

FEMINIST
LOCAL AND GLOBAL
THEORY
PERSPECTIVES
READER

CAROLE R. McCANN AND SEUNG-KYUNG KIM

ROUTLEDGE
NEW YORK AND LONDON

Ultimately it is the existing structure of the economy and society that has to be changed if the exploitation of women in the labor force is to be eliminated. Capitalist market forces and employment based on imperialist exploitation cannot liberate women from patriarchal exploitation that is the very condition for their entry into wage labor in multinational factories producing for the world market. In the long run, capitalism and imperialism only perpetuate and may even reinforce patriarchal relations of production, which in turn reinforce capitalist and imperialist relations of production. Although the liberation of women workers as women and as workers can only come about through some combined struggle against capitalist, imperialist, and patriarchal exploitation, the specific strategies to be undertaken depend on the particular historical, social, economic, and political circumstances of each national unit in the context of an international capitalism.

Notes

1. For a few examples of relevant case studies, see Snow 1977, Lim 1978b, Paglaban 1978, Grossman 1979, Fernández Kelly 1980, United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) 1980.
2. See, for example, Leontiades 1971, Adam 1975, Moxon 1974, UNIDO 1979, Fröbel, Heinrichs, and Kreye 1980.
3. Indigenous firms have to compete with multinationals in the labor market; multinationals are the leaders in setting wages and working conditions. In Singapore, the improvement of wages and working conditions in the female labor market are illustrated by the following facts: Starting wages have more than doubled in five years (ahead of inflation); fringe benefits have improved (for example, the extension of paid holiday time to two weeks in the year); part-time shifts have been instituted to suit housewives; the desired age of workers has risen from sixteen to twenty-three years to up to fifty years; there has been a dramatic reduction in rotating shifts and microscope work in electronics factories; and a five-day week is typical. Singapore workers have become a "labor aristocracy" in the Southeast Asian region.

23.

MOBILIZATION WITHOUT EMANCIPATION? WOMEN'S INTERESTS, THE STATE, AND REVOLUTION IN NICARAGUA

Maxine Molyneux

The fall of the Nicaraguan dictator, Anastasio Somoza, in July 1979 could not have been achieved without the mass urban insurrections which brought the capital, Managua, and other key cities under the increasing control of the revolutionary forces. This was the culmination of a process of growing popular opposition characterized by the incorporation of a wide cross-section of the population into political activity.

Large numbers of women from all social classes joined the youth and the unwaged poor men who entered the realm of politics in the 1970s, many for the first time. Women's participation in the Nicaraguan revolution was probably greater than in any other recent revolution with the exception of Vietnam. Women made up approximately 30 percent of the FSLN's combat forces, and at its peak in 1979, the women's organization of the FSLN, the Association of Women Confronting the National Problem, or AMPRONAC, had over 8,000 members.¹ Many more women who were not involved in organized politics provided vital logistical and backup support to the revolutionary forces, and still others gave their support silently by refusing to denounce their revolutionary neighbors, or by hiding a fleeing combatant.²

The extent of women's participation in the struggle against Somoza has been regarded by many authors as an obvious enough response to the widespread repression and brutality of the regime on the one hand, and the appeal of the FSLN's vision and strategy on the other.³ The specific ways in which women became political subjects has not been subjected to rigorous analysis, partly because it seems obvious and partly because women's extensive revolutionary activism is seen as the effect of the universalizing character of the opposition to Somoza. In the words of one author, this process dissolved the specificity of political subjects in the generalized struggle against the dictatorship.⁴ Put simply, all were united against the dictatorship, and differences of class, age, and gender were transcended. It was this unity that accounted for the strength and ultimate success of the opposition movement.

However, much depends upon what is implied by subjects "losing their specificity" and goals being universalized. For the universalization of the goals of revolu-

tionary subjects does not necessarily entail a loss of their specific *identities*, and it is certainly doubtful whether this can be said to have happened in the case of women. As far as women were concerned it would be difficult to argue that a loss of their gender identities occurred, except perhaps to a limited extent among the front line *guerrilleros* where a degree of masculinization and a blurring of gender distinctions took place.⁵ Rather, representations of women acquired new connotations, ones that *politicized* the social roles with which women are conventionally associated, but did not dissolve them.

