another organization, where I was also given responsibilities, I participated in that as well.

FEMUPROCAN, and the fact of being organized, had affected these women’s lives in many different ways, not just in regard to their standing within the community. Many of them mentioned that they now felt empowered at home as well: “When you are organized you train yourself and so you learn to change even the way you live - this could be in the home, it could be how you relate to and interact with other people, it could be considering how you are going to express your words, how you are going to greet a person, many things…”

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29 María, FEMUPROCAN cooperative member, Terrabona, July 21, 2009.
30 Granos básicos or staple grains/pulses refers to beans, corn and rice in Nicaragua.
31 Adela, President of a FEMUPROCAN Cooperative in Rio Blanco, Managua, July 15, 2009.
32 Tania, FEMUPROCAN Cooperative Member, San Juanillo, July 22, 2009.
These changes, a consequence of being organized and taking part in training workshops, had led many of the women to re-evaluate their lives and think about the reasons why changing people’s perception of appropriate gender roles in their community was important and justified. For example, with regard to women’s ability to manage projects and have a say in the allocation of resources within a community one woman argued that women were natural administrators because they had to manage their households and their communities, knowing when there would be a shortage of something and where to buy it, or how to economize. Thus, their role within the household gave them economic skills, often equal to or better than those of the men.

FEMUROCAN also wants to make it clear to the members that empowerment means that not only do they not have to depend on men to speak for them and make the decisions, but that they shouldn’t rely on the national office to make these decisions either. Empowerment, for FEMUROCAN, involved increasing the members’ abilities to act to solve their own problems and to take a proactive approach to their lives and their personal development. Diaz saw evidence of this in her dealings with the women, and regarded it as one of the principal achievements of the organization: “The greater independence of the women, who are not waiting for someone to solve their problems...for me this is a huge success because it is the key to everything else. We have worked hard on increasing the self-esteem of the women, and you can see the change.” 33

As Diaz explained to me, everything was connected – the women were training in skills that would allow them to make more money to support their families and increase

33 Morena Diaz, head of training and advocacy in FEMUROCAN, Managua, August 6th 2009
their decision making power. This, along with the self-esteem workshops run by FEMUPROCAN would help to increase rural women’s self confidence. An increase in self-confidence would enable them to lobby the local government more effectively and take on more leadership posts within the community. Both economic help and training and personal development were vital for the empowerment of women.

To summarize, it does seem that by participating in FEMUPROCAN’s training programs, in their projects designed to improve the members’ economic situation, and simply from being part of an organization in which everybody was taught to respect the opinions of everybody else, the grassroots members of FEMUPROCAN had begun to feel more empowered and capable of making decisions about their own lives. Some were evidently more confident than others, as is to be expected with any group of people, but all of the women I interviewed said that their self-esteem and confidence in their own abilities had improved as a result of their participation in FEMUPROCAN. As Adela concluded “Organized, we are somebody.” This appears to be a clear indication of the ability of FEMUPROCAN to aid in their aim of achieving greater participation of rural women producers and entrepreneurs in the economic, social and political life of the country, and thus can be considered to be a major success for FEMUPROCAN. In this respect the organization seems to be a leader in its field. Angela Rosa Acevedo, a lawyer and former Sandinista Member of Parliament who runs FEMUPROCAN’s workshops on women’s rights, said that this was the first time in thirty years of work that she has seen this level of detail and clarity from an organization on the subject of women’s rights.
Literacy and primary education

Within the training and empowerment component there is also a line of action on literacy. FEMUPROCAN maintains a literacy program for leaders and members of the organization, but its impact has gone further than this and they have also incorporated other family members, both men and women, into the program. The program began in 2000, and is now in the sixth process of literacy. Approximately 600 women have been taught how to read and write in the areas of Nandaime, Matagalpa, Jinotega and New Guinea. After the training program the women can continue their learning through the contact the unions of cooperatives have with PAEBANIC (the Nicaraguan Adult Literacy and Basic Education Program) (UNIFEM Central America 2007).

The need to teach their members how to read and write became apparent to FEMUPROCAN from the results of their initial census carried out in 1999. Despite the fact that the FSLN had claimed to have ended illiteracy in the country in the wake of their celebrated Literacy Campaign, which did indeed make remarkable progress in improving literacy and basic education rates in Nicaragua, FEMUPROCAN discovered that 25.71% of their members who took part in the census had not had the possibilities and/or opportunities to gain access to basic formal or informal education. This was, in part, due to the decade of war that devastated the countryside, the policies of the neoliberal administrations followed the Sandinista electoral defeat and the problems women faced in attending literacy programs (for example due to ill health, pregnancy, family or work responsibilities and the remote location of many of their homes) The highest proportion of illiteracy was found to be in Nueva Guinea (26.9%) and Matagalpa (20.7%). The leaders of FEMUPROCAN realized that literacy had to be one of their first priorities as an organization because “this disconnect with basic levels of instruction has
limited the members in their growth and development in the areas of organization, training, communication and information and, as a result, in their capacity to decide and lobby on the local and national level” (FEMUPROCAN 2003).

They were keen to get started and put an end to illiteracy among their members as soon as possible, but El Centro Cooperativo Sueco, which was funding the project, suggested that they try a pilot project first, and iron out any difficulties before expanding the program to other areas. Terrabona was selected for this initial phase, because of the high levels of illiteracy reported there and because of its proximity to Matagalpa, FEMUPROCAN’s birthplace and stronghold. After success in Terrabona FEMUPROCAN began the program in a new department each year.

In each area FEMUPROCAN consulted its members about the most suitable times and places to conduct the sessions. In the case of Terrabona the 80 participants and 12 educators agreed to meet three times a week for two hours each time. However, even before FEMUPROCAN had finished training these educators they encountered difficulties. The National Coordinator for the program, Rita Larenas, fell ill and eventually had to leave the country as a result of these health problems. The organization was then forced to recruit her replacement from outside of FEMUPROCAN.

There were then further setbacks when some of the educators withdrew, leaving the program running in only three out of the initial six communities. Despite these difficulties FEMUPROCAN reported that the women were making progress, with the majority able to read a little by the end of the first term. Some were more advanced, and others struggled to keep up, but morale remained high (FEMUPROCAN 2003). This difference in learning pace and irregular attendance posed a challenge for the
educators, who were forced to redesign their methodology to incorporate groups with different learning speeds.

The educators themselves, some of whom had no prior experience in teaching or professional qualifications, often lacked confidence in their own abilities and were afraid of doing something wrong. This concern led some of them to alter their reports on the advances being made by their students, a practice condemned for its “lack of professional ethics in people who supposedly carry out leadership roles in their communities” by FEMUPROCAN.

Nevertheless there were also encouraging reports that the project participants were losing their timidity and improving their oral expression and vocabulary. The literacy program had fostered the consolidation of study circles, and many of the women were reported to have put in a great deal of time and effort in order to make progress. The report notes that participants also developed their listening abilities and learned to respect other people’s opinions, even when they did not coincide with their own.

The educators also reported that they had become more self-confident and creative in their teaching methods. One of them was subsequently hired by the government literacy program (PAEBANIC) in recognition of her teaching abilities. Their experience of leading classes had encouraged them to take on other leadership roles within their communities: “I have improved my relationships with my students, with other people in the community, and this has enabled me to improve my leadership as an organized woman in the community. Through the training sessions I have developed greater abilities and acquired more knowledge” (Ana, FEMUPROCAN educator in FEMUPROCAN 2003).
The FEMUPROCAN literacy program also had a number of positive effects on gender relations in the communities. The women described how, as a result of the literacy process, there was an improvement in the way men and women valued one another. Evidence of this could be found, it was argued, in the fact that “women of all ages, with their partners and children, who, as well as all their obligations as housewives and their commitments to the organization, have been able to defend their own space as women, in order to be able to respond to one of their practical needs; learning how to read and write. This, in turn, generates the satisfaction of a strategic need, that is, their ability to be able to carry out positions and other functions in the organization” (FEMUPROCAN 2003). An increase the participants’ ability to express themselves orally translated into better communication within families, with their children, their partner, their neighbors and their friends.

Furthermore the process of literacy had helped the women of FEMUPROCAN to grow closer to one another. Many of the educators were relatively young, and many of the participants were relatively old (although people of all ages participated). This led to a greater understanding between the different generations of women and helped to strengthen the organization.

Reading and writing was seen by the women as much more than just another skill, it was intimately linked to their sense of identity and personality. They were able to identify themselves from a list of names and sign, rather than just putting an x or their fingerprint. This was a source of pride and self-confidence for the women, who felt that it would be much more difficult for somebody to manipulate them or trick them into something now that they could read and write. They felt that they had greater control
over every aspect of their lives and greater status within their communities. For example, they now had the ability to decide which name they were going to give their children, giving them more power within their families. This self confidence and self-respect had effects on all areas of the women’s lives. The educators reported that it was possible to see changes in the women’s personal and family hygiene and a concern for the cleanliness of their community. They linked this directly to the women’s educational experiences.

The national team was quick to point out to me that although the literacy program was carried out in the women’s respective communities, the project would not have been successful had it not been for the administrative skills of the central organization. Literacy programs such as this one, even when the educators are not professional teachers, do not come cheap and require a great deal of organizational work and planning. Given the initial insecurity of the educators, FEMUPROCAN’s administrative section emphasized topics such as identity, the value of the group and their importance within the structures of the Federation in an effort to boost their self-esteem and sense of belonging.

Despite the difficulties FEMUPROCAN faced along the way; the illness of the national coordinator, the irregular attendance of some of the participants (due to severe weather, obligations linked to their work as producers, illness, pregnancy and, occasionally, the opposition of their husband or partner) and the different learning speeds of the participants, overall the organization was more than satisfied with the results. From an initial enrollment of 80 women, which increased to 92 and then fell to 91, 70 managed to complete the course. This represents a retention rate of 76.92%.
However, not all of those who finished managed to pass the final exams. FEMUPROCAN attributed this to a number of different reasons, including difficulties in their vision and learning difficulties.

Those who did pass were awarded their certificates on the 8th of March, International Women’s Day. Out of the 70 who finished, 61 managed to pass the exam. According to FEMUPROCAN, this represented an excellent result in comparison to the national statistics for literacy programs. This was even more of an achievement when one takes into consideration the obstacles that these women had to overcome; they are poor, rural, women, many of whom were already quite old at the beginning of the project and have to deal with harsh climates and sometimes unpredictable weather.

However, the excellent results did not mean that there was not room for further improvement. FEMUPROCAN’s reports highlight the dependency of the educators on the national and departmental teams for the day-to-day administration of the program. The departmental teams also tended to rely heavily on the national administration, despite the latter’s insistence that their role should be largely confined to overall coordination and facilitation. Some of the educators appeared to view their job primarily in terms of making money, rather than as part of their activism within the cooperative. Finally the evaluations completed at the end of each stage of the program suggested that FEMUPROCAN try and coordinate with a health organization to negotiate for cheap glasses for the participants. This would help to solve the problems caused by poor vision, which had set many of the older women back in their learning.

FEMUPROCAN had wanted to establish a network of promotoras and literacy teachers to keep the program going at a national level and continue their literacy
process. However they were unable to achieve this objective due to a lack of financial resources and the remote and dispersed location of many of the women in need of literacy training.

The topic of literacy continues to be considered as crucial for FEMUPROCAN’s development today, even though they have succeeded in teaching many of their women basic reading and writing skills. The national leadership came to realize that literacy was often not sufficient and now is focusing on making sure its members reach the third level of basic education. By doing so they hope that the women will develop their abilities further and retain a greater number of skills for a longer period after the program has finished. Currently, there is a sense that many members still lack some of the basic skills needed for them to make the maximum possible impact in their organizational and lobbying activities. This was highlighted as one of the key weaknesses of FEMUPROCAN by Angela Rosa Acevedo:

They have a low level of skills...this is a weakness because they are women who have only recently learned to read and write, and some are still illiterate. So, this requires greater effort in order to train them, in order to invest in their development. This is a serious limitation, not just for FEMUPROCAN but for the country as a whole.34

To conclude, it seems that the literacy program of FEMUPROCAN can be considered a success and is helping to achieve many of the objectives of the organization. The members receive a number of direct and indirect benefits from the program and displayed higher levels of self-esteem. They were also more respected by their communities, and felt more capable of assuming leadership positions and making decisions about their own lives. Literacy thus addresses the women’s strategic gender

34 Angela Rosa Acevedo, Lawyer specializing in human rights, Managua, July 24th, 2009
needs, whilst at the same time aiding them in their ability to satisfy their practical gender needs.\textsuperscript{35} Having said this, there remains much work to be done in this area, and the women’s level of education remains very low. This limits them in their ability to assume a greater role in economic and social affairs of the country.

\textbf{Organization and Cooperativism}

Whereas most of the women seemed to understand the importance of being organized and building an efficient organization, it was more difficult for FEMUPROCAN to achieve its aim of changing their mentalities on the subject of cooperativism. Whereas the cooperatives were supposed to work collectively to achieve their goals, these ideas had never really fully taken hold in many of the “cooperatives” that make up FEMUPROCAN. Officially the vast majority of the base level cooperatives are agricultural production cooperatives, meaning that production is supposed to be organized collectively at every stage of the process (from initial planning and preparation of the land to the commercialization and marketing of the products) and resources ought to be pooled among cooperative members. However, many of the women explained that in actual fact their cooperatives functioned more like credit and service cooperatives, in which land remained individually held and only technical assets and credits are shared among members (Bugajski 1990, 55). It appeared that in some cases the cooperatives were not even functioning at this level of collectivism and were really cooperatives in name only. Individualism prevailed, (admittedly to varying degrees across the organization) and it was difficult for the national leadership to convince their members of the benefits of working more closely together. In fact, it was due to this sort

\textsuperscript{35} For a description of the differences between practical and strategic gender interests see Molyneux (1985).
of problem within the cooperatives that FEMUPROCAN had found it necessary to set up
the business networks discussed in a later section of this paper. Did this mean that they
were fighting a losing battle with regard to cooperativism? If this was true it would
represent a serious weakness for FEMUPROCAN, given that cooperativism supposedly
forms one of the cross-cutting themes of the organization.

One thing is certainly clear – the principles of cooperativism are certainly
emphasized in most of the training workshops that I attended. In fact there are
workshops entirely devoted to the topic and in learning about the General Law of
Cooperatives, and what it means in practice. These workshops were often requested by
the women, and members talked about their determination to keep their cooperatives
going. This suggests that there is at least some interest in understanding the topic
better and improving the functioning of the base-level cooperatives. Perhaps
enthusiasm for the idea of cooperativism is not surprising when the principles of
cooperativism are listed as follows: equality, solidarity, dignity, moral principles,
honesty, love, value, respect, responsibility and kindness. Who could be against these
things? The leaders of the training workshops explained that if the cooperatives take
love as their base, then you can see how if there is love there is understanding, if there
is understanding there is unity, and unity is achieved to the extent that each person gets
to know herself and the others, that accumulate and share knowledge – i.e. everybody
is concerned about everybody else’s education. If they have all of this then they will be
able to develop economically as a cooperative.

However, it is one thing to be enthusiastic about the idea of something, and yet
another to actually be enthusiastic about how the ideas translate into practice. During
my fieldwork I heard numerous examples of cooperatives that were not functioning as they should. Sometimes this was due to personal differences between members of the group, sometimes due to a lack of engagement and involvement in the activities of the cooperative (such as a reluctance to take on leadership positions, forcing the same people to hold these posts for long periods of time and irregular attendance at cooperative meetings) and sometimes as a result of the poverty of the members, which obliged them to sell their products individually and as soon as they were harvested.

Despite the best intentions of the Sandinista party, the idea of producing collectively in cooperatives was never really fully developed and failed to take hold among rural people in many parts of Nicaragua. Many cooperatives were formed primarily to defend their land during the turbulent years following the 1979 revolution. Diaz explained that the majority of their members were still most accustomed to working individually and using the cooperatives primarily as a means of gaining access to services and projects. FEMUPROCAN is attempting to demonstrate to their members that by working together they can often negotiate better prices for their products, coordinate their productive activities to ensure that there is not an oversupply of a particular product and have more of a voice in the spaces of local government. From my fieldwork I noticed a contradiction between what FEMUPROCAN and the General Law on Cooperatives described as the fundamental principles of cooperativism (described above) and the growing emphasis on increasing profitability and competitiveness in the marketplace as the primary motivation for producing collectively. However, Diaz explained to me that the two need not be mutually exclusive and that the principles of cooperativism ought to enable the cooperatives to generate greater profits for their
members and improve their standard of living. This is one of the reasons that they are currently focusing on commercialization:

Maybe now with the mechanism of commercialization they will manage to get the cooperatives to sell their products collectively rather than each producer selling individually. These cooperatives would do what many economically successful cooperatives have done, which is that they manage everything related to commercialization, they stock-pile production and it is the cooperative who takes it to market and exercises quality control over the merchandise. The profit, instead of going to an intermediary, is retained by the cooperative and the cooperative can then provide more services to its members.36

FEMUPROCAN, in its attempt to instill its members with the spirit of cooperativism emphasized that this meant that the cooperatives must seek to be self-sufficient as much as possible, and decrease their day-to-day dependence on the national organization of FEMUPROCAN. Diaz repeatedly asserted that it was up to the people in a cooperative to make it work, that no-one was going to come and solve their problems for them and that working together to solve these problems would be a long and difficult process but worth it in the end.

The national leadership of FEMUPROCAN was attempting to increase the members’ sense of ownership over their cooperatives and educate people about the need to share information and techniques with the whole group. The women mentioned that sometimes only the president or promotoras attended the training sessions and then they didn’t communicate what they had learned to all the members of the cooperative. Others responded that all of the blame should not be leveled at the presidents or promotoras and it was sometimes the members’ fault for not attending meetings or paying attention to what was being said. There were complaints that

36 Denis Medina, El Centro Cooperativo Sueco, Managua, August 1, 2009.
sometimes it was difficult to get members to attend meetings, to arrive on time and with
the right attitude: “Often people come to meetings and attend training sessions as if they
were doing someone a favor rather than it being their responsibility.”

This lack of engagement was, in turn, causing problems for FEMUPROCAN in its
relationship with its NGO partners. VECO M.A, who was sponsoring many of the
training sessions relating to commercialization, had expressed concern about the
irregular attendance of FEMUPROCAN members.

One way to increase this ownership would be if the cooperative members were
obliged to contribute some of their own money for the maintenance of the cooperative
on a regular basis. This would give them a direct stake in the outcome of the initiatives
proposed by the cooperative and encourage more active participation. Unfortunately
FEMUPROCAN has a very low collection rate for subscriptions (approximately 20%)
and there are no standardized punishments for failure to pay. This means that when
individual coordinators, such as Ana Julia (based in Sébaco), attempt to impose
restrictions on those who have not paid (such as banning them from claiming expenses
and transport costs from FEMUPROCAN to travel to workshops in Managua), the
women protested that this was unfair. In examples such as this the national team sided
with the coordinators, arguing that as long as you don’t take measures against these
people the problems will persist. Morena went as far as to say that people who don’t
pay shouldn’t benefit from being in a cooperative. However it seems that
FEMUPROCAN cannot actually enforce these measures unless it is prepared to risk
losing up to 80% of their members. This would be a dangerous gamble, and fewer

37 Beatriz, FEMUPROCAN Cooperative member, Terrabona, July 21, 2009
members would also weaken the organization’s influence on policy-making and in changing public opinion about rural producers.

So, it seems that while FEMUPROCAN is certainly committed to educating its members about cooperativism, they are having only limited success in changing the mentalities of their members. This is likely to be a slow and difficult process and requires more of the coordinators to take a firm stance against those who will not pay. Commitment to the ideals of cooperativism entails taking actions in support of those ideals, and fostering a sense of ownership over the cooperatives by the members. Ownership will probably only be achieved if the women are prepared to invest their own money and resources in the cooperative. It is therefore imperative that FEMUPROCAN increases the rate of collection of subscriptions in order for their focus on cooperativism to become successful.