The participation of women in political activity was certainly part of the wider process of popular mobilization, but it was entered into from a distinctive social position to men, one crucially shaped by the sexual division of labor. Moreover, for different classes and groups of women, the meaning of political participation also differed, whether in the case of students, young middle-class women, or the women in the *barrios*.⁶ For many poor women, entry into political life began with the earthquake of 1972, when in the aftermath, the neighborhood committees were organized to care for the victims, feed the dispossessed, and tend the wounded. The anger that followed Somoza's misappropriation of the relief funds intensified as the brutal methods used to contain opposition escalated. Many of these women experienced their transition from relief workers to participants in the struggle as a natural extension, albeit in combative form, of their protective role in the family as providers and crucially as mothers. This transition to "combative motherhood" was assisted by the propaganda efforts of the radical clergy, the Sandinistas, and by AMPRONAC, which linked these traditional identities to more general strategic objectives, and celebrated women's role in the creation of a more just and humanitarian social order. The revolutionary appropriation of the symbol of motherhood has since been institutionalized in the FSLN's canonization of the "Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs," a support group which remains an active part of the Sandinistas' political base.⁷

However, if the revolution did not demand the dissolution of women's *identities*, it did require the *subordination* of their *specific interests* to the broader goals of overthrowing Somoza and establishing a new social order. This raises an important question which lies at the heart of debates about the relationship between socialist revolution and women's emancipation. For if women surrender their specific interests in the universal struggle for a different society, at what point are these interests rehabilitated, legitimated, and responded to by the revolutionary forces or by the new socialist state? Some feminist writing implies that they are never adequately reestablished and that this is why socialism⁸ has failed to fulfill its promise to emancipate women. Such critics point out that not only does gender inequality still persist in these states, but also in some ways women could be considered to be worse off than they were before the revolution. Far from having been "emancipated" as the official rhetoric sometimes claims, women's work load has been increased and there has been no substantial redefinition of the relations between the sexes. To the traditional roles of housewife and mother have been added those of full-time wage worker and political activist, while the provision of childcare

agencies remains inadequate. As one Soviet woman recently summed it up, "If this is emancipation, then I'm against it."⁹

The negative image of socialist states in this regard is reinforced by their failure to establish anything near sexual parity in the organs of political power, and by the absence of real popular democracy. The conventional explanations of these shortcomings—at least in the poorer states—in terms of resource scarcity, international pressure, underdevelopment, or the "weight of tradition," are greeted with increasing skepticism. A feminist writer recently expressed an emerging consensus when she wrote: "if a country can eliminate the tsetse fly, it can get an equal number of men and women on its politburo."¹⁰

This article focuses on the Nicaraguan revolution and its progress since the seizure of state power by the Sandinistas in July 1979, in order to consider the proposition that women's interests are not served by socialist revolutions....

Women's Interests

The concept of women's interests is central to feminist evaluations of socialist societies and indeed social policies in general. Most feminist critiques of socialist regimes rest on an implicit or explicit assumption that there is a *given entity*, *women's interests*, that is ignored or overridden by policymakers. However, the question of these interests is far more complex than is frequently assumed. As the problems of deploying any theory of interest in the analysis of postrevolutionary situations are considerable, the following discussion must be considered an attempt to open up debate rather than to attain closure....

Although it is true that at a certain level of abstraction women can be said to have some interests in common, there is no consensus over what these interests are or how they are to be formulated. This is in part because there is no theoretically adequate and universally applicable causal explanation of women's subordination from which a general account of women's interests can be derived. Women's oppression is recognized as being multicausal in origin and mediated through a variety of different structures, mechanisms, and levels which may vary considerably across space and time. There is *therefore continuing* debate over the *appropriate site* of *feminist struggle* and over whether it is more important to focus attempts at change on objective or subjective elements, "men" or "structures"; laws, institutions, or interpersonal power relations—or all of them simultaneously. Because a general conception of interests (one which has political validity) must be derived from a theory of how the subordination of a determinate social category is secured, it is difficult to see how it would overcome the two most salient and intractable features of women's oppression—its multicausal nature, and the extreme variability of its forms of existence across class and nation. These factors vitiate attempts to speak *without qualification* of a unitary category "women" with a set of already constituted interests common to it. A theory of interests that has an application to the debate about women's capacity to struggle for and benefit from social change must begin by recognizing difference rather than by assuming homogeneity.

It is clear from the extensive feminist literature on women's oppression that a number of different conceptions prevail of what women's interests are, and that these in turn rest implicitly or explicitly, upon different theories of the causes of gender inequality. For the purpose of clarifying the issues discussed here, three conceptions of women's interests, which are frequently conflated, will be delineated. These are women's interests, strategic gender interests, and practical gender interests.

Women's interests. Although present in much political and theoretical discourse, the concept of women's interests is, for the reasons given earlier, a highly contentious one. Because women are positioned within their societies through a variety of different means—among them, class, ethnicity, and gender—the interests they have as a group are similarly shaped in complex and sometimes conflicting ways. It is therefore difficult, if not impossible, to generalize about the interests of women. Instead, we need to specify how the various categories of women might be affected differently, and act differently on account of the particularities of their social positioning and their chosen identities. However, this is not to deny that women may have certain general interests in common. These can be called gender interests to differentiate them from the false homogeneity imposed by the notion of women's interests.

Strategic gender interests. Gender interests are those that women (or men, for that matter) may develop by virtue of their social positioning through gender attributes. Gender interests can be either strategic or practical, each being derived in a different way and each involving differing implications for women's subjectivity. Strategic interests are derived in the first instance deductively, that is, from the analysis of women's subordination and from the formulation of an alternative, more satisfactory set of arrangements to those which exist. These ethical and theoretical criteria assist in the formulation of strategic objectives to overcome women's subordination, such as the abolition of the sexual division of labor, the alleviation of the burden of domestic labor and childcare, the removal of institutionalized forms of discrimination, the attainment of political equality, the establishment of freedom of choice over childbearing, and the adoption of adequate measures against male violence and control over women. These constitute what might be called strategic gender interests, and they are the ones most frequently considered by feminists to be women's "real" interests. The demands that are formulated on this basis are usually termed "feminist" as is the level of consciousness required to struggle effectively for them.¹¹

Practical gender interests. Practical gender interests are given inductively and arise from the concrete conditions of women's positioning within the gender division of labor. In contrast to strategic gender interests, these are formulated by the women who are themselves within these positions rather than through external interventions. Practical interests are usually a response to an immediate perceived need, and they do not generally entail a strategic goal such as women's emancipation or gender equality. Analyses of female collective action frequently deploy this conception of interests to explain the dynamic and goals of women's participation

in social action. For example, it has been argued that by virtue of their place within the sexual division of labor as those primarily responsible for their household's daily welfare, women have a special interest in domestic provision and public welfare.¹² When governments fail to provide these basic needs, women withdraw their support; when the livelihood of their families—especially their children—is threatened, it is women who form the phalanxes of bread rioters, demonstrators, and petitioners. It is clear, however, from this example that gender and class are closely intertwined; it is, for obvious reasons, usually poor women who are so readily mobilized by economic necessity. Practical interests, therefore, cannot be assumed to be innocent of class effects. Moreover, these practical interests do not in themselves challenge the prevailing forms of gender subordination, even though they arise directly out of them. An understanding of this is vital in understanding the capacity or failure of states or organizations to win the loyalty and support of women.

The pertinence of these ways of conceptualizing interests for an understanding of women's consciousness is a complex matter, but three initial points can be made. First, the relationship between what we have called strategic gender interests and women's recognition of them and desire to realize them cannot be assumed. Even the lowest common denominator of interests which might seem uncontested and of universal applicability (such as complete equality with men, control over reproduction, and greater personal autonomy and independence from men) are not readily accepted by all women. This is not just because of "false consciousness" as is frequently supposed—although this can be a factor—but because such changes realized in a piecemeal fashion could threaten the short-term practical interests of some women, or entail a cost in the loss of forms of protection which are not then compensated for in some way. Thus the formulation of strategic interests can only be effective as a form of intervention when full account is taken of these practical interests. Indeed, it is the politicization of these practical interests and their transformation into strategic interests that women can identify with and support which constitutes a central aspect of feminist political practice.