**Strengthening the Business and Entrepreneurial Skills of Women Producers**

**Business techniques**

When FEMUPROCAN began working with the women it became apparent that many of their members lacked the business skills that would allow them to maximize their profits. This would not only improve their individual material wealth but also make them able to contribute to the financial stability of their cooperative, and to FEMUPROCAN. This lack of knowledge about the market was not confined to women, but rather was a problem for male and female smallholding farmers in Nicaragua:

Historically small producers have had the problem that they have not managed to take ownership over and take control over the mechanisms of commercialization because they don’t know the market or they don’t have the knowledge and the experience to manage themselves in the market,
and determine prices. This is a long, hard task which still requires more time for its consolidation.  

Improving these business techniques forms the core of FEMUPROCAN’s current phase of its strategy. They have developed a number of teaching materials and workshops on matters such as feasibility and profitability and are exploring ways in which the members can increase their incomes and diversify their production. Some members reported feeling more confident in making calculations and carrying out cost-benefit analyses: “We have been trained in how to go about making a plan of work and how to know how much you are going to spend from when you begin to plough or prepare the land until the product goes to market”.  

In the workshops they emphasize that the members are perfectly capable of navigating the ins and outs of the market, and that one of the benefits of being in a cooperative is that each member can concentrate on the areas that they are best at, supporting the other members as need be.

It appears that FEMUPROCAN is shifting its focus to emphasizing market-based solutions to the problems faced by its members. I was repeatedly told that the cooperatives should be seen by their members, and by the general public, first and foremost as economic enterprises oriented towards the generation of profits for their members and for FEMUPROCAN. It was for this reason that they were setting up the business networks in all of the departments where FEMUPROCAN is active. Rather than trying to fix some of the problems in the cooperatives described above, FEMUPROCAN saw the business networks as an opportunity to start afresh, and avoid the emergence of these problems in the first place.

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38 Denis Medina, El Centro Cooperativo Sueco, Managua, August 1, 2009

39 Tania, FEMUPROCAN Cooperative Member, San Juanillo, July 22, 2009
However, it is not just FEMUPROCAN that is attempting to improve the business skills of rural women producers. There are many organizations and NGOs working on microfinance projects for women, many of which involve some training in business techniques (Babb 2001). The Nicaraguan Institute for the Support of Small and Medium Sized Businesses (INPYME) is the government body responsible for the promotion of this type of enterprise. Among other things they organize exchanges of experiences between groups from different areas of the country. FEMUPROCAN is one of the organizations that benefit from these exchanges, providing their members with the opportunity to learn from the success of other cooperatives outside of the organization and generating new ideas. It is important to point out that although the fact of being organized in FEMUPROCAN grants the women access to this type of exchange, the initiative is coordinated by INPYME, not FEMUPROCAN. FEMUPROCAN cannot, therefore, claim all the credit for the benefits of this program for their members.

There are also members of FEMUPROCAN who, on their own initiative, are seeking out other ways of improving their business and administration skills. Several of the younger promotoras with whom I spoke were currently enrolled, or hoping to enroll, in university level programs in Business Administration. They are not being supported by FEMUPROCAN in order to do this and it was unclear how much of what they were learning they passed on to the other members of their cooperatives, or whether they planned to remain part of FEMUPROCAN after graduation. It remains to be seen whether FEMUPROCAN can develop sufficient incentives for these younger, skilled members to remain within the organization in some function. To lose them would
certainly limit FEMUPROCAN’s ability to develop an entrepreneurial spirit among its members.

So far, it seems that there is significant interest among the grassroots members in developing their business skills. However, they are limited in their abilities to put some of these skills to use, due to a number of interrelated factors. Many of these are related to their position as rural people who have only recently learned to read and write, their poverty and the lack of financial resources within their cooperatives, and in FEMUPROCAN more generally, their gender, which limited their access to credit and other forms of financial assistance, and their lack of confidence in their own abilities. Many of the cooperatives still do not make a profit and the business networks are in their infancy. Therefore FEMUPROCAN cannot, yet, be described as successful with regard to teaching their members business techniques.

**Access to land and other property**

Perhaps one of the most important limitations the women of FEMUPROCAN had to overcome was their lack of access to resources, and, in particular, to land and other property. Angela Rosa Acevedo explained that even though the Sandinista agrarian reform allowed for the land title to be put in the names of more than one person often this meant that, rather than placing their partner on the title, men would register the property in their name and that of their eldest son, effectively bypassing the women in the family. Not only this but many of FEMUPROCAN’s members received their land under Law 278. This law states that property titles are understood to be automatically extended in the name of the couple, but that this meant that, in practice, the man retained control of the property, and only his name featured on the deeds. He could thus do whatever he wanted with the property, without having to consult his wife/partner.
For FEMUPROCAN, then, one of their priorities was that women legalize their situation with regard to land tenancy. Torres explained that although FEMUPROCAN is comprised of women producers this does not mean that the members own the land on which they were producing. Many of them are sharecroppers and/or farm rented or borrowed land. Often this land was borrowed from their husbands who could, theoretically, take it back at any time. They thus had little real control over the land, and few incentives to carry out improvements on the land. They also found it difficult to gain access to technical assistance or training programs, and lacked the collateral usually required in order to take out loans.40

In order to gather more information about the extent of the problem among their members, the national leadership decided to undertake a rapid appraisal of the ways in which the members gained access to the land they were working, and the legality of the land parcels that the women declared as their own. This appraisal was carried out in 2008 and involved 343 members (338 women and five men), organized in 43 cooperatives located in nineteen municipalities from different regions of the country.

The results showed that 61% of the members interviewed responded that they had access to their own land. The remaining 39% had access to land which was borrowed (15.6%), rented (14.6%), sharecropped (8.5%) or given (but without handing over the legal title to the land) (0.5%) (FEMUPROCAN 2008). Of the 61% that was owned by the

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40 According to Maria Rosa Renzi, “One of the problems with the cooperative sector is that almost always the women are in a cooperative because their husband has given them two or three parcels to work, but the owner of the land is almost always the husband, the man, and this means that the women don’t have access to credit…they are very much in the shadow, well, subject to the will of their partner. If these women were to genuinely have access to land, access to financing and access to technical training programs this would represent a huge boost, a huge advance for them in economic terms” (Interview with María Rosa Renzi, UNIFEM, Managua, July 15th 2009).
members, many women lacked some or all of the documentation necessary to prove their legal ownership of the land.

To try and improve this situation, FEMUPROCAN participates in the Coordinator for Rural Women. This organization focuses on the problem of women's access to land and lobbies the Nicaraguan government to try and influence policy and mobilizes rural women to struggle for equal access to land. They put forward proposals to the government, one of which has already been accepted for debate by the legislative assembly. This proposal seeks to get approval for a law on women's access to land, which would include the creation of a land bank for women.

Many of the most economically successful of FEMUPROCAN's cooperatives were those in which many of the members had managed to legalize their ownership rights over the land, whereas many that were struggling were comprised of women without access to their own land. Those that had land were the ones selected to participate in the projects organized by FEMUPROCAN, such as the drip watering schemes piloted in Terrabona and Darío.

However, legalizing the members' situation is not simple. It is a long, complicated and time consuming process. Not only that but men have to be persuaded of the need to grant property rights to women, in a way that minimizes conflicts within couples and/or families. Consequently, FEMUPROCAN acknowledges that many of their members still have problems regarding their access to land.

Even when the members were able to access credit and training programs and were able to buy or rent their own plots of land they often faced problems explaining their actions to their partners and families. When I attended a workshop in Nueva
Guinea, one of the participants described how she and her husband had been working land together for a long time. Although their house and various assets were in her name she never received direct benefits from her work but was dependent on her husband, who held the land title. The woman decided she wanted to work her own land in order to be able to provide for herself without having to ask for everything. So, she sold a cow, bought some land and decided to work this for herself. Her husband couldn’t understand why she would want to do this, and felt personally offended by her actions. He went to live with his family and continued to work the land. The woman was repeatedly insulted and harassed by her husband’s family, who felt that she was betraying her husband and damaging his reputation. Her husband accused her of wanting to leave him and it was almost impossible for the woman to convince him otherwise. Every time they came close to a reconciliation, her husband would ask if he could work her land, she would refuse, and the whole argument would start all over again.

To summarize it does seem that FEMUPROCAN is having some success in influencing policy makers regarding women’s access to land, via their participation in the Coordinator for Rural Women. They are also providing support and assistance for their members in their attempts to gain access to land and legalize their situation. In the training sessions the importance of having access to land in their own name is discussed and members find a space to share their experiences.

Having said that, many of FEMUPROCAN’s members still lack access to and control over their own lands, limiting their ability to make their own production decisions, determine how income should be spent within the household and gain greater
independence from their partners. It does not appear that FEMUPROCAN has successfully managed to persuade these husbands of the importance of granting women access to lands in their own names. The organization has not succeeded in preventing conflicts from arising within households due to access to land and women’s desire for greater independence. Changing mentalities takes a long time and perhaps the men will gradually come around to accepting the idea. However, at present it remains an important obstacle to FEMUPROCAN’s desire to grant rural women equality of access to land.

**Diversification and modernization of production**

However, access to land is not enough if the amount of income generated by the members from their production is insufficient to lift them and their families out of poverty. To try and improve the standard of living of their members FEMUPROCAN is attempting to facilitate the diversification and modernization of production, introducing new crops and farming techniques.

According to their 2008 report, out of a total of 2083 manzanas (approximately 3600 acres) worked by the members, 90.9% was devoted to the production of basic grains.\(^{41}\) Beans and corn comprised the vast majority of this figure. It appears, therefore, that FEMUPROCAN has so far struggled to persuade many of the members to diversify their production. One reason for this was simply that the inputs needed for the production of basic grains are much cheaper than other, potentially more profitable, crops such as tomatoes or onions. Valle explained that the cost of planting basic grains in the region was on the order of C$5,000 per manzana, including all the seed and

\(^{41}\) 1 manzana = 1.73 acres
inputs. One bag of improved tomato seeds (containing 10,000 seeds), by contrast, costs C$10,000 to C$10,500. For onions one can expect to spend from C$10,000 to C$15,000, depending on the variety. Not only do both of these crops require a higher initial investment, they also need a qualified workforce to work in the nursery and in the transplanting process. As the above figures clearly demonstrate, it should not be argued that people keep sowing corn and beans entirely for traditional reasons or because they do not want to diversify. FEMUPROCAN’s members are overwhelmingly smallholding women producers who do not have the capital necessary to invest in expensive new crops, especially when they have not grown them before and they require a high level of care and attention. The fact that prices of inputs and the cost of living had risen sharply in recent years in Nicaragua made it even more difficult for the members to diversify their production.

Despite these difficulties, with the support of FEMUPROCAN some of the cooperative members have managed to diversify their production, mainly moving into the cultivation of vegetables like tomatoes, cucumbers and sweet peppers on a rotational system. These new crops had allowed some members to substantially improve their economic situation and gain standing in their communities. Some had even made enough money to finance the purchase of various luxury items and household appliances. Others were not so lucky, and had found it difficult to care for the vegetables properly. Some had lost their crops to pests and/or disease, whereas other members mentioned that they had been forced to sell their products at a low price or risk them spoiling. The women knew how to store basic grains, but lacked knowledge of appropriate techniques for dealing with the more perishable vegetables.
FEMUPROCAN, along with VECO M.A., are currently in the process of training the women who grow vegetables how to process them and make new products. It is hoped that these new items, such as tomato chutney, will have both a longer shelf-life and higher selling price than the unprocessed vegetables.

Essential to the production of these vegetables is a reliable supply of water. However, many of FEMUPROCAN’s cooperatives are located in dry regions near to Ciudad Darío, Terrabona, San Francisco Libre and Nandaime. In these areas the families depend on the winter rains in order to farm and support their families. They were thus only able to cultivate crops for part of the year, leaving an epoca muerta or dead season in the summer. Poverty and the rising costs of living, as well as the scaling back of government support after 1990, have forced many people from these communities to migrate to Costa Rica, or other parts of Nicaragua, in search of seasonal employment. Often only one or two members of the family might migrate, and the women in FEMUPROCAN were keen to find alternatives that would allow them to keep their families together.

For these reasons, FEMUPROCAN devised a drip watering system that could be used in these arid areas in the summer months. Martha Valle first tested it out on her own farm and then, encouraged by the results, FEMUPROCAN formulated a proposal with El Centro Cooperativo Sueco for the implementation of a pilot project. Four years after its initiation, the project had been gradually expanded to benefit more members, with a total of around forty watering systems installed. By 2008, this had increased to 63, covering a total of 252 manzanas, with an average of 4 manzanas per watering system. This number, however, does not capture the number of people who have
benefitted from these 63 systems. Mercedes, a FEMUPROCAN member from near Terrabona, described how the motors from the watering systems were shared by the entire community: “One person will have their turn at watering during the night, another begins in the morning and we take it in turns like this. In our community there is only one motor and we share it between about ten families.”

Such intensive use of the motors in these remote communities sometimes led to mechanical failures. The women described how, in the case of breakdown, they were still much better off being affiliated to FEMUPROCAN than they had been previously, as the organization responded quickly and efficiently to their problems:

Listen, the main achievement of being organized has been, for me, to be able to manage resources and find responses to the needs that I had. For example, our motor broke down right when we had our nurseries all ready [to transplant the crops]. So I rushed to a meeting and Martha Valle said to me, “look, if you can find a guarantor, or a farmer to back you up the motor can be taken away to be fixed tomorrow.” So I went to my father-in-law’s house and he agreed to support me and gave me his signature. The very next day they took the motor away for repairs. It was all very quick without many obstacles. This is a benefit of being organized, because if I hadn’t been I wouldn’t have been able to solve my production problem…also if I had gone to a bank I would have waited two or three months, or who knows how long but FEMUPROCAN resolved my problem practically overnight.

Through this project, FEMUPROCAN provides the members with financing for fertilizers, seeds and motors at lower interest rates than many microfinance organizations. Thus the organization hopes to be able to recoup its initial investment, plus some interest, to make the project financially self-sustainable and enable them to keep expanding its scope. At the time of my visit, many of the beneficiaries were still in

42 Mercedes, FEMUPROCAN cooperative member, Terrabona, July 22, 2009

43 Mirna Gonzales Mairena, Vice President of the Board of Directors of the Cooperative Rafaela Herrera, Terrabona, from transcripts of interviews carried out by FEMUPROCAN in August of 2008 kept in the Managua headquarters of FEMUPROCAN.
debt but were confident of their ability to repay in the near future. Others have been somewhat more successful:

I know members who didn’t have anything. Now they even have Nintendos in their houses, they have televisions. Some have telephones, others have fixed up their houses. And this has been because with the watering systems they have achieved all this. They sell well, although sometimes they lose money, but only sometimes – the majority earn money.⁴⁴

A member sowed one manzana of mint and cilantro and it sold for C$100,000.⁴⁵ With that they paid off the credit and bought another little farm for their children and constructed another watering system with the money that was left. Today the family is involved in the commercialization of these nontraditional products. (Agurto and Guido 2007)

Overall, it seems that while not all of the participants enjoyed this level of success, the vast majority were benefitting from the watering systems, which enabled them to sow all year round. They were able to demand higher prices for products like tomatoes and onions, provide year-round employment for their families and thus help to halt the disintegration of families due to migration. This project has managed to win a significant amount of attention in Nicaragua, and in March of this year (2010) featured in a television news report shown on the national Nicaraguan TV Channel Canal 2.

But cash crop production is not the only way FEMUPROCAN would like its members to diversify. The organization has also encouraged the women to think about planting more varieties of foods for household consumption, such as avocado and lemon trees, thereby increasing their families’ food security and reducing their vulnerability in times of crisis. Planting more of these trees had also encouraged the women to take better care of their homes and the surroundings and many of the interviewees expressed pride in how beautiful their homes now looked. They were

⁴⁴ Mercedes, FEMUPROCAN cooperative member, Terrabona, July 22, 2009.
⁴⁵ Approximately $4,737 at March 2010 prices.
learning how to cultivate new foods for their families, some of which, like the sweet potato, were still relatively unknown in their communities. Thus, some of the women were gaining a reputation as innovators, of which they were rightfully proud.

For many of the people I interviewed, this type of diversification for household consumption was considered as, if not more, important than diversification for the market. This demonstrates that, in many cases, the health and well-being of their families remains FEMUPROCAN’s members’ first priority, over and above discussions of profits and markets: “[diversification] is, above all, about diversifying a parcel in order to produce food to sustain your family. For the people who are growing vegetables they sell half, but they keep the rest for their children’s consumption.”

It seems clear that FEMUPROCAN’s attempts to diversify are bearing some fruit, especially for the members benefiting from the watering systems project. These benefits are helping to keep their families together, and improving their nutrition and overall quality of life. Watering systems and diversification have reduced women’s vulnerability to bad weather and greater food self-sufficiency has diminished the impact of economic crises on the members’ abilities to feed their families. The cooperatives are demonstrating to Nicaragua that women are capable of producing a wide variety of traditional and non-traditional crops and incorporating new farming techniques.

On the other hand, FEMUPROCAN does not appear to have successfully expanded the opportunities to participate in projects such as those mentioned above to all of its members. The watering systems benefit only a small percentage of the organization’s total membership and FEMUPROCAN does not have the financial

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46 María, FEMUPROCAN cooperative member, Terrabona, July 21, 2009
resources to provide low interest credit to all of its members. The vast majority of the women at the grassroots are too poor to afford the inputs required for them to experiment with new crops. This helps to explain why, in 2008, 90% of FEMUPROCAN’s production was still devoted to the cultivation of basic grains. It seems fair to say that those few members of FEMUPROCAN who had managed to diversify their production had met with considerable success. However, for the vast majority FEMUPROCAN is not succeeding in its objective to diversify and modernize production.

**Financing of productive activities**

As discussed above, FEMUPROCAN recognizes that having access to land, training and information about new production techniques means little if the members cannot get financing to put this knowledge and these skills into practice. As poor, rural women, many of whom did not own their own land, FEMUPROCAN’s members find it difficult to get credit, especially from traditional banks: “The banks aren’t giving us credit perhaps because they are worried that we will not pay the money back.”

Many of the loans they were able to access had extremely high interest rates which members might struggle to repay. Considering the fact that the majority of FEMUPROCAN members’ projects do not generate large profits, the benefits of taking out a high interest loan seem even more questionable. One of FEMUPROCAN’s objectives is to increase their members’ access to various sources of funding. They have set up their own credit window and provide financing for the members selected to participate in the watering systems project, as well as for other inputs, seed and

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47 Adela, President of a FEMUPROCAN Cooperative in Rio Blanco, Managua, July 15, 2009.
agricultural equipment. In 2008, for example, 30 women from Río Blanco were able to benefit from the establishment of a credit fund in their area.

All of this does not mean that FEMUPROCAN seeks to encourage its members to take out loans without careful consideration of the costs involved and prospects for repayment. The training workshops on feasibility studies and creating business networks aim to teach the women how to calculate whether a potential venture will likely be profitable or not, and the national leadership urge caution before taking out expensive microfinance loans, especially at the beginning of a venture. However, they do not dismiss all microfinance organizations, and recognize that for many of their members, microfinance may well be the only option open to them. FEMUPROCAN has thus sought to train its members on how to manage credit, in coordination with a North American faith-based organization called Red Arco Iris, or Rainbow Network.

Despite their efforts, many of FEMUPROCAN’s members still cited a lack of access to credit and financing as one of the most serious problems they faced, and as a weakness of the organization as a whole. Many cooperatives had not managed to set up their own credit funds within the cooperative and this meant that the members had to waste considerable time going from institution to institution, bank to bank, looking for credit. It also limited their freedom to define their own priorities for financing, as only those initiatives with prior approval from the lending organization were able to proceed. With a fund within the cooperative it would be the members themselves who participated in the decisions about how to allocate credit, based on their knowledge of one another and assessment of their most pressing needs at the time. I found little evidence that FEMUPROCAN had been able to grant their members greater access to
credit on a large scale, with some women even reporting that it was now more difficult to find credit than it had been a few years ago.