Second, the way in which interests are formulated—whether by women or political organizations—will vary considerably across space and time and may be shaped in different ways by prevailing political and discursive influences. This is important to bear in mind when considering the problem of internationalism and the limits and possibilities of cross-cultural solidarity. Finally, because women's interests are significantly broader than gender interests, and are shaped to a considerable degree by class factors, women's unity and cohesion on gender issues cannot be assumed. Although they can form the basis of unity around a common program, such unity has to be constructed—it is never given. Moreover, even when unity exists it is always conditional, and the historical record suggests that it tends to collapse under the pressure of acute class conflict. It is also threatened by differences of race, ethnicity, and nationality. It is therefore difficult to argue, as some feminists have done, that gender issues are primary for women, at all times.¹³

This general problem of the conditionality of women's unity and the fact that gender issues are not necessarily primary is nowhere more clearly illustrated than by

the example of revolutionary upheaval. In such situations, gender issues are frequently displaced by class conflict, principally because although women may suffer discrimination on the basis of gender and may be aware that they do, they nonetheless suffer differentially according to their social class. These differences crucially affect attitudes toward revolutionary change, especially if this is in the direction of socialism. This does not mean that, because gender interests are an insufficient basis for unity among women in the context of class polarization, they disappear. Rather, they become more specifically attached to and defined by social class.

An awareness of the complex issues involved serves to guard against any simple treatment of the question of whether a state is or is not acting in the interests of women, that is, whether all or any of these interests are represented within the state. Before any analysis can be attempted it is necessary to specify in what sense the term "interest" is being deployed. A state may gain the support of women by satisfying either their immediate practical demands or certain class interests, or both. It may do this without advancing their strategic objective interests at all. However, the claims of such a state to be supporting women's *emancipation* could not be substantiated merely on the evidence that it maintained women's support on the basis of representing some of their more practical or class interests....

The Nicaraguan Revolution

... The Nicaraguan revolution also gave hope to those who supported women's liberation, for here too, the Sandinistas were full of promise. The revolution occurred in the period after the upsurge of the "new feminism" of the late sixties, at a time when Latin American women were mobilizing around feminist demands in countries like Mexico, Peru, and Brazil. The Sandinistas' awareness of the limitations of orthodox Marxism encouraged some to believe that a space would be allowed for the development of new social movements such as feminism. Some members of the leadership seemed aware of the importance of women's liberation and of the need for it in Nicaragua. The early issues of *Somos AMNLAE*, one of two newspapers of the women's organization, contained articles about feminist issues and addressed some of the ongoing debates within Western feminism. Unlike many of its counterparts elsewhere, the FSLN, the revolutionary party, did not denounce feminism as a "counterrevolutionary diversion," and some women officials had even gone on record expressing enthusiasm for its ideals.

In practical terms too, there was promise. The FSLN had shown itself capable of mobilizing many thousands of women in support of its struggle. It had done this partly through AMPRONAC, the women's organization that combined a commitment to overthrow the Somoza regime with that of struggling for women's equality. At its peak in 1979, two years after it was founded, AMPRONAC had attracted over 8,000 members. Feminist observers noted the high level of participation of women in the ranks of the combat forces, epitomized in Dora Maria Tellez's role as Commander Two in the seizure of the Presidential Palace by the guerillas in

1978, and they debated how the Sandinista commitment to women's equality would be realized if they triumphed....

A detailed analysis of the impact of Sandinista social policies is beyond the scope of this paper.¹⁴ Instead, I will briefly summarize some of the relevant conclusions by considering the effects of the reforms in terms of the three categories of interest referred to earlier.