This situation had been exacerbated by the international economic crisis, which Martha Valle blamed for the tightening up and/or closing off of avenues of credit previously available to the members:

We have a situation in which bank policy has focused almost entirely on recuperation [of money owed] and the restriction of credit lines and policies, principally in our sector…this area [of credit] is not open because with the worldwide movement of the economic recession the banks immediately closed these credit lines and began a new policy, which is the policy of recuperating money owed to them.  

It seems apparent that although FEMUPROCAN’s credit program does provide quick and much needed assistance to a very small number of their members, it is still very much in its infancy, and the vast majority of women affiliated with the organization have not been able to access financing in this way. Poor, rural women still face many obstacles in accessing sources of credit, and the international economic crisis appears to be making things worse. Some members had managed to take out loans, the vast majority of which were with microfinance institutions. Many of these institutions charged high interest rates and were relatively inflexible in their terms. However, this may be the only viable option for many of FEMUPROCAN’s members if they wish to implement projects of their own, modernize and diversify their production, or set up processing enterprises, which they are encouraged to do by FEMUPROCAN. To date FEMUPROCAN has only achieved very limited success in their objective of increasing their members’ access to sources of financing for their projects.

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48 Martha Valle, President of FEMUPROCAN, Managua, August 3rd, 2009.
Marketing and commercialization

One of FEMUPROCAN’s current priorities is to develop the ability of their members to effectively market their products and train them how to add value or ensure that they receive the best possible price. The national leadership is struggling to change the mentalities of the women at the grassroots – from that of producers towards that of businesswomen. Rocha informed me that commercialization represented a bottleneck in the organization at present because generally, in Nicaragua, “business” and the large-scale sale of products was seen as a man’s responsibility, or for women in other sectors. The women in FEMUPROCAN have to learn how to sell their goods and develop the skills to do so with confidence.

Despite the success of the watering systems described above in enabling members to diversify their production and adopt specialized agricultural techniques, participants had sometimes struggled to find a buyer for their produce and had been forced to sell at a low price or risk spoiling their crops. In the light of this and other similar experiences, FEMUPROCAN realized that, in order for the women to make real profits and become less dependent on the national organization they would have to pay more attention to marketing. El Centro Cooperativo Sueco agreed, and in 2006 they shifted their support from the development of production systems to “support initiatives for the commercialization of production, how to organize this and how to create infrastructure for commercialization.” They provided a mixture of training workshops and technical assistance, including market studies, internal markets and the formulation of commercialization networks. These networks were designed to eliminate intermediary merchants and allow the women to sell their production directly, and thus obtain a larger
profit. This initial phase of CCS’s support was due to end in 2009, and the organization was preparing for the next phase of their cooperation with FEMUPROCAN.

Thanks to assistance from CCS and several other organizations FEMUPROCAN was able to build the basic structure for their roadside market, located near Ciudad Darío. In addition to a small stall displaying a selection of soft drinks and products made by FEMUPROCAN members the roadside market consists of a number of different buildings set in grounds planted with flowers and trees by FEMUPROCAN’s national leadership. Many of the training workshops for the members in the Darío area are held there and FEMUPROCAN employs a recent economics graduate, Mayli, to staff the small office and carry out various monitoring activities with the women at the grassroots. A small wind generator provides power and everything on the site is grown using organic methods. Valle informed me that she wanted to demonstrate that it is possible to produce good crops and healthy plants organically and also to educate the members about the need to plant flowers, to make more of an effort to make their houses and farms pleasant places to live. She wanted them to take pride in their houses and their lands but explained that it was a long and difficult process to change people’s mentalities.

The primary function of the market is supposed to be to provide the women with a place to sell their products. Little by little FEMUPROCAN is improving the buildings, which remain very basic at present. Martha Valle also has visions that one day in the future they will be able to construct a roadside restaurant and small cabins for visiting delegations to stay in. In the more immediate future FEMUPROCAN is seeking to transform two of the modules into a laboratory for processing and packaging goods.
CCS has promised to continue their support, but, at the time of my visit, FEMUPROCAN was struggling to find even half of the money they needed in order to equip the laboratory properly. They were thus proceeding piece-meal as best they could.

When I visited in July and August 2009, however, one thing seemed clear – the members were not using the roadside market to sell their goods. There were a few bottles of honey and wine produced by the women, but very little in the way of vegetables or other fresh produce on offer. The one little stall selling these goods was staffed by the caretaker of the site and his son, and business appeared to be very slow. My interviews with the women confirmed these suspicions, as did representatives from both Oxfam Canada and VECO MA. The vast majority of members still sell their goods to intermediary merchants who arrive in trucks from nearby urban centers to buy from the women at their farms. They explained that these merchants were able to buy all of their production at once and pay for it immediately. The roadside market did not have the resources to be able to pay the women for large quantities up front and lacked adequate storage facilities to prevent the products from spoiling before they were sold.

Although the middlemen were able to provide the women with much needed instant cash for their products, they also were able to make significant profits. Many merchants took advantage of the women’s remote locations, lack of transport, lack of storage facilities, and lack of knowledge about commercialization and marketing to buy the products for the lowest possible price before selling them at much higher prices in the markets of Managua and Sébaco. What particularly angered FEMUPROCAN’s members was the tendency for some of these merchants to buy up large quantities of produce when prices are cheap, sometimes to sell in neighboring countries for higher
prices. Then, during times of scarcity in Nicaragua the merchants would return to sell the same products at much higher prices. Thus, due to a lack of storage facilities and knowledge of the market the women who produced the food in the first place would then have to pay a lot more in order to buy enough food for them and their family to survive. Especially with some of the vegetables grown by members with watering systems the women had to find a buyer quickly, due to the perishable nature of the product and were sometimes forced to sell at very low prices.

FEMUPROCAN aims to eliminate many of these intermediary merchants and train their members in marketing techniques. The national leadership emphasized that, in order to make a profit, the members had to change their mentalities. There was a tendency for the women to concentrate entirely on production before considering where they were going to sell it. FEMUPROCAN trains its members to have a client agree in advance whenever possible and to carefully examine the small details of any agreements they make. Through the planning system coordinated by the national organization, but carried out in each cooperative, FEMUPROCAN is trying to create a system in which “production is staggered to come on to the market at different times to ensure that although there are always products on the market there is never an overabundance of one thing, which enables us to manage and predict prices more effectively.” 49

The national organization is attempting to convince its members of the benefits of selling collectively, via their cooperatives, instead of on an individual basis. They pointed out that not only would this allow the cooperative to generate money for use on

49 Denis Medina, Centro Cooperativo Sueco, Managua, August 1, 2009.
future projects or initiatives but also that many clients needed large quantities of a
product or a guaranteed supply over a specific period of time. It was much easier for a
cooperative to meet these requirements than an individual, especially considering the
small size of most of the members’ plots.

The cooperatives could also carry out quality control and ensure that hygiene and
food safety standards required to sell products in supermarkets were upheld by the
members. FEMUPROCAN, with support from VECO MA and PECOSOL (The Regional
Program for Economic Solidarity in Central America), has recently begun to train its
members in these regulations and packaging processes.⁵⁰ The business networks
currently being developed by FEMUPROCAN are designed to focus on the production
of just one particular type of product and often have fewer members than the
cooperatives. Certain of these networks have been selected as pilot schemes for the
production of a variety of fruit jellies and preserves, and members in San Francisco
Libre secured financing for a mill to produce pinolillo and other cereal products.⁵¹ As
with any new venture, there were initial teething problems - the lids of some products
were not properly sealed, causing the food inside the containers to spoil, and it took
time before the women were familiar with all of the requirements – but the women were
keen to learn and understood the importance of this type of controls. They were
beginning to express a greater sense of pride and satisfaction in the high quality of their
products, and this pride made them more rigorous in their selection and presentation of
goods for the market. These standards, processing and packaging techniques not only

⁵⁰ PECOSOL is comprised of an alliance between organizations of small producers from Central America
and organizations dedicated to processing and commercialization.

⁵¹ Pinolillo is a typical Nicaraguan drink made from ground toasted corn, cinnamon and cacao. The
powder is normally sweetened with sugar and mixed with either water or milk.
improved the quality of the products sold by the members but also added value, ensuring that they were able to command higher prices for their goods. In this way, FEMUPROCAN is preparing its members to sell their goods directly, not only to local stores or markets, but to supermarkets and bigger clients, who were more demanding and set higher standards.

The work appears to be paying off. During my time in Managua FEMUPROCAN, assisted by VECO MA, submitted a proposal to Walmart. To their considerable surprise, the supermarket chain (represented by Supermercados Palí and La Unión in Nicaragua) agreed to meet with the women and requested a sample of FEMUPROCAN's produce. After several rounds of negotiations FEMUPROCAN and Walmart appeared close to agreeing on a pilot project. If everything went well then this pilot project would gradually be expanded and FEMUPROCAN would become a regular supplier to the supermarket chain. As exciting as this development was for the national team, they were determined not to forget what they had learned about commercialization and marketing. They would start small and set feasible goals rather than trying to do too much too quickly. Rocha recognized that whilst this presented FEMUPROCAN with a fantastic opportunity, it also represented a risk. The large supermarket chains had a reputation for failing to pay the producers on time, something that represented a real concern for an organization like FEMUPROCAN that had precious few economic resources to begin with.

This caution did not mean that FEMUPROCAN did not have big ambitions concerning commercialization. The national team explained that they hoped that one day they would have developed sufficient capacity within their membership to begin exporting their products to neighboring countries and, perhaps, one day even to the
United States: “We do not aspire to remain solely at the level of the local or intermediary market, but rather we aspire that the women’s products find a place at the national level, at the level of the supermarkets and, why not, at the Central American level. At least we want to be able to sell processed products in Central American and international markets.” However, at present, this international trade still seems some way off and would require even stricter quality control and compliance with further hygiene and food safety controls.

The members participating in the training course on business networks were guided through each stage of the process by FEMUPROCAN. They were encouraged not to rush through the steps, but to take time to build a solid base for the network and allow the members to get to know and trust one another before attempting to set up an enterprise together. Diaz informed me that many of the cooperatives had not spent sufficient time on building their organization before they launched into various initiatives. She saw this as a major reason for some of the problems they subsequently encountered. This was a fairly new initiative for FEMUPROCAN, and they were still in the process of training the first round of promotoras. Many of the networks were in the very early stages of development, so it remains to be seen whether this represents a more successful strategy for the commercialization and marketing of production.

To conclude, FEMUPROCAN, in my opinion, is taking the first steps towards a new phase in its development that focuses on the ability of its members to sell, process, and package their products. So far progress on this front has been insufficient and commercialization represents an important weakness in the organization today. The

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52 Blanca Lidia Torres, Director of FEMUPROCAN’s System of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, Managua, August 3, 2009
roadside market is clearly not yet functioning as it should, and most members still sell their produce individually, via intermediary merchants. However, there are signs that demonstrate that FEMUPROCAN’s current focus on commercialization and marketing may pay off in the future, such as the agreements with Walmart and the adoption of new products and processing techniques. This emphasis on commercialization, encouraging individual cooperatives to become less dependent on the national organization, and greater integration into the market economy is likely a consequence of the shift to neoliberal policies around the world and in Nicaragua since the 1990s and a reflection of the dominance of market-oriented discourses and microfinance projects in much mainstream development thinking at the moment.

**Influencing the Processes of Promotion and Formulation of Policies Related to the Countryside and Women Producers?**

**Dissemination of information and media strategy**

FEMUPROCAN does not seem to have been very successful in obtaining media coverage for their events or demands. This may be due to the fact that, as yet, they have not developed a media strategy or paid a great deal of attention to this aspect of the organization. They have identified this as an area requiring improvement in the future and Oxfam Canada is currently providing them with assistance in formulating their media strategy. Morena Diaz is the member of the national team responsible for FEMUPROCAN’s public relations, such as they are, and Ericka Sobalvarno maintains the organization’s web page. When I asked Morena about the reasons behind the lack of newspaper coverage of FEMUPROCAN she replied that it was true that they had little contact with the media. This was partly due to a lack of financial resources. Diaz explained that the main problem was that they had found that organizations had to pay
journalists to attend meetings if they wanted to get publicity for them, and that FEMUPROCAN did not have sufficient funds to be able to do this. The journalists in Nicaragua, she said, tend to write in favor of whoever was paying them.

FEMUPROCAN did not seem to be actively pursuing other avenues for raising their media profile. They do have a webpage, created with the help of Oxfam Canada, which appears to function well and gives a basic introduction to the organization. However it is not updated very often (partly because Ericka is kept busy with her other responsibilities as the person in control of FEMUPROCAN’s finances) and could perhaps benefit from being translated into English, (for the benefit of potential international NGO partners in the future). At present, FEMUPROCAN has not explored the possibilities of making contacts online, through social networking websites, for example, which again would perhaps help to build their international profile (despite the fact that some of the national team have individual Facebook profiles). A simple web search for the organization brings up their website, a few articles from the Nicaraguan press (mainly from El Nuevo Diario and El Observador Económico), and a video diary and report from a North American women’s organization whose president visited FEMUPROCAN to write an article on what it is like to live on less than a dollar a day.

Most of the pieces that have been published, however, concern the achievements of FEMUPROCAN in providing their members with a way out of poverty and thus provide valuable positive publicity for the organization. Some others focus on the difficulties faced by FEMUPROCAN’s members in their struggle for greater participation in the economic and social affairs of the country. For example, in an article from 2006 that appeared in El Nuevo Diario William Briones explains how FEMUPROCAN and
various other organizations had invited the presidential candidates to a meeting on International Rural Women’s Day to put forward a platform for action. However, none of the candidates attended the event. Only two representatives, both women, from the main two parties (the FSLN and PLC) actually showed up. The candidates for the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS), the Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance (ALN) and Alternative for Change not only failed to attend, but they didn’t bother to send any delegate in their place (Briones 2006). FEMUPROCAN may hope that this kind of article will shame policy makers into taking action to meet their demands and convince them to attend similar events in the future for fear of further bad publicity.

The organization has also published a series of reports to coincide with their annual anniversary, and a detailed study of the organization carried out in 2006 under the name “FEMUPROCAN: A Life of Stories, Struggles and Challenges.” These publications are primarily intended for internal use and not for public consumption. They help to disseminate information to the members of the organization and to NGO partners, but do little to raise FEMUPROCAN’s public profile.

In addition to these self-published titles, FEMUPROCAN has been featured in a few academic publications available in the United States, most notably in Deere and Royce’s 2009 volume on rural social movements in Latin America. This collection of case studies came out of a conference held at the University of Florida in 2006 and combines chapters written by scholars with those written by social movement leaders. Martha Valle contributed a brief chapter summarizing the goals, history, and achievements of FEMUPROCAN, potentially bringing the organization to the attention of scholars of social movements throughout Latin America. Not only does this perhaps
increase their chances of featuring in academic research projects in the future, but it grants FEMUPROCAN a significant level of recognition and legitimacy as an important social movement organization.

At present FEMUPROCAN is much more successful in disseminating information internally than creating and maintaining the organization’s public profile in Nicaragua. None of the people I met in Managua who were not directly involved in working with rural women had heard of the FEMUPROCAN, let alone knew anything about the goals of the organization. It will be difficult for FEMUPROCAN to gain high levels of public recognition and media coverage without spending significant amounts of money. However, the formulation of a detailed media strategy, with Oxfam Canada’s assistance, may help them to identify less costly ways of publicizing the organization and its objectives. Since my visit there have been some initial signs that this new media strategy may well be bearing fruit as FEMUPROCAN’s watering systems project recently featured as the subject of a television news report by the Nicaraguan national TV channel, Canal 2. FEMUPROCAN has informed me that, in addition, it is actively seeking to improve its coverage in the local media and encouraging the members to publicize their events and successes at the local and regional level.

**Lobbying and advocacy**

Lobbying and advocacy work, vital for FEMUPROCAN to be able to achieve their aim of influencing policy makers and public opinion, has only relatively recently begun to receive the attention it deserves within the organization. A UNIFEM report published in 2007 reported that “this is the component on which they have done least work until last year [2006] when they began a training program with the objective of forming a network of lobbying promotoras” (UNIFEM Central America 2007). Nevertheless a lack of formal
initiatives regarding advocacy work among their members does not mean that FEMUPROCAN has not managed to lobby successfully on behalf of their members at various times. Opinion seemed to be divided about the level and success of FEMUPROCAN’s advocacy, with some commentators fairly dismissive (as in the UNIFEM report mentioned above) and others, such as Angela Rosa Acevedo, full of praise for the organization:

For me, their greatest strength is the capacity they have had to push forward proposals concerning rural women. As a consequence, many of their initiatives are discussed by those bodies in charge of formulating policy for rural women. It is a strength that they [FEMUPROCAN] exist because they are authorized to present the demands of rural women and small producers…they visibilize the needs of the women and put rural women’s needs on the public agenda…not all civil society organizations do this, or rather, everybody raises issues but regarding women’s needs they don’t do it with the same degree of clarity as FEMUPROCAN. 53

However, all commentators agreed that FEMUPROCAN has consistently worked for the recognition of the identity of its members as rural women producers. It has taken a lot of hard work for the members to recognize themselves as producers and proved even harder for FEMUPROCAN to persuade the general public in Nicaragua that women are producers and farmers in their own right:

In the beginning, for example, when there were debates and committees we presented ourselves as housewives, not as women producers. First we had to recognize this [that they were producers] ourselves and then we worked in order that others recognized us. But in addition to recognition we were striving for valuation, valuation of the work done by rural women producers and for the support she provides to the household economy, to the country’s economy that is currently invisible. Some of the most basic problems we face in our recognition of ourselves as women producers, and in society’s recognition of this identity are machismo and prejudices about women’s organizations. For belonging to a women’s organization you can

be categorized as any number of things, a feminist, a lesbian, a prostitute…\textsuperscript{54}

Some members have been bolder than others in affirming their identity and demanding recognition of their rightful place in society. These women have helped to break down taboos surrounding traditionally male activities (UNIFEM 2007). Many of the women are recognized as leaders in their communities and participate in the different local decision making and coordinating spaces. However, UNIFEM questioned how many of these women were given real decision making power.

These differences in opinion make it difficult to accurately assess FEMUPROCAN’s success in terms of lobbying and advocacy. A consideration of the linkages forged by FEMUPROCAN with other organizations may help to shed some light on the matter.

\textbf{Links with Other Organizations}

A vital component of social movement organizations is their coordination and cooperation with other participants in the same social movement. The national leadership of FEMUPROCAN has clearly recognized the importance of building linkages for the success of the organization. As Valle remarked to me “we can’t see ourselves as islands”\textsuperscript{55}. I was interested to find out about the type of bridges that FEMUPROCAN had been building and with whom they had chosen to coordinate. This section will investigate the types of linkages FEMUPROCAN has forged with women’s organizations, the cooperative movement and peasant organizations both in Nicaragua and abroad.

\textsuperscript{54} Blanca Lidia Torres, Director of FEMUPROCAN’s System of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, Managua, August 3, 2009.

\textsuperscript{55} Martha Valle. President of FEMUPROCAN. Managua, August 3\textsuperscript{rd}, 2009.
It is interesting to note that on FEMUPROCAN’s website there is no mention of the specific organizations with which they collaborate in any of these movements. By contrast, the NGO partners who finance the organization are clearly identified. The website of the MEC devotes an entire section to their regional links, with contact details for each of the organizations listed. In this respect the MEC seems to have developed much further than FEMUPROCAN.

**FEMUPROCAN and Women’s Organizations**

Despite FEMUPROCAN’s commitment to women’s rights and improving the position of rural women, they appear to have refrained from stating the organization’s official position on the more controversial topics tackled by the women’s organizations in Nicaragua. They do not define themselves as a feminist organization, even though some of the national leaders considered themselves to be feminists, and have shown little interest in cooperating with women’s organizations not directly related to the economic interests of FEMUPROCAN’s members. This may be related to the fragmentation of the women’s movements in recent years in Nicaragua, in which organizations, by focusing on the differences between women, have perhaps forgotten some of those things which they have in common. They have been reluctant to coordinate with one another in case the specific demands of their members are lost among the other demands of the movement. For example, in a conversation with Diaz, who is charge of FEMUPROCAN’s lobbying and advocacy activities, a fellow researcher studying poor women in Managua asked whether Diaz knew much about a couple of women’s organizations the researcher was interested in finding out more about. Diaz replied that she hadn’t heard of them and that really she knew nothing about the urban women’s movement.
This is not to say that FEMUPROCAN does not have any ties to the women’s movements, or that they will not develop these linkages further in the future. For example, during my time in Managua, the leadership received an invitation to meet with a feminist group from León to talk about possibilities for future collaboration. Unfortunately, the group had to cancel this meeting just before it was scheduled to take place and no alternative date was set. Nevertheless, this demonstrates that FEMUPROCAN is open to dialogue and possible cooperation with a variety of different types of women’s groups, including those who explicitly identify themselves as feminists. Whether this openness to dialogue will ever translate into agreements to cooperate, or whether FEMUPROCAN will ever begin to actively seek out these meetings instead of just receiving invitations, remains to be seen.

At present, FEMUPROCAN, represented by Blanca Lidia Torres, participates in the Women’s Economic Agenda (AGEM), organized by the United Nations Development Program. This program brings together government institutions and civil society organizations in order to facilitate dialogue and cooperation between the state and women’s organizations. AGEM trains the participants in gender analysis methods and is primarily concerned with strengthening women’s economic capacity. Their overall objective is stated as “to contribute to the reduction of gender inequality through the search for a development model based on people’s and society’s wellbeing, through the integration of social and political actions that promote the economic autonomy of women in the country” (PNUD Nicaragua). This space has allowed women from 14 different organizations, including FEMUPROCAN, MEC and the women’s section of UNAG, to share their experiences and learn from one another. The level of coordination
is such that the participants recently agreed upon and published a document entitled “The Coordinated Economic Agenda by Nicaraguan Women” (“La Agenda Económica Concertada desde las Mujeres Nicaragüenses). This sets out their analysis of the current situation of women in Nicaragua, and principal challenges that must be overcome by those seeking to establish gender equality in the country, as well as highlighting some of the initiatives already undertaken by the participating organizations. This is clear evidence of the construction of a shared set of beliefs, a necessary component of a social movement.

However, it was interesting to note that the head of UNDP’s gender program in Nicaragua, Maria Rosa Renzi, and the Coordinator for AGEM, Veronica Gutierrez, both seemed to feel that FEMUPROCAN could increase its participation in the women’s movement. They pointed out that FEMUPROCAN had not got involved spaces for the debate of issues such as abortion and reproductive health: “FEMUPROCAN have always restricted themselves as an organization to those rights directly related to women’s agricultural production and not participated as an organization in other campaigns associated with feminist movements” (Maria Rosa Renzi, Managua, July 15th, 2009).

The leadership of FEMUPROCAN freely admitted this, arguing that they encouraged their members to participate in a variety of organizations promoting women’s rights but on an individual basis. They felt that, as an organization with a relatively small national team, they had neither the time nor the resources to begin to tackle the entire range of issues debated by women’s movements in Nicaragua. Far better to concentrate on the area that they knew well than to attempt to cover everything
related to women’s rights. For this reason they have focused their efforts on creating alliances with other organizations representing rural women, the cooperative sector and women’s economic rights. They have not only sought out similar organizations and spaces for dialogue in Nicaragua, but also at a regional level, creating linkages with women’s groups from all over Central America.

At the international level FEMUPROCAN participates in the Women’s Forum for Central American Integration and in the Regional Rural Dialogue. They were supposed to send a representative to an intercontinental meeting of women’s organizations held in Quito, Ecuador. However, FEMUPROCAN was not able to finance the cost of the plane ticket. One of their NGO partners had offered them 800 dollars towards the price, but the women were shocked to discover that this would not even pay for 80% of the airfare, let alone provide for the expenses incurred in the trip. Valle pointed out that this was an illustration of why it was imperative that FEMUPROCAN become financially sustainable as lack of funds served to limit the links FEMUPROCAN could build on an international scale. Additionally, she explained that FEMUPROCAN had not yet developed an international advocacy plan, and that such a plan was urgently needed to prevent them from missing opportunities such as this in the future.

When I asked for the views of Oxfam Canada and Centro Cooperativo Sueco on the extent of FEMUPROCAN’s involvement in women’s movements in the country I received two very opposite answers. Oxfam Canada seemed to agree with the Maria Rosa Renzi’ s assessment that although FEMUPROCAN had successfully built relationships with a number of organizations, they had not really engaged with many of the issues of the broader women’s movement in Nicaragua. Oxfam believed that such
participation would not only increase the visibility of the organization on a national scale, but would also help to develop and strengthen the organization’s views on gender and feminism.

El Centro Cooperativo Sueco, by contrast, seemed overwhelmingly positive about FEMUPROCAN’s involvement in the women’s movement:

FEMUPROCAN pays attention to all types of women’s rights, their social, economic and political rights. They have built a lot of external relationships for this reason, to fight for women’s demands in other spaces. They are, for example, in a space called the Rural Women’s Coordinating Committee and the main focus of this committee is land, rural women’s right to land. They are fighting for this, they are proposing bills, they are organizing movements of women to fight for land, and they proposed a bill, which has already been taken up by the legislative assembly, arguing for the approval of a law concerning women’s access to land, with the proposal that the government create a land bank for women.\textsuperscript{56}

It is worth noting that, although Medina mentioned that he believed FEMUPROCAN was active in campaigning for all aspects of women’s rights, the example he gives is still related to women’s economic rights.

From my interviews, conversations and observations, it appeared that the level of FEMUPROCAN’s involvement in the women’s movement conformed more to the views expressed by Oxfam Canada and the women from AGEM. Although they have forged important linkages and actively participated in those areas of the women’s movement specifically fighting for rural women’s rights or for women’s economic rights at both a national and international level, they have, so far, not developed many relationships with organizations working on other areas of women’s rights. This reflects the fragmentation and lack of coordination that has characterized the women’s movement in Nicaragua in

\textsuperscript{56} Denis Medina, representative of CCS, Managua, August 1, 2009. The women’s land bank proposal was subsequently approved by the Nicaraguan Parliament in May 2010.
recent years. FEMUPROCAN appears to be aware of this weakness to some extent, and of the need to focus more attention on their advocacy and lobbying activities, both within Nicaragua and internationally. Hopefully this will translate into a greater effort to building sustained, meaningful relationships with groups from different branches of the women’s movements.

**FEMUPROCAN and Cooperative Organizations**

FEMUPROCAN has made perhaps most progress in building links with other organizations in the cooperative sector. Their position as the only all-women federation of agricultural cooperatives operating in Nicaragua has given them a high level of recognition within the cooperative movement and allowed them to assume a leading role in many coordinating bodies both nationally and regionally.

Martha Valle is currently the President of the National Council of Cooperatives (CONACOOP) and a member of FEMUPROCAN’s administrative council is on the board of directors of the Institute for Cooperative Development (INFOCOOP). These are the most important organizations in the cooperative sector in Nicaragua, and reflect the level of recognition FEMUPROCAN has achieved in this area.

Furthermore, they are currently discussing the possibility of forming a confederation of cooperative organizations to further increase their ability to lobby the government on behalf of the rural cooperative sector:

This would be another strength, if we form a confederation with other federations which allows us to put forward stronger proposals to government and civil society institutions. I think they would be stronger economically, socially and I would say politically as well. Why? Because your proposal is not the same when you have four thousand members as if you are talking about twenty thousand, forty thousand members – then your proposal would be more convincing. It is for this reason that we are
attempting to form a confederation between similar federations, which represent the farming sector.\textsuperscript{57}

Should this go ahead it will be the first confederation of cooperatives at a national level in Nicaragua. FEMUPROCAN’s inclusion in this body is seen as evidence of FEMUPROCAN’s strength in terms of their organization, production and advocacy work. Torres observed that, due to their status as the only all-women’s federation of cooperatives, they might well have been granted a place in the confederation anyway. However, she believes that the other organizations forming the confederation have recognized the achievements of FEMUPROCAN, and that this recognition will allow them to play a leading role in the new organization. One of the organizations in talks about forming the confederation is UNAG, FEMUPROCAN’s parent organization. Given the history of animosity between the two, I was interested to find out whether FEMUPROCAN was wary about cooperating with UNAG in this confederation. Diaz replied that the women of FEMUPROCAN felt that their work had achieved sufficient recognition for them to enter into the confederation as equal partners with UNAG, and that their relationship had now changed for the better:

Precisely because of our successes we have gained recognition, they respect us. That is to say our relationship is not the same as it was when we were within UNAG. Now we talk to one another as equals, I mean as organizations FEMUPROCAN and UNAG are on the same level. We each have our own proposals, our own work but now we can act together on some points, whilst respecting one another. The relationship has changed a great deal you understand because before they used to decide what they were going to do, and up to what point we could advance but now they don’t, now the relationship is more “cara a cara”, like face to face…no-one is in a position of subordination you understand?\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{57} Martha Valle, President of FEMUPROCAN, Managua, August 3rd, 2009.

\textsuperscript{58} Morena Diaz, head of training and advocacy in FEMUPROCAN, Managua, August 6\textsuperscript{th} 2009
On an international level as well FEMUPROCAN has been keen to participate in regional cooperative forums, coordinating with women’s cooperative organizations primarily from Central America but also some from Latin America. They are members of the Latin American Confederation of Cooperatives and Mutual Societies (COLACOT) and participate in the Central American Cooperative Roundtable.

Perhaps it is not surprising that FEMUPROCAN has, overall, developed many more linkages with the cooperative sector than with women’s movements. After all, cooperativism is listed as one of the key values of FEMUPROCAN, whereas the organization has remained silent on many issues. Cooperativism is also less controversial and has recently been less confrontational than some of the “riskier” issues tackled by women’s movements, such as abortion. Cooperativism still forms part of the FSLN’s ideology and the current administration looks much more kindly on the cooperative movement than they do on the “feminist troublemakers” active within the women’s movements. Furthermore, Martha Valle, Matilde Rocha and Morena Diaz all have long histories of organizing within the cooperative sector. This experience has given them much needed contacts, and helped them to win an impressive level of recognition within the sector. This recognition is perhaps not surprising when one remembers that they are the only all-women federation of farming cooperatives in the country. By contrast FEMUPROCAN is just one of many, many women’s organizations in the country, and it is consequently much harder to achieve this level of recognition within the women’s movements.

**FEMUPROCAN and Peasant/Rural Organizations**

However, these contacts and experiences within rural and peasant organizations such as UNAG does not seem to have translated into FEMUPROCAN’s involvement in
international mixed-sex peasant organizations. They appear to have largely limited their participation to spaces for rural women’s movements. Perhaps this could be attributed to a fear that women’s interests would not be given sufficient attention in mixed sex movements, but this does not seem to have affected their involvement in the cooperative sector, as discussed above. I was curious to find out why FEMUPROCAN had not joined Via Campesina or CLOC (The Latin American Coordinator of Rural Organizations), the two largest peasant organizations operating in Latin America (and, in the case of Via Campesina, one of the world’s largest peasant organizations).

Valle responded by saying that she had helped to found Via Campesina in 1993 when she was still in the women’s section of UNAG. She had participated in the organization in its early years but when FEMUPROCAN separated from UNAG it had taken them time to become consolidated as an organization, and strengthening the organization formed their first priority. They were thus not ready to enter into Via Campesina at that point. Since then FEMUPROCAN has been in regular contact with Via Campesina and the two organizations have kept the channels of communication open. However FEMUPROCAN still has not become a full member of the organization. The members of the national leadership did not rule this out for the future, explaining that one of their immediate priorities for the organization today was precisely the development of an international advocacy strategy and the creation of linkages with influential movements throughout the region. They had prioritized the cooperative sector as this coincided most closely with the particular goals and beliefs of FEMUPROCAN but they were not opposed to the idea of participating in organizations such as Via Campesina, who represent a wider range of rural people. Given their limited human
and financial resources, they explained that it had not been possible for FEMUPROCAN to explore all the possibilities for cooperation on an international level. However they hoped to develop further relationships internationally in the upcoming years.

**FEMUPROCAN and Linkages with Other Organizations**

Many of the grassroots members of FEMUPROCAN collaborated with, or were also members of, other organizations working in their communities. In the area of health, in particular, Torres informed me that there was a high degree of cooperation between FEMUPROCAN’s members and the health *promotoras* within the community. Some of these *promotoras* are employed by the Nicaraguan government, whereas others are employed by NGOs. Individual cooperatives affiliated to FEMUPROCAN have forged alliances with representatives of organizations such as IXCHEN, a Nicaraguan NGO that deals with issues related to women’s sexual and reproductive health, and international NGOs implementing projects within their communities. Although FEMUPROCAN is not a religious organization, many of the members at the grassroots coordinate with their local church organizations on a range of different topics. Perhaps these linkages with church-based groups may explain some of FEMUPROCAN’s reluctance to take a stand, as an organization, on thorny issues such as abortion, for it is not clear where the women’s loyalties would lie if these church organizations and FEMUPROCAN disagreed about an important issue.

The key to understanding why FEMUPROCAN has chosen to participate in some movements and spaces over others is that FEMUPROCAN considers that the selected movements share some of the same beliefs or objectives as them, as Torres explained to me: “FEMUPROCAN participates in the spaces with which we feel we can identify and in which we feel that the elements and “*puntos de agenda*” concerning rural
women are articulated and, above all, when we feel that there is an opening for the priorities of women producers to be heard.”

Additionally, they have developed much stronger linkages to those movements directly related to their previous organizing work in the Women’s Section in UNAG, probably due to their contacts, experience and recognition built up over their time within the mixed sex organization.

This explains why FEMUPROCAN appears to have focused primarily on the cooperative movement and rural women’s movements (particularly those concerned with rural women’s economic rights) and have not forged as many strong alliances as an organization with women’s movements outside of their economic sector. This does not seem to concern the national leadership too much at present, as they don’t appear to feel that the organization can identify with some of the more radical feminist groups in Nicaragua. Nonetheless, there are signs that they are willing to listen to what some of these women’s organizations have to say, with a view to possible collaboration in the future. It is my opinion that such collaboration could potentially prove very beneficial to both sides and could help to make FEMUPROCAN a more successful organization overall.

59 Blanca Lidia Torres, Director of FEMUPROCAN’s System of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, Managua, August 3, 2009
Figure 6-1. The problem of identifying social movement outcomes

A = Effects of movement actions that bear directly on movement claims
B = Joint effects of movement actions and outside influences that bear directly on movement claims
C = Effects of outside influences (but not of movement actions) that bear directly on movement claims
D = Joint effects of movement actions and outside influences that don’t bear directly on movement claims

Source: Tilly (1998)
CHAPTER 7
ACCEPTANCE

In this chapter I analyze the extent to which FEMUPROCAN has been accepted as a legitimate representative of rural women producers in Nicaragua. Gamson’s measure of acceptance has four main elements: consultation, negotiation, recognition and inclusion. I take each one of these components in turn to discuss the level of FEMUPROCAN’s acceptance by public policy makers, civil society organizations and the general public in Nicaragua.

Consultation

This section examines the extent to which the “movement antagonists,” in this case government policy makers and mainstream public opinion in Nicaragua, instigate consultations with FEMUPROCAN in a manner that treats the organization as a legitimate spokesperson for rural women producers.

At the local level, Diaz argued that, partly as a result of their advocacy work, FEMUPROCAN members were regularly consulted by municipal governments: “The women have had a lot of recognition in different departments [of the country]…at a local level they are lobbying a lot. The mayor’s offices call them in order to define various proposals, including those concerning budgeting.”¹ My interviews backed this up and suggested that FEMUPROCAN’s members were consulted on a wide variety of topics by local governments and by other residents in their communities: “I am always doing something, I am invited to meetings and many different events. I have a position of

¹ Morena Díaz, head of training and advocacy in FEMUPROCAN, Managua, August 6th 2009
responsibility within the community and am always invited to workshops and to share my views and my knowledge.”

Representatives of national government institutions working at the local level, such as technicians and extension workers from INTA and MAGFOR have consulted FEMUPROCAN’s members and placed them in charge of allocating and distributing seed in their communities:

They didn’t want anyone else to distribute it but rather they came looking for me so that I could do it. So I could distribute the seed among my people...so we formed a team and with the support of INTA we distributed the seed through the cooperative and the unions of cooperatives.3

INTA came to find me and we had a meeting. They are supporting the cooperatives with training sessions and in setting up kitchen gardens...they already distributed the seeds for the gardens to around twenty cooperative members...but what I mean to say is that they look to us to coordinate matters. We are allowed to select people [for programs or assistance]. They recognize that women want to work and they meet with the presidents [of the cooperatives] who are responsible for selecting the participants.4

As the only all women cooperative organization operating at a national level in Nicaragua, FEMUPROCAN has also been consulted on numerous occasions by national government institutions, an achievement recognized by Oxfam Canada.

Negotiation

The main questions to be answered here concern whether negotiations are undertaken over a sustained period of time and demonstrate that the Nicaraguan government and general public are dealing with FEMUPROCAN’s negotiators as representatives of rural women producers.

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2 Mercedes, FEMUPROCAN cooperative member, Terrabona, July 22, 2009.

3 Leticia, President of a FEMUPROCAN cooperative, Terrabona, July 21, 2009.

4 Adela, President of a FEMUPROCAN Cooperative in Rio Blanco, Managua, July 15, 2009.
As Angela Rosa Acevedo asserted, FEMUPROCAN’s leaders, and many of the members at the lower rungs of the organization, have been fighting for women’s rights for years. Some of them had begun their advocacy and lobbying activities before FEMUPROCAN was even founded, when they were still within the women’s secretariat of UNAG. This long history of political action has given them and FEMUPROCAN significant legitimacy as negotiators for the rights of rural women producers. They have consistently engaged policy makers in debates over proposals affecting rural women, with the result that some of their demands were included in laws discussed by the national assembly.

Denis Medina, from CCS, was also keen to emphasize the sustained nature of FEMUPROCAN’S lobbying activities as a particularly important strength of the organization: “Another strength that seems important to me is that they carry out political advocacy work, always looking for support to bring their membership benefits from public policies, to obtain resources to support the production of their members…they are always searching…lobbying or participating in institutional negotiations.”

At a local level there was evidence that FEMUPROCAN’s members were actively negotiating with the authorities, pledging their support in return for formal recognition:

We will support our mayor, the teacher Daniela Martinez, and her plan together with her councilors, but our support requires:

1- That we are seen as an organization, since we are a legally constituted trade association with 12 cooperatives and two unions of cooperatives

2- That we are assigned a quota as an organization under the expansion of the Bono Productivo

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5 Denis Medina, representative of CCS, Managua, August 1, 2009
3- That we are included in the programs and projects that come to the municipality.\(^6\)

With regard to negotiations with the other primary movement antagonist, that is, mainstream public opinion, Torres asserted that in FEMUPROCAN “we always have to keep demonstrating, you know, we live in permanent demonstration of the fact that yes we can do things, yes, we are capable of doing things. That we deserve these rights and this respect whereas men do not have to do this. We, the women, have to continually do battle with society in this sense, for recognition.”\(^7\) Thus each individual member of FEMUPROCAN is involved in day-to-day negotiations with the rest of society, in order for the contributions of rural women to Nicaragua’s economic and social life to gain the recognition and the acceptance they deserve.

### Recognition

Formal recognition would be signified by an explicit recognition on the part of the government and/or the public that FEMUPROCAN is a legitimate spokesperson for rural women. In some respects, the government and the general public have little choice but to recognize FEMUPROCAN, given that there are no other organizations comprised entirely of rural women producers at the national level. There are, of course, other organizations with large numbers of rural women members, such as UNAG. However, as Oxfam Canada pointed out, it is not the same to say you are dealing with a mixed sex organization as it is to work with an all-women organization.

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\(^6\) From a speech given in the town of Terrabona on October 30th 2008. Signed by a number of FEMUPROCAN Presidents and representatives from the Unions of Cooperatives.

\(^7\) Blanca Lidia Torres, Director of FEMUPROCAN’s System of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, Managua, August 3, 2009.
FEMUPROCAN enjoys high levels of formal recognition with respect to its legality as an organization, and the fact that all of the base level cooperatives have documents to show they have been legally recognized and registered by the government, or are in the process of obtaining this.

With respect to the general public it seems that whereas FEMUPROCAN enjoys a high level of recognition within the small communities in which they work, the vast majority of the Nicaraguan public outside of these areas have not heard of the organization, much less formally recognized it as a spokesperson for rural women. For many not involved in the cooperative sector UNAG still enjoys much higher levels of recognition and legitimacy to speak for rural women. Despite my attempts to interview representatives from a number of other women’s organizations that work with rural women I was unable to meet with many members of other women’s organizations and so am unable to gauge the level of recognition FEMUPROCAN enjoys within the women’s movements. However, the women I did manage to engage in conversation were all aware of the importance of the work done by rural women’s secretariats during the 1980s and appeared to have heard of FEMUPROCAN, suggesting that the organization has achieved at least a minimum level of recognition among those in women’s movements working with rural women. Those who focused on urban women appeared to have less knowledge of FEMUPROCAN, suggesting that the Federation has a lower level of recognition among those organizations.

Inclusion

Finally, inclusion concerns the extent to which FEMUPROCAN’s leaders or members have been granted positions of status and responsibility within the
organizational structure of the Nicaraguan government, whilst simultaneously remaining active members of FEMUPROCAN.

The General Law of Cooperatives, Law 499, passed in 2005 and amended slightly in 2007, established two institutions as the primary regulators of the cooperative sector in Nicaragua: INFOCOOP (The National Institute for the Promotion of Cooperatives) and CONACOOP (The National Council of Cooperatives). INFOCOOP is primarily concerned with registration, regulation and oversight of cooperatives, whereas CONACOOP focuses mainly on the promotion of the sector and its demands (Clarity: The Cooperative Law and Regulation Initiative 2006). FEMUPROCAN has been included in both of these organizations with one of their members sitting on the board of directors of INFOCOOP, and Martha Valle currently serving as President of CONACOOP. To be included in the two most important government bodies in the cooperative sector is certainly a major achievement for FEMUPROCAN, and a strong indicator of their level of success in gaining government acceptance as a legitimate spokesperson for the interests of rural women. As yet, FEMUPROCAN has not been included to the same extent in other government institutions that formulate policy affecting rural women, such as MAGFOR, INTA or MIFAMILIA.

At both a local and national level UNIFEM (2007) raised doubts about the ways in which FEMUPROCAN had been included by the government, suggesting that they were not given much in the way of real power to determine policy priorities or participate in their formulation. For the most part, UNIFEM argued, FEMUPROCAN members have been included in spaces where pre-determined policy is debated, and perhaps modified, but have not played a decisive role in constructing the policies in the first place. Oxfam
Canada expressed similar concerns, discussed below. However, the overall picture that emerges about the level of FEMUPROCAN’s inclusion in the formal organizational structures of government suggests that the organization has succeeding in gaining a considerable degree of acceptance.

Inclusion by mainstream public opinion is rather more difficult to measure. What would constitute the relevant positions of status and responsibility in which organizational structures? For me, this concerns the level of FEMUPROCAN’s involvement as a representative of rural women in various organizations and groups in leadership positions elected by the community. This would suggest that public opinion in these towns accepted FEMUPROCAN as a legitimate spokesperson for rural women. Evidence of this inclusion can be found in the 508 members of FEMUPROCAN currently carrying out positions of responsibility as Health and Ecological Brigadistas, members of the Councils of Citizen Power (CPCs), the Municipal Development Committees, the Regional Committees, Health and Education Coordinators and members of Sandinista councils (FEMUPROCAN 2008). However, members also reported that they continued to face discrimination because they were women, and were sometimes elected to less important positions or sidelined by the men, who paid less attention to the women’s opinions. Women tended to be included more in those bodies and organizations dealing with issues that coincided better with ideas about the traditional role of women as caregivers and mothers.

So has FEMUPROCAN been successful in gaining acceptance as a legitimate spokesperson for rural women? It appears that the organization has, on balance, achieved a high level of acceptance among government policy makers and officials in
Nicaragua. It would be interesting to see whether this level of acceptance would
continue under future administrations, especially those not controlled by the FSLN. With
regard to public opinion FEMUPROCAN has achieved only limited and uneven success,
achieving significant acceptance in some areas and among some sectors of society,
and much less in others. Changing mentalities takes time and determination, and
raising the public profile of the organization would likely require substantial amounts of
funds and the development of a coherent media and public relations strategy. It may
then be some time before FEMUPROCAN is truly accepted by the mainstream
Nicaraguan public as a legitimate spokesperson for rural women.

However, even if we accept that FEMUPROCAN has successfully been accepted
as a legitimate spokesperson for rural women producers by the Nicaraguan
government, acceptance alone is not sufficient to guarantee success if the organization
is not capable of influencing those in power to change their policies or satisfy the
demands of the movement. In this respect, Oxfam Canada feels that FEMUPROCAN’s
advocacy activities leave much room for improvement, suggesting that:

They were not making the most of their opportunities and lobbying on the
public stage…they did participate in various spaces but they didn’t
demonstrate results in terms of [affecting national] statistics…sometimes
they participated from an individual perspective or at a local level. For
example three women members of the cooperative would be part of the
development council or community council but there was not a collective
position as a federation, they didn’t lobby as a federation.\footnote{Interview with
representatives from Oxfam Canada, Managua, July 31, 2009.}

On a larger scale, FEMUPROCAN has yet to develop an international advocacy
plan, which limits their abilities to participate in international events and movements.
These limitations are probably partly related to the cost of implementing comprehensive advocacy training programs for the members. Bringing women from their communities to participate in national decision making spaces requires a substantial financial outlay – not only does FEMUPROCAN have to fund the members’ transport expenses, but they also have to provide them with food and accommodation. It can also prove expensive for the women, especially in terms of time that they could be using to work on production to provide for their families. In order to attend all of the meetings and spaces to which they are invited would require FEMUPROCAN to hire another member of staff. Given their difficulties in finding enough money to pay the current administrative costs of the organization this does not seem likely any time soon. Nevertheless, FEMUPROCAN does actually carry out numerous advocacy related activities. However, they lack the funds necessary to publicize these activities outside of the organization.

Conclusions

So, how successful is FEMUPROCAN as an organization? To summarize, it appears that FEMUPROCAN has been successful in gaining acceptance by the Nicaraguan government and by many civil society organizations as a legitimate spokesperson for rural women. At a local level members have won substantial recognition and assumed a number of different leadership roles and positions of responsibility. This acceptance has allowed them to participate in decision making processes and put their demands on the public agenda. However, the government has allowed them to participate only up to a certain point, and no further and it is unclear whether FEMUPROCAN enjoys any real decision-making power. Often the representatives are still not able to participate in these spaces on equal terms with men.
and powerful elites. Nevertheless, their achievements in this area mark FEMUPROCAN out as one of the most successful organizations representing rural women in Nicaragua at present.

Internally they have made considerable progress towards strengthening the organization and training the members in a wide range of topics. Many women reported that they had experienced significant personal development and a sense of empowerment through their participation in the organization. This had enabled them to participate more in the social and economic affairs of their communities, representing important progress towards FEMUPROCAN’s overarching goals. Some members, particularly those who had benefited from FEMUPROCAN’s projects on watering systems, organic fertilizer and processing, had also been able to significantly improve their standard of living and their ability to provide for their families. The organization has created a strong sense of unity and shared identity among its members and this identity is slowing gaining widespread acceptance in Nicaraguan society.

However, FEMUPROCAN has failed to generate enough money for the maintenance and functioning of the organization, and looks unlikely to do so in the near future. This represents a serious organizational weakness. They have struggled to change the mentalities of their members (and of the general public) and persuade them of the benefits of working collectively rather than individually. They have met with only limited success in developing the principles of cooperativism and admit that many cooperatives are still not functioning as they should. Despite some successful initiatives aimed at diversification and modernization of production many of FEMUPROCAN’s projects remain very limited in scope and benefit only a fraction of their membership.
There is also still much room for improvement in terms of developing the commercialization and marketing skills amongst their members (although, to be fair to FEMUPROCAN, they have only just begun to focus on this aspect). Related to this, the organization has found it difficult to foster an entrepreneurial mentality amongst the women at the grassroots, with many of the cooperatives dependent on the national organization for assistance and direction.

FEMUPROCAN’s success is also limited by persisting constraints on rural women’s participation in the economic and social affairs of the country. As well as machismo, the members faced obstacles in terms of their lack of access to and control over resources, particularly land and sources of financing. Although FEMUPROCAN is attempting to help the women overcome these hurdles and push for policy that would increase women’s access to land, at present they still represent serious problems for rural women in Nicaragua.
CHAPTER 8
THE LIMITS TO AUTONOMY: FROM SANDINISTA AFFILIATED MASS MOVEMENT TO INDEPENDENT WOMEN'S ORGANIZATION

This chapter analyzes the extent to which FEMUPROCAN has successfully established itself as an autonomous organization representing rural women producers, or whether they have simply exchanged one form of dependence (on the FSLN) for another (foreign donor NGOs).

When FEMUPROCAN emerged in 1997 from the FSLN-affiliated rural mass organization, UNAG, FEMUPROCAN's founders felt that women were not taken seriously within the mixed-sex organization, and that the time had come to cut all links with a particular political party. Affiliation to the FSLN had provided mass organizations with important financial and political support, but had also placed limits on the freedom of the organizations to push for change. The FSLN controlled what was allowed on the agenda, and defending the revolution always took priority over the interests and demands of the mass movements (Bickham Mendez 2005).

Autonomy meant that FEMUPROCAN, like other important women's organizations in Nicaragua, had to seek alternative means of supporting themselves. The vast majority of this support came from (and continues to come from) foreign NGOs and social movements, normally based in the developed world. Thus, although FEMUPROCAN may have been able to distance itself from the FSLN, they remained dependent on outside sources of funding for their survival and development. Such aid does not come without strings attached, and donors all have requirements that must be fulfilled before they will consent to provide money to an organization. This money must then be spent in the ways agreed upon in pre-approved plans and detailed budgets. FEMUPROCAN has to submit periodic reports demonstrating that they are not deviating
from these plans and budgets. This raises questions about the extent of ‘autonomy’ that the organization really has (Ewig 1999). Some scholars have argued that other women’s organizations that have undergone a similar process are still unable to define their own agenda and lack the freedom to act without consulting these NGO “partners.” They have thus swapped one form of dependence for another (O’Neill 2004). Despite the rhetoric of partnerships and cooperation favored by these NGOs it is extremely difficult to construct a relationship of equality between two organizations if one of the partners controls the purse strings.

However, not all NGOs operate in the same way, and some are much better at granting their partner organizations in the Global South some degree of freedom to determine funding priorities, to participate in the design and evaluation of projects, and discuss ultimate goals and objectives. Other NGOs are much more inflexible when it comes to priorities for funding and attempt to implement their own projects without a great deal of participation from their partners at the design or evaluation stages. Although it may be unrealistic to assume that they will grant total freedom to their partners, there are clearly cases of donors that aspire to more equitable relationships with their Southern counterparts, and those that exercise a high degree of control over all aspects of their dealings with these “partners” and place them firmly in a subordinate position.

This is not to say that working with Northern NGOs does not have other advantages (besides merely financial) that may offset the loss of some autonomy for the organization in the South. Powerful international organizations can help to put the demands of groups such as FEMUPROCAN on the global agenda, pressure
governments in both the developed and developing worlds to take action to meet these demands, as well as provide links to similar movements elsewhere and valuable moral and technical support.

This chapter will investigate the degree to which FEMUPROCAN has managed to establish itself as an “autonomous” women’s organization, paying particular attention to the relationships between the organization and political parties in Nicaragua, as well as the ways in which their “partnerships” with NGO funders function. I then turn to a discussion about whether complete autonomy is desirable, or even possible, for an organization such as FEMUPROCAN. By comparing the experiences of FEMUPROCAN with those of other women’s organizations from around the world, I intend to draw some tentative conclusions about the ability of women’s movements and organizations to achieve genuine autonomy and what this means in practice.

**Defining Autonomy**

Before assessing the extent to which FEMUPROCAN has successfully achieved autonomy it is essential to explore exactly what autonomy means and which criteria should be used to gauge the extent of the autonomy achieved by an organization. This has been a source of considerable disagreement between scholars and among activists. Karen Kampwirth (2004, 63) writes that at the first National Feminist Conference organized at the Olof Palme Center in January 1992, entitled “Diverse but United,” “the major conflict that divided the newly autonomous activists was autonomy itself. What exactly did it mean to be autonomous?” Did this entail breaking all linkages with other organizations or institutions or was perhaps some sort of coordinating body desirable?
Most organizations agreed that autonomy need not mean complete isolation, and Kampwirth argues that it was precisely the amount of coordination between different groups that made the Nicaraguan women’s movements so successful and enabled them to gain such a high profile on the international stage. Chinchilla agrees that for Latin American groups autonomy has meant the creation of new spaces for coordination and debate, where women’s demands can be put on the agenda. It involves, she states, “the right to carve out a political space within which they can choose their own leaders, criteria for membership, and political agenda. In the case of women’s organizations, González, Loria and Lozano (1988, 22) cite Chinchilla (1992, 47), suggesting that it also means:

The creation of a correlation of forces favorable to the raising of women’s demands, one which does not imply their subordination. At the same time it means the existence of safe spaces where women can discover their identities, give mutual support, build trust, explore previously forbidden topics…and invent new forms of political struggle or definitions of what it means to “do politics.” In Latin America, these safe spaces are usually linked to political activity in such a way that autonomy, for the majority of groups, is not simply a defensive concept and does not signify isolation or ghettoization in a “world of women.”

However, both of these meanings of autonomy are rather vague and give little idea of what the concept means for the operations of women’s organizations on a day to day basis. At a more micro-level of analysis some of the definitions of autonomy used by scholars of management and business practices may prove useful. Brock (2003, 58), writing about autonomy within organizations, defines it as “the degree to which one may make significant decisions without the consent of others.” This amounts to a “day-to-day freedom to manage” (Datta et al. 1991) that allows individuals, or in this case, an organization, to take actions without getting prior approval from another organization. To these definitions I would add that autonomy entails the freedom of an organization to set
its own goals and priorities for action, and to maintain or alter these objectives as they see fit.

When discussing autonomy, or independence, it is useful to emphasize that to be completely autonomous an organization must be legally, financially and politically independent from other organizations. In much of the literature scholars have made reference to the emergence of an autonomous women’s movement in Nicaragua in the years following the 1990 election defeat of the Sandinistas. However it seems that the definition of “autonomy” in this case is limited to independence from a particular political party (the FSLN) or the independence of women as individuals:

As women enter into struggles to dismantle the structures of domination, they become acutely aware of their own discrimination as women within their communities and families. Their drive for autonomy often takes the form of gaining control over their bodies in reproductive issues, sexuality and obtaining mobility and representation in public spheres…women are seeking autonomy not only in their community and region, but also in the home, where they seek relief from patriarchal oppression. (Nash 2005, 7)

These definitions are problematic as they may serve to obscure other relationships of dependence that these supposedly autonomous organizations may have, in particular with the international development organizations that finance many of their programs. Therefore, in order to ascertain the degree to which FEMUPROCAN has become an autonomous organization it is essential to understand the nature of the relationship between the organization and political parties in Nicaragua and also with their NGO “partners.”

To operationalize the concept of autonomy it is necessary to consider its various dimensions, and to analyze FEMUPROCAN’s level of each type of independence. Disney identifies two main types of autonomy: “autonomy of thought and autonomy of action, that is, the ideological space to think critically and propose alternative policy
recommendations and the decision-making structures to implement such proposals” (Disney 2008, 47). She labels these ideological and organizational autonomy. Ideological autonomy is concerned with the degree to which members of the organization are able to “theorize, understand, and analyze the oppression of women from a gendered or feminist perspective and, as a result, to shape and conceptualize women’s emancipation accordingly – of, for, and by women.” Organizational autonomy she defines as the extent to which the women in the organizations “act, make decisions, elect leaders, issue statements, and shape policies on behalf of women given their analyses of the causes of women’s oppression and thus the solutions for women’s emancipation” (Disney 2008, 48).

Chinchilla expands the concept of autonomy further, arguing that it “entails a recognition of the diversity of social interests, the refusal of class reductionism, and, above all, of economism” (Chinchilla 1992, 47). This acknowledges that autonomy is far more than the extent of an organization’s affiliation with a political party, but it is still a definition constructed by those on the outside.

Bickham Mendez, on the other hand, whilst she does see the relevance of these definitions and their utility in constructing the concept of autonomy, also points to the need to analyze how the participants in women’s movements understand the term, and how these might differ from organization to organization and between different individuals within the same organization:

It is important not to gloss the complexity involved in the construction of collective definitions of autonomy within the organizations that make up this movement. Shared understandings of the meaning of autonomy do not exist a priori, but rather emerge from the articulations of members’ identities as political actors with the specific political and social conditions. Contemporary meanings of autonomy draw from particular interactions
between global and local processes and social movement participants’ understandings of them. (Bickham Mendez 2005, 90)

Aguilar et al (1997) also acknowledge the multi-dimensional nature of autonomy, and the fact that it can be applied to both individuals and a collective. For them personal autonomy relates to one’s ability to exercise self-determination in order to generate the conditions to create the possibility of living freely, according to the interests, beliefs, feelings and values of each person (Aguilar, et al., 30). From their interviews with participants in women’s movements across Central America they construct the concept of collective autonomy around the following points (Ibid., 67):

- The capacity to act and decide in an autonomous manner
- The self-sufficiency of the movement
- Autonomy is equal to organizational and financial independence from any institution
- There is more recognition of organizational autonomy and very little regarding the construction of specific identities of organizations
- It is relative and depends on the situation and the objectives of the group or organization
- Is vital for the construction of the women’s movement and for civil society in general
- It is a process constructed by way of negotiation

With these considerations in mind it was possible to formulate a series of research questions that would allow me to explore the different dimensions of the “autonomy” of FEMUPROCAN and how these were understood by the leadership and grassroots of the organization, as well as by the NGOs with which FEMUPROCAN works. These questions included finding out where the money to fund the organization comes from and what type of conditions were attached to it, as well as whether FEMUPROCAN
would be able to survive without financial support from its NGO partners (economic or financial autonomy).

The degree of political autonomy refers to whether there were any formal or non-formal linkages remaining with any political party or tendency – do they make any reference to support/opposition for a political party within the printed materials they produce? Are there any regulations or laws linking them to a party? How is the organization seen by the members? Do they associate it with a particular political tendency? Do other people in their community associate FEMUPROCAN with a particular party? Are the members also active participants in political parties? Has this led to any tensions or disagreements? What about the leadership, have they retained connections with people in government from their days in UNAG? I also examined the criteria for membership and leadership to find out if anybody was excluded or discriminated against and why.

With regard to the organizational autonomy of FEMUPROCAN today, and its relationship with the NGOs, I was interested to find out how much input FEMUPROCAN had into each stage of the project process. Who designs the projects? Who implements them? How are participants in a project selected? What kind of monitoring mechanisms do the NGOs require? Who evaluates the projects and according to which criteria? Given that autonomy involves the ability of an organization to set and alter their own objectives and priorities for action I was interested to find out whether NGOs had tried to change the goals of FEMUPROCAN or whether the women had been allowed to construct and maintain these goals independently. Related to this, I inquired as to what mechanisms FEMUPROCAN had for maintaining their autonomy.
Finally, during the course of my research it became clear that I had to analyze another component of autonomy; that of the NGOs themselves. Who provided them with their funds and who were they accountable to? Did this affect their relationship with FEMUPROCAN and if so, how?

**Political Autonomy**

In her ethnography of the Movimiento de Mujeres Trabajadoras y Desempleadas “María Elena Cuadra” (MEC), Bickham Mendez (2005) mentions the problems caused by *doble militancia*, when members of the MEC were also committed party activists. As the movement sought to distance itself from the Sandinista party and develop their own set of objectives, tensions arose when those whose principal loyalty remained the FSLN accused the women seeking autonomy of betraying the revolution. This issue was not confined to the Nicaraguan women’s movement but was rather a concern shared by groups throughout the region. Indeed it formed one of the principle themes of the first Regional Feminist Meeting in 1981 in Bogota, Colombia and generated much disagreement amongst conference attendees (Craske 1999).

Several of the national leaders of FEMUPROCAN held high profile positions linked to the FSLN or served as Sandinista representatives in the National Assembly. Many of the older women at the grassroots had participated in the revolutionary struggles in 1979, and carried out a variety of functions in Sandinista institutions at the local or regional level. The organization was born out of the Women’s Secretariat of UNAG, the Sandinista affiliated farmer’s organization. Additionally, cooperativism formed a key component of the FSLN’s reforms once they had come to power, and many of the cooperatives that comprise FEMUPROCAN were founded in the period of Sandinista government. All of these factors seemed to suggest that, whereas officially
FEMUPROCAN may not be associated with one particular political party, in practice there was likely to be some sort of connection and sympathy, at the very least, for the political goals of the FSLN.

However, the picture that emerged during the course of the research was more complicated than I had expected. Almost without exception the people interviewed asserted that FEMUPROCAN was not associated with any particular party. During my time in Nicaragua I met members who were clearly and proudly Sandinista, but also women who were outspoken in their support for their largest opponent, the Constitutionalist Liberal Party (PLC). There were members who had taken an active role in supporting the Sandinista revolution in the late seventies and also those who had supported the Contra fighters in the 1980s. All seemed to agree that FEMUPROCAN was not the place to initiate conflicts along political lines and that all political viewpoints were welcome in the organization. There were clear commonalities with Sandinista ideology, particularly the focus on cooperativism and working collectively. However, it was also possible to denote a shift within the organization in recent years towards developing the entrepreneurial capacities of the members, and a belief in the market as the solution (provided of course that the women were given the skills and opportunity to compete on a more equal footing than in the past). These aspects appeared to coincide more with the Liberal standpoint, and also reflect current trends in international development for the promotion of small businesses, micro-finance and the idea that people can work themselves out of poverty without too much help from the state.

Additionally, given the organizational structure of FEMUPROCAN, it became clear that some individual cooperatives were more associated with a particular party at the
local level, because the membership of that particular cooperative consisted almost entirely of supporters of the FSLN or the PLC. Their political sympathies were thus sometimes well known at the local level but this never went as far as the formal affiliation of the cooperative with that political party and the political views of the grassroots members did not translate into the formulation of a political standpoint for the organization at the national level. Having said that the polarization of Nicaraguan society along party lines had obviously affected some of these members at the grassroots and they talked about the problems that partisan politics had caused them within their communities. If their cooperative was primarily comprised of women from a different political party than that of the mayor then they sometimes found themselves excluded from participation in projects or in organs of local government: “Listen, here because the local government is not ours we don’t have much of a relationship with them. They only call their people when there is going to be a meeting, they only invite their people. Look, I have never had a meeting with those people. We, because we are Sandinistas, are not taken into account.”

These political affiliations at the local or regional level can sometimes have consequences for the members of FEMUPROCAN’s base-level cooperatives. It also seems that, occasionally, women will forget that they are not supposed to talk party politics when representing FEMUPROCAN, such as in the following announcement made by one regional coordinator upon the Sandinista electoral victory in 2006: “These sixteen years of neoliberal governments have denied us the right to financing in order to produce and develop ourselves economically. Today, now that our party is in power we

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demand that they support us, giving us our rights that were denied to us.” (emphasis mine)²

This may well be a legacy of years of work with Sandinista organizations such as UNAG, which trained women to make announcements in certain ways and use a certain type of language. Habits such as these can be difficult to break and take time and effort. It is likely that as time goes by and fewer members of FEMUPROCAN had this sort of training that the old ways of talking will slowly be phased out. However, given the age of many of the members of FEMUPROCAN today, some of the old style rhetoric persists within the organization.

Having said this, the fact that the organization has its roots in UNAG does not necessarily lead to a political affiliation on the part of FEMUPROCAN. It must be remembered that the women who formed FEMUPROCAN left the organization as they were dissatisfied with its functioning but that the Women’s Secretariat did not disappear when they left. Some women preferred to stay with the mixed sex union, and, given that one of the reasons FEMUPROCAN separated was to have more political freedom, it may be that many of the women most ideologically committed to the FSLN remained in UNAG.³

This high degree of political autonomy may well have been fostered by the General Law of Cooperatives which sets out the principles of cooperativism. According

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² From a speech given in the town of Terrabona on October 30th 2008. Signed by a number of FEMUPROCAN Presidents and representatives from the Unions of Cooperatives.

³ According to María Rosa Renzi Regional Director of UNIFEM and Director of the Women’s Economic Agenda in Nicaragua (AGEM): “UNAG is a trade association but it is has a stronger association with party politics and those that opted to separate wanted a little more freedom or flexibility with regard to several issues fundamental to the question of gender. And so, even if at the grassroots they may have Sandinista supporters, they are not an organization that is completely linked to the party.” (Interview, Managua, July 15, 2009).
to these principles it is illegal to discriminate against somebody on the basis of their political affiliation when forming a cooperative. It is therefore not surprising that in many of FEMUPROCAN’s cooperatives there is a mixture of Sandinistas and Liberals.

However, all of the credit for FEMUPROCAN’s political autonomy should not go to the Nicaraguan government or the legal framework for cooperativism. Perhaps even more important, has been the determined effort of the leadership of FEMUPROCAN to convince their members to work together, whichever party they support. The national leadership has repeatedly stated that FEMUPROCAN is not the place for party politics, and have encouraged the leaders at the local level to follow suit:

Look, in our organization as a cooperative there are women who are Sandinistas and women who are Liberals, but in my role as president of the cooperative I don’t like to link myself to one or the other…we are a cooperative, we don’t see ourselves in terms of political parties, not at all. Everyone has the right to decide for themselves about their political party. I respect their opinion if they are Liberal and I also respect their opinion if they are Sandinista because we all have the legal right to decide which party we want to vote for.⁴

The importance of respect and of harmony between the members was a recurring theme in the interviews I conducted with members of FEMUPROCAN. This was something that many members had struggled with at the beginning, given the political polarization of the country and the memories of the armed struggles of the revolution in 1979 and the subsequent Contra War which festered on throughout the eighties. However, it was a lesson that Martha Valle, the President of FEMUPROCAN, was determined to get across to the women, right from the beginning of the organization, and she was prepared to spend significant resources on getting her point across:

⁴ Adela, President of a FEMUPROCAN Cooperative in Rio Blanco, Managua, July 15, 2009.
I say that it is better not to get involved [in party politics within a cooperative] because one of the lessons that we received from FEMUPROCAN was that we are women, we are trade associations and we are not linked to political parties. We are a trade association and we see everyone in the same way because this was one of the first lessons that Martha Valle taught us...it cost her a lot to teach it to us because there were women who wanted to listen and those who didn’t...\textsuperscript{5}

However, Martha Valle herself does not only refrain from identification with a political party herself but appears to be distrustful and disenchanted with the whole system of party politics. In this sense, she shares the defining characteristic of new social movements identified by Hellman (1992, 53): “It is clear that new social movements in both Latin America and Western Europe do share at least one defining characteristic. That is their fundamental distrust of the traditional parties and formations of the Left. Movement participants often see parties and unions as interested in the success of the new social movements only insofar as they can manipulate these movements for their own partisan ends.”

Although she was involved in the FSLN since before the fall of Somoza (1979) Martha Valle claims that she never shared some of the ideological fervor of other combatants. This did not prevent her from serving as a FSLN congressional representative when still a member of UNAG, though she asserted that she was motivated more by a genuine desire to improve the position of rural people, and women in particular, than by any particular ideological commitment to a particular party or desire for power or self enrichment. She was offered the vice-presidency of MAGFOR (the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry of the Nicaraguan government) and various important mayoral positions but she turned them down and told me that she quickly

\textsuperscript{5} Leticia, President of a FEMUPROCAN cooperative, Terrabona, July 21, 2009.
became disillusioned by the back-stabbing and corruption she witnessed throughout her political career. Her whole experience in politics appears to have left her with a very negative image of the whole system and a deep seated distrust of all politicians. According to Valle, corruption among politicians was rife and almost everybody was in it for personal gain, regularly abusing their positions to enrich themselves. These sorts of practices disgusted her and she was determined not to let FEMUPROCAN get co-opted by a political party. Such strong leadership from the top of the organization appears to have paid off in terms of the national organization.

However, it is important to note that, despite Martha’s aversion to partisan politics this does not mean that FEMUPROCAN is apolitical or that they tell their members not to engage in political action. On the contrary, they urge their members to exercise their political rights and participate in local decision-making spheres as much as possible. They hold training sessions on lobbying and advocacy and to inform their members about these political rights. They recognize the benefits this can bring to the individual women, and to the organization as a whole, in terms of recognition, policy change and material benefits.

So, to summarize, it would seem that FEMUPROCAN has achieved a high degree of political autonomy at the national level, although the picture at the local level appears more uneven. Many of the goals of the organization coincide better with those of the Sandinistas than the Liberals (cooperativism, redistribution etc) but this has not translated into affiliation with the FSLN. Perhaps it is better to talk of political autonomy combined with a degree of sympathy for some of the ideals of Sandinismo.
Economic and Organizational Autonomy

The issue of economic autonomy hangs like a black cloud over the organization, and threatens to diminish the importance of the gains made by FEMUPROCAN in achieving a high degree of political independence. Both the representatives from the NGO partner organization and some of the national leadership of FEMUPROCAN admitted that the organization owes its survival to the continued financial support provided by their international partners. At worst, this lack of economic autonomy could result in FEMUPROCAN being nothing more than a puppet organization, a cheap way of implementing projects designed by the NGOs according to their own agendas, while simultaneously cashing in on the current fashion for local participation in international development circles.

Should this be the case one would have to ask whether this form of dependence represented a step forward at all from the Sandinista era. The parent might have changed (FSLN to NGO) but the child (FEMUPROCAN) remains a child, subject to the whims and wishes of the adult and unable to survive on its own. However, this is not necessarily the case, and as FEMUPROCAN shows, it is possible for third world organizations to find NGOs who are prepared to form more respectful and less unequal relationships. In this way the proliferation of NGOs with funds to spend in countries such as Nicaragua represents a real opportunity for organizations based in the global south to formulate their own objectives and maintain their own vision and strategy. More NGOs mean more diversity among funders, and this gives FEMUPROCAN the ability to control what type of organization they work with.

Firstly, in order to understand the position of FEMUPROCAN today it is necessary to summarize the development of state-sponsored mass organizations under the
Sandinistas and their subsequent evolution into so-called “autonomous” organization after the elections of 1990. Although mass organizations linked to the Sandinista party had seen their particular objectives take second place to the overriding goal of defending the revolution during the war, their loyalty was rewarded in the form of funds, influence with the government on some policy issues and a privileged status in law which allowed for the existence of only one mass organization per sector. During the 1990s the growth of many women’s organizations was made possible by both a change in the law and the financial support of foreign NGOs. When FEMUPROCAN split from UNAG in 1997, one of their most pressing tasks was the search for NGO “partners” who would provide economic assistance. Without this assistance FEMUPROCAN might well have fallen at the first hurdle, and certainly would not have been able to implement many of its projects or facilitate the training of its members in a wide range of issues. However, such assistance always comes with strings attached which restrict, to varying degrees, the ability of FEMUPROCAN to act as it wishes. Thus, the concepts of economic and organizational autonomy are intertwined. Without economic autonomy it is impossible to have total organizational freedom.

However, the number of conditions placed on such aid varies wildly from one NGO to the next. If we accept that FEMUPROCAN, due to its lack of financial sustainability, depends on the assistance of the NGOs, the question is not whether they have total organizational independence (they can’t have) but rather if they have successfully found ways to limit the amount of influence the NGO partners have in the day to day functioning of the organization. Furthermore, if organizational autonomy really is their
goal then it is necessary to examine how FEMUPROCAN is seeking to address the issue of their financial dependence, and what the prospects are for the future.

A key component of organizational autonomy is the ability to set one’s own goals and priorities and all of the interviewees agreed that FEMUPROCAN has managed to maintain their themes of struggle, their rallying slogans and symbols. This is certainly an achievement, and an indication that they have retained a constant vision and mission throughout, perhaps one of the most important components of organizational autonomy. They have maintained true to their overall guiding strategy, although they have modified this strategy slightly along the way to reflect the development of the organization.

It appears that FEMUPROCAN has worked hard to carefully select the organizations with which it works, recognizing that more partners is not always an improvement if those partners are not willing to respect FEMUPROCAN’s objectives and ways of working. Therefore, the fact that they only have three main organizations with which they work has both advantages (more careful selection of partners, more meaningful relationships with partners) and disadvantages (it means they are more vulnerable economically should they lose one of these partners and fewer resources for FEMUPROCAN).

One of the major problems with working with NGOs is that they tend to favor short term projects with easily measurable goals. The benefits provided by these projects may not last very long but they provide good publicity for the NGO back home and gives them the sense that they are “doing something.” However, this may leave the underlying causes of the poverty of the target group untouched, and provide only a short term solution. Longer term commitments, or projects with less tangible results, but that may
be of greater long term benefit to the participants (such as self-esteem workshops) are likely to slip further down the agenda. However, although FEMUPROCAN’s partners still talk about funding particular projects, both Oxfam Canada and El Centro Cooperativo Sueco (CCS) have provided more or less continual support to FEMUPROCAN since its beginning. Even when funds for international cooperation were reduced recently, these two NGOs continued their commitment to FEMUPROCAN and have built up meaningful relationships between the organizations:

For us, our relationship with the organization [FEMUPROCAN] is stable...we base it on a partnership for development [sociedad para el desarrollo]. This means that it is not a relationship of cooperante to the receptor of cooperation/aid but rather a relationship between members in which we share the strategy, we share values, principles, work philosophies and we also share resources, because the organizations with which we work provide resources in cash and in kind, which complement the project.  

Of the three main partners of FEMUPROCAN (Oxfam Canada, VECO M.A. and El Centro Cooperativo Sueco) it was the relationship with Oxfam Canada that seemed to be viewed in the most positive light by the national leadership of FEMUPROCAN. Not only was this one of the first organizations to offer support for FEMUPROCAN but they also appear to have maintained a high level of respect for the Nicaraguan organization throughout the relationship, something that was much appreciated by FEMUPROCAN’s leadership:

Oxfam Canada has been one of the organizations that have supported us from the beginning, when we were founding the federation, in the area of training. We have had a very respectful relationship...this is extremely important and let me tell you, if someone were to ask me, I would say Oxfam has been a very respectful relationship with regard to what it was we agreed on, and in complying with international conventions which describe the role of the NGO and the role of the organization.  

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6 Denis Medina, El Centro Cooperativo Sueco, Managua, August 1, 2009  
7 Marta Valle, President of FEMUPROCAN, Managua, August 3rd, 2009.
We like that they have respected our process and have believed in us, despite the fact that we used to have nothing. There are organizations that will only support you once they see you with an office and not before. But Oxfam believed in us long before that, like the Swedes [CCS], we started out in a garage with no resources. However, they believed in our project and they supported us.\(^8\)

For FEMUPROCAN, conditions placed on money such as the need to provide monitoring reports and proof that the money was spent in the manner agreed upon beforehand do not pose a particular problem. Rather, such conditions are to be expected. What they are not prepared to tolerate is any attempt to modify the goals of the organization:

We are very clear about what we want and the way in which we want to work with the organizations. If there is an organization that wants to impose its own criteria or work focuses upon us then it is better that we say no. If we work with an organization it is because we share the same vision of the work and what development work should consist of. So, on many occasions we have actually had to say no to some organizations, because they were trying to divert us from our strategy...It is not that we work with organizations because they chose us, we, too, choose with whom we wish to work\(^9\).

It is worth highlighting here that Oxfam Canada has not always agreed with the decisions taken by FEMUPROCAN but this has not led them to interfere in the organization. They emphasized the fact that they respect the individual processes of each actor and that, in their opinion, everybody follows their own, unique path. This does not mean that they give their counterparts a free rein to do whatever they feel like, and they still require the organizations to produce well formulated projects and implement them efficiently. However, the fact that both Oxfam and the CCS expect FEMUPROCAN to present their own ideas and designs for projects demonstrates that

\(^8\) Matilde Rocha, Vice President of FEMUPROCAN, Managua, August 4th, 2009.

\(^9\) Matilde Rocha, Vice President of FEMUPROCAN, Managua, August 4th, 2009.
these NGOs are willing to listen to what their partner wants to do, rather than simply implementing projects designed by the NGO according to what they think would be best for the women. This gives FEMUPROCAN more operational autonomy than they would have enjoyed had they selected some other NGOs:

The first condition is that they present a well formulated project where they clearly define what exactly they want to do and the strategy they are going to use for what they want to do. What we ask is that the formulation of the project is a participatory exercise of analyzing problems with the regional leaders. So, the project must come out of this analysis of the problem and assessment of the situation, from this they define the objective of the project, the results they are seeking and the activities they will implement.\(^{10}\)

Although FEMUPROCAN participates in each stage of the project process, from the formulation to the implementation, monitoring and evaluation, it must be noted that they have to get approval from their funders before they can implement a project, severely restricting their organizational autonomy. The projects that get funded are thus likely to be those that coincide best with the funders’ current priorities. For instance, in the above example the Centro Cooperativo Sueco insists that everything be formulated using a participatory process, and he goes on to say that CCS provides methodological assistance and guides for constructing logical frameworks. Thus we see that they are able to impose their ways of working on FEMUPROCAN. Although both sides claimed that the projects were approved and details negotiated through dialogue between FEMUPROCAN and the NGO, it is clear that these negotiations are shaped by unequal power relations, with the NGO retaining the right to have the final say on the matter. For example, at the beginning of the organization’s life they had managed to secure funding for a series of workshops on self-esteem, the results of which had impressed the leadership of FEMUPROCAN. Last year, with a new generation of women entering the

\(^{10}\) Denis Medina, Centro Cooperativo Sueco, Managua, August 1, 2009.
organization, the leadership wanted to repeat the process but was told that there were no longer any funds available for such activities.

The leaders of FEMUPROCAN sometimes expressed frustration at the lack of flexibility in the funds they were given, which could only be used on exactly what had been agreed upon in advance, although they also understood the NGOs need to account for how the money was being spent. Related to this was the problem of administrative funds for the maintenance of the head office and the salaries of the leaders of the organization. Because most of the funds are designated for specific projects, there is little left over to pay the running costs of the organization. The leadership has to piece this together from all the projects they manage to get approved, but this is barely sufficient at the best of times.

The fact that up to this point they have enjoyed long-term support from organizations like Oxfam Canada and CCS does not mean that the lack of financial autonomy is not a problem. On the contrary, their international counterparts could pull out at any point, leaving FEMUPROCAN struggling to survive. To try and increase their economic independence, Oxfam believes that FEMUPROCAN needs to mobilize their resources and better develop the entrepreneurial capacity of their members. Currently, they estimate only about 20% of the members of FEMUPROCAN pay their dues to the organization. Unless they can increase this number dramatically financial autonomy looks to be a long way off. In addition, although some of the beneficiaries of projects such as the watering systems are supposed to pay back the cost of the investment with interest, the limited scope of the project and the time it takes for the women to generate enough profit to begin paying FEMUPROCAN back means that the amount of money
they currently receive from these initiatives is not sufficient to make a real impact on the economic sustainability of the organization as a whole.

To summarize, economic dependence does not necessarily mean the complete loss of ideological autonomy. However, it does place significant conditions on FEMUPROCAN’s ability to make major decisions without consulting others, whatever the NGOs rhetoric about equality and respect in their partnerships. Given that all such partnerships, however equitable they claim to be, involve power relations, and that normally it is the one holding the purse strings who enjoys the superior position, the goal of the leadership of FEMUPROCAN has always been financial independence. This would finally give them the flexibility to use funds as they wished and to implement projects that may not necessarily be in fashion with development agencies but that the members need and want. Financial stability holds the key to genuine autonomy, to the extent that such a thing is possible in today’s interconnected world.

**Autonomy within FEMUPROCAN**

Many scholars writing on the question of autonomy have argued that it is equally important to look inside an organization as it is to consider its external relations. FEMUPROCAN consists of base level cooperatives, organized by region, and sometimes by the union of cooperatives to which they belong, and coordinated by a national leadership based in Managua. It is therefore necessary to consider the autonomy of the local branches of the organization with respect to the national team, and also to investigate the level of autonomy enjoyed by individual members.

**At a Regional Level**

Just as in the MEC described by Bickham Mendez, the leadership of FEMUPROCAN has sought to develop greater autonomy at a regional level. The
Sandinista affiliated mass organizations from which both these women’s organizations emerged were characterized by a highly centralized and hierarchical structure. After breaking away from UNAG, FEMUPROCAN claims to have adopted a radically different approach, which grants the regional levels of the organization much more autonomy to act as they think best. The national organization coordinates the overall strategy of the organization and facilitates the training of promotoras from all over the country. However, the regional organizations are expected to formulate their own projects and design their own proposals. The national team can provide them with methodological tools and technical assistance to facilitate this, but the goal is that women identify their own priorities for action and formulate proposals accordingly, rather than waiting for handouts from Managua:

In this respect FEMUPROCAN has been very clear with us that the only thing they facilitate is organization, and the purpose of organizing ourselves is to take actions ourselves, to worry about ourselves, to empower ourselves on the basis of our understanding of all the training sessions they have given us.\footnote{Adela, President of a FEMUPROCAN Cooperative in Rio Blanco, Managua, July 15, 2009.}

I am not against saying that FEMUPROCAN does not give us projects because FEMUPROCAN has been very clear with us that it is up to us to keep ourselves going. We are organized in order to come together to manage, to implement and to initiate actions according to our own perspectives.\footnote{Ana, Secretary of a FEMUPROCAN Cooperative in Nandaime, Managua, July 15, 2009.}

This appears to be working better in some cases than in others. Some regions seem to have been quite active and successful in designing their own plans of action and in securing some funding from NGOs for their projects. The case of Nueva Guinea springs to mind. This rapidly expanding town, seven hours by bus from Managua, is home to one of the most dynamic branches of FEMUPROCAN. They have managed to
construct their own regional office, implement their own projects and gain a relatively high profile in the community. For this reason they were the area selected by FEMUPROCAN’s national leadership for a pilot training program aimed at young people. Much of their success can be attributed to the leadership of Modesta González, the regional coordinator. With years of experience in women’s organizing (she too was active in the women’s secretariat of UNAG before helping to found FEMUPROCAN) Modesta brought invaluable knowledge, contacts and determination to the role. In fact, her contribution to the advancement of gender equality was recognized last year when the Danish embassy entrusted her with a torch representing gender equality and empowerment. FEMUPROCAN Nueva Guinea thus enjoys a relatively high level of autonomy with respect to the national organization, and the leaders of FEMUPROCAN have a lot of respect for the opinions of women like González.

In other areas local leadership capacity has not been developed to the same extent. Many of these women lack both the experience and contacts with international organizations that leaders such as Modesta can draw on. Even if they do manage to formulate a project they may lack the skills to present it in the format required by international NGOs, or simply lack access to the NGOs at all. They rely much more on the national organization for support, and to bring projects to them: “well, then Martha came and said that there was a project.”¹³

This led an Oxfam representative to remark that many of the women at the base of FEMUPROCAN are currently nothing more than “groups of demanding women.” Unfortunately, as Bickham Mendez (2005) points out it is often on the basis of

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¹³ María, FEMUPROCAN cooperative member, Terrabona, July 21, 2009
established personal relationships that projects get approved by NGOs. The idea that this is someone who can be trusted is often crucial to an NGO’s decision to provide financial aid to a project. However, in the vast majority of cases, the only people with the required contacts and skills are those in the national leadership. Women further down are thus unlikely to get funding unless their projects have been approved and actively supported by the Managua office, limiting the autonomy of the women at the local level.

Unfortunately Sandinista attempts to channel aid to the grassroots of their organizations sometimes ended up creating dependency among the members. It is extremely difficult to change these mentalities, but FEMUPROCAN stresses the need for the local branches to develop their own capacities and formulate their own proposals throughout their training sessions.

Just as it is difficult to convince the women to stop expecting handouts, vestiges of the old style of top down management remain within the organization. Diaz explained that this was simply for the sake of efficiency – an organization must retain some sort of hierarchical structure in order to get anything done. However, Denis Medina from the CCS believed there was more to it than this. According to Medina, the national leadership was sometimes reluctant to hand over leadership to the regional and local levels of the organization and wanted to retain control over many of the projects (e.g. the drip watering program piloted in Terrabona). This was not fostering local autonomy, and it is also preventing the national leadership from being able to focus on areas such as political advocacy and lobbying the institutions of the Nicaraguan government. So, for Medina some of these hierarchical tendencies were actually making the organization less, rather than more, efficient.
Overall it seems that whereas FEMUPROCAN would like to present itself as a decentralized organization with high levels of regional and local autonomy the reality is that some areas have developed this capacity much more fully than others. Much progress has been made in disintegrating some of the top-down structures that characterized Sandinista mass organizations. However, much remains to be done. The national leadership needs to facilitate more meaningful linkages between local branches and NGOs, but these local branches also need to be more proactive and creative in their search for sources of funding and in designing their own initiatives. The Managua office needs to consider whether they need to be involved in so many projects to such a level or whether these projects can be handled further down the organization. If they cannot, then perhaps the question is why not? According to their own publications, one of FEMUPROCAN’s main objectives is the training of capable women leaders. If they do not trust their own women to manage the projects at a local or regional level then they appear to be failing in this aim.

At an Individual Level

At the level of individuals, autonomy can be operationalized as one’s ability to make decisions regarding their lives on a day to day basis without consulting others. This poses the question about the extent to which FEMUPROCAN interferes in the lives of its members. Do the women at the grassroots feel that FEMUPROCAN allows them to make their own decisions, or do the national team, or local leaders dictate what will be done?

The grassroots cooperatives are organized democratically, with elections held to decide all leadership positions at all levels in the organization. In this way the women are free to select the leaders of their choosing, and the national organization respects
these decisions. Indeed the national organization attempts not to interfere in the running of the individual cooperatives.

Provided they abide by the principles of cooperativism outlined in the General Law of Cooperatives, the women are able to choose whether to join a cooperative in the first place, what that cooperative will produce, how the work will be divided, and for how long they will remain in the cooperative (as long as they continue to comply with the rules governing membership elaborated by each cooperative). As discussed above they are free to identify with any political party, whilst recognizing that FEMUPROCAN has no political affiliation. The national leadership has refrained from defining the position of the organization with regard to many things normally considered under the umbrella of “women’s rights”. This includes issues to do with reproduction such as abortion and contraception, domestic violence and women’s control over their bodies. These subjects may be touched on during the training sessions on women’s rights but there has been no official stance towards these topics agreed upon by the organization. This has been the source of some criticism from their NGO partners (particularly Oxfam Canada) and by some in the Nicaraguan women’s movement. However, it could be argued that by not defining an organizational position, FEMUPROCAN grants its members considerable individual autonomy to make their own decisions about these issues.

This individual autonomy is obviously still limited in a number of ways including adherence to the overall goals of the organization and the principles of cooperativism and adherence to the rules set out in individual cooperatives. Equally importantly, is the fact that the autonomy of individuals (i.e. their ability to make decisions without
consulting others) is severely limited by the continued subordination of women to men in Nicaragua, and the material poverty of the members.

Nevertheless, when assessing the amount of personal independence enjoyed by members of FEMUPROCAN it seems that the organization has, overall, provided them with a considerable degree of freedom to express their own opinions and make their own decisions. Moreover, it is impossible to grant members total individual autonomy and maintain a cohesive and efficient organization. So, on this front FEMUPROCAN generally appears to have been successful in granting neither too much nor too little individual autonomy. As Morena Diaz commented during a workshop held for young people, “you always need other people but this does not mean you cannot decide things for yourself.”

The Autonomy of the NGO Partners

As Martha Valle points out the question of autonomy is further complicated when one considers to whom the NGO partners are accountable, and on whose support they rely:

Look, the NGOs have their own politics and furthermore, they only send representatives to our countries, the policies are designed in European and other Latin American countries but they don’t design them here…sometimes the international cooperation policies of the NGOs themselves are based on world politics and sometimes NGOs have to make an effort to adapt to the characteristics of each country.

Many times the bulk of the funding for these organizations comes from governments in the Global North. For example, in the case of FEMUPROCAN’s Belgian based partner VECO MA, 70% of the funds come from the Belgian government.

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14 Morena Diaz, Head of Training and Advocacy, FEMUPROCAN, Nueva Guinea, July 30, 2009.
15 Martha Valle, President of FEMUPROCAN, Managua, August 3rd, 2009
According to the representative of VECO MA in Nicaragua, the Belgian government is
very demanding and requires periodic reports about how VECO MA is allocating their
funds, as well as testimonial evidence from the beneficiaries of their programs.

El Centro Cooperativo Sueco also receives a significant proportion of its money
from the Swedish government. The representative of CCS with whom I spoke explained
that this meant they have the obligation to make sure that the funds are being put to
good use. They have to carry out a variety of monitoring tasks and report back to the
Swedish government about how funds were allocated and how the projects are
progressing (based on a series of indicators). He added that in 2009 one of the biggest
problems they encountered was the devaluation of the Swedish currency as a result of
the current global economic crisis. At the same time the cost of living in Nicaragua has
increased, making everything more expensive. This meant that for the next few years
they were likely to have fewer funds available to carry out activities. They envisage
scaling back their work and focusing on those projects they really consider priorities.

Thus, the NGOs themselves do not enjoy complete organizational autonomy, and
their priorities for action reflect (admittedly to varying degrees) the priorities of
governments in the North. The global economic crisis also makes its presence felt, by
reducing the foreign aid budgets of governments in the North, the devaluation of
currencies and a focus on domestic, rather than international policy. As prices have
risen in Nicaragua the purchasing power of the money provided to FEMUPROCAN is
likely to decrease dramatically in the upcoming months/years. In this way we see how
FEMUPROCAN is, indirectly, linked to, and dependent on, the fashions of development
policy in the North, in terms of how much money is available for which type of activity, and in which regions.

**Getting the Autonomy / Dependence Balance Right**

For many academics writing about women’s movements, autonomy has been seen as unqualified good (Ray and Korteweg 1999; González and Kampwirth 2001a, 17-21; Chinchilla 1994, 191; Bickham Mendez 2005, 71). For Alvarez, (1990, 23) autonomy is so important that she claims it is one of the defining characteristics of a women’s movement. This omits “state-linked mass organizations for women, women’s branches of political parties, trade unions and other organizations of civil society that are not primarily organized to advance women’s gender specific concerns.” To accept this definition would run the risk of over-simplifying the diverse nature of women’s movements around the world. With regard to FEMUPROCAN, although they do advance women’s gender specific concerns, they are, as we have seen, to some extent controlled by a social group – International NGOs. Would Alvarez deny them a place in the women’s movement in Nicaragua because of this? It seems that her definition is too narrow, and as Molyneux points out, “these criteria…denote a particular kind of women’s movement, and, while such movements have been significant in the development of feminism, they have not been the only kind, or even sometimes the most important kind (Molyneux 1998, 224, emphasis in original).

In order to properly assess FEMUPROCAN’s performance as a successful organization we have to ask whether aiming for complete autonomy is desirable, or even possible. Perhaps it is unrealistic to expect an organization comprised of small women producers in a poor country such as Nicaragua to be economically self-sufficient. If the members can hardly afford to pay for the needs and up keep of their
families, how can they be expected to generate sufficient funds for the functioning of an association like FEMUPROCAN? Even if the organization were to manage to scrape together enough money from dues to prevent the collapse of FEMUPROCAN, there might be little left over to pay for training sessions or the implementation of projects. Thus, it does not seem that total autonomy should be seen as necessarily the best option for an organization such as FEMUPROCAN. If they were to refuse to cooperate with NGOs they would be, in fact, turning away money and knowledge much needed by their members and failing in their goal to bring about material improvements to their lives. Not only would this most likely alienate many of their members at the grassroots, but it would bring the whole *raison d'être* of the organization into question. Scholars have thus suggested that it might be more appropriate to talk about relative rather than total autonomy. Rather than seeking total autonomy perhaps it is more useful to examine how much autonomy ought to be sacrificed to best serve the members of FEMUPROCAN and to make progress towards achieving some of the overarching objectives of the organization. The same holds true for political autonomy. The attempt to distance oneself from affiliation with a particular political party should not be confused with a complete withdrawal from participation in politics. This has been a mistake of some “autonomous” women’s organizations in a number of different countries, as Craske explains:

In systems which have relied on clientelism and co-optation to maintain political stability and generate support, the desire for independence from the institutional political arena is strong. It is equally clear, however, that a strict adherence to the principle of autonomy can result in permanent exclusion. Continued apathy on the part of women, particularly some feminist organizations and ‘apolitical’ motherist groups, towards the institutional political arena tends to lead to disempowerment. The antipathy
towards politics is explained, in part, by the culture of autonomy among opposition organizations. (Craske 1999, 199-200)

Barrig (1989, 142) agrees, suggesting that although women’s organizations do need a space of their own in which to organize free from the constraints imposed by the ideologies and priorities of political parties, successful autonomy should not mean severing all links to other organizations. She talks of a “current of feedback” of mutual support between women’s groups and other organizations at a local level, which can help to ensure that the women participate in local decision making spaces and are not marginalized from local politics and development plans.

To summarize, it seems that Hellman’s warning about the fetishization of autonomy holds true (Hellman 1992). It should not be held up to be “the answer” to constructing successful women’s movements but should rather be seen as a process which may enable organizations to make progress towards achieving their objectives and successfully representing their members. On the other hand, it should not be pursued at all costs, but the benefits and costs of sacrificing or maintaining some degree of independence should constantly be weighed and the position of the organization re-negotiated accordingly.

**Putting the Experience of FEMUPROCAN in Context**

One should not perhaps be so harsh on FEMUPROCAN for lacking financial independence when many of the most prominent women’s organizations in the country, including the MEC, find themselves in exactly the same position: “If you look at María Elena Cuadra you find the same situation, they depend a lot on international cooperation, UNAG also depends on international cooperation” (María Rosa Renzi, Managua, July 15, 2009). Renzi attributed this to the lack of a “cultura de cotización” or
dues-paying culture in the country and explained that “this happens to the majority of organizations, not only those of/for women but other organizations as well, there are very few trade unions that maintain themselves with their own funds for the same reason” (*Ibid*). The difficulty in creating this *cultura de cotización* among members of cooperatives formed in the Sandinista years primarily to defend the land came up frequently as one of the most serious problems facing the organization at present in my interviews with the leadership of FEMUPROCAN, the *promotoras* and the NGO partners.

This supports Maxine Molyneux’s contention that the character of women’s movements depends on the context in which they develop: “prevailing cultural configurations, family forms, political formations, the forms and degree of female solidarity, and more generally on the character of civil society in the regional and national context” (Molyneux 1998, 221). Thus, we should not be too quick to judge the performance of FEMUPROCAN by the standards of other regions and we should pay close attention to how the wider context opens up possibilities for more or less autonomy at different historical moments.

It appears that it has been extremely difficult for “autonomous” women’s organizations in Nicaragua to achieve financial independence (and this therefore limits their organizational autonomy). In the case of the MEC mentioned above Bickham Mendez finds that the organization has faced similar problems to those encountered by FEMUPROCAN: “Autonomy from a male-dominated movement has not guaranteed that MEC organizers can define their own interests. Autonomy from the labor movement has meant that MEC must seek its own funding from international donors, and…reliance on
northern NGOs brings with it a whole new set of issues, compromising to some degree
MEC’s ability to establish independently its own agenda.” (Bickham Mendez 2005, 72)

This is not to say that economic autonomy is impossible. In 1997 Aguilar et al
reported that according to their investigations 64.3% of women’s organizations said that
they received funds from other governments, 64.3% from private cooperation agencies
and 57.1% from solidarity groups. Although these numbers suggest that over half the
women’s organizations in Nicaragua were not economically sustainable, the authors
found that 42.9% reported that their financing was a result of self-management and
28.9% responded that they generated income by selling their services (Aguilar et al
1997, 410). Thus, although it may be difficult, and should indeed be seen as a process,
economic autonomy is not an impossible dream for women’s organizations in
Nicaragua. From their study of movements throughout the Central American region it
seems that it is women’s organizations in Nicaragua that had developed the most
complex, nuanced understanding of what autonomy means and formulating strategies
to achieve it. In countries such as Guatemala there has been little attention paid to the
nature of the international NGO and local women’s organizations relationship, with the
result that the NGOS enjoy considerably more freedom to dictate the rules of the game.

We see, therefore, that a recognition of the importance of the specific context in
shaping the character of women’s movements in Nicaragua does not mean that there
are no lessons to be learned from autonomous women’s movements elsewhere. During
the wave of democratization in Latin America, autonomous women’s organizations
sprang up across the continent, sharing an aversion to involvement in partisan politics.
As early as 1989 Maruja Barrig, writing about Peru, was warning about the dangers of
being dependent on external sources for funding, especially international development agencies and foundations. For Barrig, women’s centers funded externally are problematic not only because of the possible interference or influence of the funders on the program of the women’s organization but also because “it is difficult to determine whether the centers are operating on the basis of militancy, that is as groups of people committed to a set of beliefs and to voluntary action, or on the basis of employment, because the centers provide paid professional work” (Barrig 1989, 127).

Conclusions

FEMUPROCAN appears to have achieved a high degree of political autonomy at the national level, with more uneven progress at the local level. However, there is a general agreement within the organization, and within the organizations that work with them that FEMUPROCAN is not associated with any political party. There are sympathies and certain members are fiercely political (both Sandinista and Liberal) but the effort to leave those partisan politics at the door seems to have largely been successful.

They have also allowed their members considerable individual autonomy, for example, to choose who to vote for and to decide which crops to produce. Many members asserted that they felt they were also gaining more autonomy within their households and taking more decisions on their own, without feeling that they had to ask permission from their husbands or partners, as a result of their membership in FEMUPROCAN. However, moving up the scale, the results have been less uniform at the local and regional level. Some areas are clearly much more autonomous than others, and in many cases there is still a tendency for women to look to the national organization for the ideas and financing for projects, and for the national leadership to
attempt to control every stage of these projects. FEMUPROCAN is currently trying to recreate the success of areas like Nueva Guinea across the entire organization, but this is a process that will most likely take considerable time, effort and the identification and promotion of key women leaders at the regional level, who can serve as an inspiration to others.

The organization’s main weakness is financial autonomy, and their dependence on external funding does not look likely to be solved in the near future. This severely limits their organizational autonomy in certain important ways. However, FEMUPROCAN has been careful to select partners that respect the overall goal and mission of the organization, and so have managed to stay within their own strategies for the development of the organization. They have selected organizations which share some of their beliefs about priorities for action and ways of working. However, these relationships with NGOs are marked by unequal power relations and FEMUPROCAN remains dependent on the continued goodwill of the NGOS. These NGOs are in turn dependent on the continued support of governments in the North. Therefore, the best strategy for FEMUPROCAN to achieve genuine autonomy would be to develop their own economic sustainability. In this respect they still have a long way to go.

The experiences of FEMUPROCAN in their struggle for autonomy, and the evidence from the literature on autonomous women’s movements throughout the region (and indeed the world), suggests that this economic independence is difficult, but not impossible to achieve. Political autonomy, at least in the Nicaraguan case, has proved more feasible. Within FEMUPROCAN there is some mention of disagreements due to this decision to abandon partisan politics at the beginning of the organization, and it
took time for some of the women at the grassroots to learn how to get along with members who supported different political parties. However, these problems do not seem to have destabilized the movement to the same extent as those described by Bickham Mendez in her study of the MEC. Indeed it seems that today there is an overwhelming acceptance of the idea that FEMUPROCAN is no place for party politics.

It is unlikely, and probably unwise, that a women’s organization can ever achieve total autonomy in all the dimensions of the concept. There will always be a need to coordinate in some manner with external organizations and institutions. These actions will always be shaped by power relations, which tend to limit the true autonomy of the subordinate organization. Perhaps Aguilar et al (1997) summed it up best when they pointed out that autonomy should be seen as a process rather than a static concept, and is constantly being renegotiated and re-conceptualized by women’s movements across the world, each according to their particular set of historical, economic and social circumstances.
CHAPTER 9
CONCLUSIONS: TO WHAT EXTENT CAN SUCCESSFUL, AUTONOMOUS WOMEN’S ORGANIZATIONS EMERGE FROM CLASS-BASED MASS ORGANIZATIONS?

So, what does the case study of FEMUPROCAN tells us about the possibility of building successful, autonomous women’s organizations out of class-based mass organizations? In Nicaragua, I argue, far from being a hindrance to the construction of successful, autonomous women’s movements’ roots in Sandinista mass organizations actually contributed to their success. The leaders of both FEMUPROCAN and the MEC were able to bring a number of significant resources with them from their parent organizations including self-confidence, organizing skills and contacts with international funders and transnational social movement activists (Kampwirth 2004). These contacts were vital for the survival of the organizations, as they are totally dependent on funding from international NGOs for their success. Additionally, long histories of organizing in prominent positions within the UNAG women’s secretariat gave the leaders of FEMUPROCAN increased legitimacy and acceptance among Nicaraguan policy makers.

Both the MEC and FEMUPROCAN seem to have been successful in establishing a high degree of political autonomy and are not associated with any particular political party. Bickham Mendez goes into significant detail about the tensions caused by double militancy, being active in the party and in the women’s organization for the MEC, especially in the beginning. Although FEMUPROCAN members mentioned that at first it had been difficult to learn how to get along with supporters of different political parties, the problems of double militancy do not seem to have been as severe or reached as far up the organization as they did in the MEC. Perhaps this is partly due to the fact that
FEMUPROCAN emerged three years later (1997) than the MEC (1994) and also due to the particular mass movement from which they emerged. UNAG, FEMUPROCAN’s “parent,” is widely regarded as having been the most autonomous of the Sandinista mass organizations (Luciak 1987, 1990). It is likely that by the time FEMUPROCAN was founded, the successes of autonomous women’s movements had been firmly established and that there was a better understanding of what the concept of autonomy actually entailed. Nevertheless, by the time I conducted my research (2009) both organizations seem to have successfully distanced themselves from the FSLN, or any other political party.

So, why was this possible in the Nicaraguan case but more difficult in places such as Mozambique, where autonomous women’s movements did not emerge until much later? In her comparative analysis of Nicaragua and Mozambique, Jennifer Leigh Disney (2008) suggests that it is related to two factors: the duration of autonomy struggles in a country, which provides the foundation for autonomous women’s organizations and developments in electoral politics. She argues that the organizations such as FEMUPROCAN and MEC were able to break away from and resist affiliation with any particular political party precisely because the FSLN lost the elections in 1990, 1996 and 2001. By the time the FSLN regained power in 2007 the autonomous women’s movements had developed to such an extent that it would have made it extremely difficult for the party to try and regain control over them. In contrast, in Mozambique, the revolutionary party, Frelimo was re-elected. Disney illustrates that in many ways it is much harder to break away from party affiliation when the state is a “friend” to the women’s movements (at least rhetorically, whatever the practical
limitations), as was the case in Mozambique. In Nicaragua on the other hand the situation changed to that of “state as enemy” after 1990, making the fight for autonomy from party politics much easier. This situation has not changed with the reelection of Daniel Ortega, given his administration’s attempts to suppress the women’s movement.

Equally, the main weakness of FEMUPROCAN – its total dependence on external funding from NGOs for the survival and maintenance of the organization − seems to be a problem shared by many similar organizations, including the MEC. FEMUPROCAN does not seem likely to be able to significantly increase its rate of subscriptions any time soon and is hoping that developing the business networks and emphasizing commercialization and marketing will allow the cooperatives and networks to begin generating profits and become self-sustaining. In its five year plan (2006-2010) the MEC also sets out its objective to develop projects to increase the economic sustainability of their organization. However, it is far from certain how long it would take for the organizations to develop this self-sufficiency, or if they ever will. I am not aware of any major women’s organization comprised of poor women that emerged from a mass organization in the developing world that is completely self-sustaining financially. The members of both the MEC and FEMUPROCAN are, for the most part, very poor and may not be able to spare the money to contribute to their organizations or allow the cooperative to retain some of the money from the business ventures. It is not clear how exactly the MEC is attempting to become self-sustaining, but in the case of FEMUPROCAN it is clear that they still have a long way to go in developing the business and marketing skills of their members and expanding the scope of projects that might help them to generate real profits. They are struggling to convince their
members that they cannot sit around and wait for development to happen to them but rather they themselves can be active agents of development. Part of the difficulty in achieving this stems from years of handouts to cooperative members from the Sandinista party and from development NGOs, which created a culture of dependency among some members. So, is economic autonomy possible? I argue that in Nicaragua, the answer unfortunately has to be, not right now but perhaps, hopefully, one day in the future. For FEMUPROCAN to have the best chance of achieving it would require: favorable economic, political and social contexts; the pursuit and development of larger scale initiatives with big companies such as that being negotiated with Walmart (and a government willing to introduce legislation to protect small producers in their negotiations and require prompt payment by the supermarket); the development of a greater number of processed or packaged products that add value; higher standards of quality control exercised by the members and continuing innovation and a search for new, profitable initiatives by FEMUPROCAN’s leaders and members at the grassroots.

There is no reason why the NGOs upon which FEMUPROCAN is dependent cannot use their international linkages to develop, with the participation of FEMUPROCAN, profitable new product lines or ventures such as volunteer or community tourism.

This dependency on external sources of funding limits the organizational autonomy of FEMUPROCAN and the MEC. However, organizations can attempt to limit the amount of control exercised by the NGO partners in the development process in a number of ways. In the case of FEMUPROCAN they have preferred to carefully consider the organizations with which they work and build up long-lasting meaningful
relationships with a few organizations. As a result, their relationships with their partners are characterized by mutual respect and shared beliefs about some of the priorities for action and ways of working. This strategy appears to be paying off but perhaps FEMUPROCAN would benefit from gradually increasing the number of these partners. This would, if done carefully, allow the organization to expand the scope of its projects and proposals and to tackle a wider range of issues as well as reduce its vulnerability should one of these partners suddenly withdraw its support. As such, FEMUPROCAN does not appear to have developed a coherent strategy to do this. Moreover, even the most “hands-off” NGOs attach conditions to their funding, and negotiations between partners, however respectful or friendly, are always shaped by unequal power relations, particularly when one partner controls the purse strings.

In both MEC and FEMUPROCAN there is a tendency for the members and regional offices to rely heavily on the national office to formulate and find funding for initiatives. This leads to heavy workloads for the national teams and a lack of dynamism and leadership at the lower levels of the organizations. Both MEC and FEMUPROCAN have been keen to decentralize much decision making and encourage regional offices to take a larger role in their own development. Bickham Mendez describes how some of the offices were much more capable and successful than others in this respect. She describes how the women in regional offices were sometimes resentful if the national team told them they needed to develop their own capacities and begin acting more independently. She also described this was made more difficult because it was the members of the national office who had the technical skills and the contacts to develop projects and meet the requirements of international funders. They were therefore much
more successful in getting funding. The same can be said, to some degree, about FEMUPROCAN. Aside from a few examples of successful projects formulated and implemented by regional offices such as Nueva Guinea, the vast majority of FEMUPROCAN’s members lacked the skills and the contacts to formulate and gain approval for their projects, and relied on the national leadership. However, there did not seem to be resentment towards the national team but rather a sense of resignation by the women at the grassroots who were unable to find funding. They agreed that the national team had clearly stated their role as coordinator and facilitator of training programs, not as the provider of handouts. So, it seems that for many organizations, decentralization or the autonomy of regional offices was limited primarily by a lack of professional project formulation skills and difficulty in making independent contacts with NGOs. Whereas the top of the organizations may have undergone a significant degree of “NGO-ization” the regional leaderships have not as yet, which puts them at a disadvantage in their competition for funding. Greater regional autonomy is possible, providing the leadership of FEMUPROCAN and similar organizations is prepared to invest in the training and professionalization of its regional coordinators and assist them in making NGO contacts.

To summarize, women’s organizations emerging from class-based mass organizations do seem to be able to gain a high level of political autonomy and successfully distance themselves from party politics. Their main stumbling block concerns economic autonomy, which in turn places limits on their organizational autonomy. There are ways in which the women’s organizations can negotiate the extent of these limits and it does appear possible for the organizations to define their own
strategies and stick to them, compromising only on smaller details but not on their overall mission and objectives. Total autonomy is not only almost impossible to achieve but would also be unwise and result in the isolation and marginalization of the organizations. After all, the partner NGOs provide many more benefits besides money, including exchange of information and ideas in which both sides benefit in important ways from the relationship. FEMUPROCAN and MEC are thus attempting a delicate balancing act between autonomy, collaboration and dependency in which they are constantly seeking to renegotiate and redefine the meaning of autonomy.

Some of FEMUPROCAN’s successes are undeniable – the literacy program and self esteem workshops have resulted in a sense of empowerment among the members, and significant numbers of them are exercising their leadership skills in their local communities. Training in technical skills and personal development workshops have combined to give the women a sense that they do have something important to say and ought to be listened to. Moreover, belonging to an organization, in addition to providing the women with a space in which to share their experiences and find moral support, has also contributed to a feeling that they are “somebody.” They are gaining recognition for their achievements and abilities among local government officials and within their communities.

The organization has also been very successful in legalizing the situation of the cooperatives. They have made much more limited progress on the issue of women’s access to land and credit, with the majority of FEMUPROCAN’s members still working land that is not their own. Nevertheless, the organization has proved that it can still find a receptive audience among policy makers on some issues, participating in the
Coordinator for Rural Women, the body responsible for the formulation of a bill proposing the establishment of a land bank for women. Should this bill be approved it would mark a major step forward for the organization on this topic.

Having said that, the success of FEMUPROCAN and other women's organizations, such as MEC, is hampered by the increasing division and polarization of Nicaraguan society. This has a number of effects including a refusal by local government officials to work with people supporting different parties and the increasing fragmentation of the women's movements in the country. Lacking sufficient coordination, the women's movements appear to have lost their way in recent years and have thus seen their ability to successfully pressure policy makers seriously reduced.

The poverty and lack of education of many members of women's organizations representing rural and urban women also limits the success of these organizations. As discussed above most women do not have the skills or training to formulate their own projects. With only basic levels of literacy members find it more difficult to defend their rights and mount sophisticated challenges to those in power. Although FEMUPROCAN and MEC are educating their members about their rights and what they are entitled to under Nicaraguan law, many women still have only a limited knowledge and understanding of the implications of existing legislation. Organizations such as FEMUPROCAN find it more difficult to collect detailed monitoring data from their membership or convince them of the need to keep written records of income, expenses, meetings, etc. than those comprised of professional, more highly educated women.

In terms of the development of a gender consciousness among their members, FEMUPROCAN has won praise for its detailed, complex treatment of gender and
development in its training sessions and in its publications. However, the organization has focused almost entirely on women’s economic and political rights and has shied away from campaigning or holding workshops on more controversial issues such as sexual and reproductive health. But this does not mean that women’s organizations cannot tackle these issues and still be successful. In contrast to FEMUPROCAN, the MEC actively campaigned against the ban on therapeutic abortion and argues that such issues are an integral part of its work. It is unclear why FEMUPROCAN has not taken more action or developed more extensive training programs on such issues. It may be that they fear alienating their membership, it may be that they see therapeutic abortion as mainly an elite issue and not of great importance to their membership or, and in my opinion, most likely they do not want to lose the position of acceptance they have gained with the government as a legitimate representative of rural women. This might lead them to stay away from controversial topics that have resulted in increasing suppression and condemnation of the women’s movements by the Ortega administration. By not ruffling too many feathers they may hope to find a more sympathetic ear to their particular demands and retain their positions of influence within government bodies related to the cooperative sector. Whatever their reasons for doing so I argue that FEMUPROCAN’s decision to focus only on a limited range of issues neglects a significant part of rural women’s lives and the ways in which topics such as reproductive health affect rural women’s abilities to produce and provide for their families. They will only ever meet with partial success in their mission to increase rural women producers and entrepreneurs’ participation in the economic and social affairs of the country if they continue to focus on this, fairly narrow, set of issues.
Whereas the MEC has developed a series of linkages and spaces in which it coordinates with a number of different currents in the women’s movements in Nicaragua, FEMUPROCAN has mainly, thus far, concentrated on building alliances with the cooperative sector. Though this has helped them to establish themselves as the accepted leader of the women’s cooperative movement in Nicaragua (despite the fact that with only 1,767 direct members FEMUPROCAN remains small relative to the numbers of rural women in mixed sex organizations such as UNAG) building bridges with the women’s movement would increase their ability to lobby the government on a wider range of issues. Perhaps FEMUPROCAN needs to take a more proactive approach in this regard, identifying women’s groups and bodies with which to work and initiating contact.

FEMUPROCAN has met with only limited, gradual success in changing the mentalities of its members from individualism to cooperativism and from producers to businesswomen. The vast majority of their members still produce and sell their goods on an individual basis, not through the cooperative. Many of these cooperatives thus do not generate any profit, (a large percentage of which is kept by the intermediary merchants who come to the communities) and the members normally do not have a buyer agreed in advance, often forcing them to sell at low prices. Perhaps the business networks offer a way out of this problem especially if they are funded from the beginning out of the pockets of the members, and clear, detailed regulations for membership are devised and enforced. However, it is too early to tell at present and many of the networks were still in the planning phase when I visited.
Both FEMUPROCAN and MEC have ambitious goals for ending women’s subordination in Nicaragua. Despite advances in certain areas, some members of both organizations still faced conflicts with their husbands or other male family members, and all suffered from the machismo and discrimination still present in Nicaraguan society. However, changing such entrenched beliefs is a long, time consuming and delicate process and we should not expect gender equality to be achieved overnight. Nevertheless FEMUPROCAN, with its focus on the family and non-confrontational approach to many gender issues, appears to have limited the opposition of many men to women’s participation in the organization and, indeed, many have actually begun to support and approve of their partners’ membership in the organization. What would happen to these men’s support if the organizational was to begin to tackle more controversial subjects is not certain, but it may be that FEMUPROCAN has steered clear of addressing such subjects as an organization in an attempt to minimize intra-household conflict.

In terms of lobbying and advocacy, it appears that FEMUPROCAN has not yet developed the same level of public relations expertise and lobbying activities as the MEC. The latter have identified and elaborated a series of well articulated campaigns on topics such as “Work and Health” and “Safety and Work”. Whereas FEMUPROCAN has been involved in a number of initiatives it has not yet managed to publicize and promote them to the same degree. They are currently hoping to develop their media coverage at the local level and there are some signs of growing national recognition such as the report on watering systems which aired on national television in March 2010. MEC shows that it is possible for women’s organizations emerging from the old Sandinista
organizations to gain a national presence and high public profile. In this respect, FEMUPROCAN has some serious catching up to do if it wants to be recognized by the general public in Nicaragua as a leading representative of the rural women’s movements. They claim to be focusing on developing lobbying strategies at all levels of the organization at present but it remains to be seen how successful they will be in this regard, particularly because lobbying and advocacy work can often be expensive, and money is one thing that FEMUPROCAN definitely does not have a surplus of.

Having said that, the fact that FEMUPROCAN is the only all women organization of rural cooperatives in Nicaragua and their inclusion in the two most important government bodies dealing with the cooperative sector suggests that even if FEMUPROCAN still needs to gain acceptance among some sectors of the general public they have managed to convince those in government that they are a legitimate representative of rural women. This is certainly a mark of a successful organization.

To conclude, both FEMUPROCAN and the MEC are recognized as some of the leading organizations in their respective currents of the women’s movements in Nicaragua. Both have achieved significant levels of recognition and acceptance by policy makers and have been able to make some real changes to the lives of their members. So, in this regard the answer to the question of whether successful, autonomous women’s organizations can emerge from class-based mass organizations would appear to be yes. However, their success is limited in a number of important ways. Perhaps their biggest weakness is a lack of economic self-sustainability and their consequent dependence on international NGOs for funding. Secondly, their success depends on the existence of a favorable political, economic and social climate which
affects the extent to which the organizations are able to make progress towards achieving their objectives. Consequently both the current global economic crisis and the hostility of the Ortega administration towards women’s organizations campaigning on more controversial topics limits the ability of FEMUPROCAN and similar organizations to achieve their goals. To be truly successful these organizations would likely need to coordinate with strong and vibrant women’s movements which would enable them to effectively pressure the government to agree to some of their demands. In addition such movements play a crucial role in turning the tide of public opinion in a country. Lastly, they attract the attention and support of a wide range of international actors, from social movement activists, international NGOs to academics and students of social movements. However, the Nicaraguan women’s movements appear to be experiencing a period of fragmentation and disarray at present and have lost much of their former dynamism. It remains to be seen whether this will be only a temporary phase or if we are witnessing the beginning of a long-term decline in the strength of Nicaraguan women’s movements. I, for one, hope that women’s organizations such as FEMUPROCAN make the best of this situation by engaging in much needed re-evaluation and regrouping in order to develop new strategies for action and new forms of coordination that would usher in a revival of women’s activism in the country. Otherwise it will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, for women’s movements to make real progress towards achieving their goals.
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Eleanor Jane Sintjago (nee Lewis) was born in 1984 in Worcestershire, UK and grew up in the town of Bromsgrove, Worcestershire. After finishing high school she moved to Leeds, Yorkshire in 2003 and attended the University of Leeds, graduating with a BA in Spanish Language and Literature. During her third year of studies at the University of Leeds, she lived a year in Barcelona, Spain and attended the Universitat Pompeu Fabra where she practiced her Spanish and studied Catalan.

After completing her bachelor’s degree she spent six months travelling to South America, New Zealand, Australia, Thailand, Laos and China. She has also travelled extensively through Europe and Mexico. She plans to work at a non-profit or governmental organization where she can apply her knowledge of Spanish and Latin American Studies.