If we disaggregate women's interests and consider how different categories of women fared since 1979, it is clear that the majority of women in Nicaragua were positively affected by the government's redistribution policies.¹⁵ This is so even though fundamental structures of gender inequality were not dismantled. In keeping with the socialist character of the government, policies were targeted in favor of the poorest sections of the population and focused on basic needs provision in the areas of health, housing, education, and food subsidies. In the short span of only five years, the Sandinistas reduced the illiteracy rate from over 50 percent to 13 percent; doubled the number of educational establishments, increased school enrollment, eradicated a number of mortal diseases, provided the population with basic healthcare services, and achieved more in their housing program than Somoza had in his entire period of rule.¹⁶ In addition, the land reform canceled peasants' debts and gave thousands of rural workers their own parcels of land or secured them stable jobs on the state farms and cooperatives.¹⁶

In terms of *practical* gender interests, these redistributive policies have also had gender as well as class effects. By virtue of their place within the sexual division of labor, women are disproportionately responsible for childcare and family health, and they are particularly concerned with housing and food provision. The policy measures directed at alleviating the situation in these areas has, not surprisingly, elicited a positive response from the women affected by them as borne out by the available research into the popularity of the government. Many of the campaigns mounted by AMNLAE have been directed at resolving some of the practical problems women face, as is exemplified by its mother and child healthcare program, or by its campaign aimed at encouraging women to conserve domestic resources to make the family income stretch further and thus avoid pressure building up over wage demands or shortages.¹⁷ A feature of this kind of campaign is its recognition of women's practical interests, but in accepting the division of labor and women's subordination within it, it may entail a denial of their strategic interests.

With respect to strategic interests, the acid test of whether women's emancipation is on the political agenda or not, the progress which was made is modest but significant. Legal reform, especially in the area of the family, has confronted the issue of relations between the sexes and of male privilege, by attempting to end a situation in which most men are able to evade responsibility for the welfare of their families, and become liable for a contribution paid in cash, in kind, or in the form of services. This also enabled the issue of domestic labor to be politicized in the discussions of the need to share this work equally among all members of the family....

Yet these qualifications are important nonetheless, and have a significance which goes beyond the Sandinista revolution to the wider question of the relationship between socialism and feminism. Three of these issues can be listed here in summary form. The first is that what we have called strategic gender interests—although recognized in the official theory and program of women's emancipation—remains rather narrowly defined, based as they are on the privileging of economic criteria. Feminist theories of sexual oppression, or the critique of the family or of male power have had little impact on official thinking, and indeed are sometimes suppressed as being too radical and too threatening to popular solidarity.¹⁸ There is a need for greater discussion and debate around these questions both among the people and within the organs of political power, so that the issue of women's emancipation remains alive and open, and does not become entombed within official doctrine.

The second issue concerns the relationship established by planners between the goal of women's emancipation and other goals, such as economic development, which have priority. It is not the *linkage* itself that constitutes the problem—principles like social equality and women's emancipation can only be realized within determinate conditions of existence. So linking the program for women's emancipation to these wider goals need not necessarily be a cause for concern because these wider goals may constitute the preconditions for realizing the principles. The question is rather, the nature of the link: Are gender interests articulated into a wider strategy of economic development (for example) or are they irretrievably subordinated to it? In the first case we would expect gender interests to be recognized as being specific and irreducible, and requiring something more for their realization than is generally provided for in the pursuit of the wider goals. Thus, when it is not possible to pursue a full program for women's emancipation this can be explained and debated. The goal can be left on the agenda, and every effort made to pursue it within the existing constraints. In the latter case, the specificity of gender interests is likely to be denied or its overall importance minimized. The issues are trivialized or buried; the program for women's emancipation remains one conceived in terms of how functional it is for achieving the wider goals of the state. . . .

And this raises the third general issue, which is that of political guarantees. For if gender interests are to be realized only within the context of wider considerations, it is essential that the political institutions charged with representing these interests have the means to prevent their being submerged altogether, and action on them being indefinitely postponed. Women's organizations, the official representatives of women's interests, should not conform to Lenin's conception of mass organizations as mere "transmission belts of the party." Rather, they must enjoy a certain independence and exercise power and influence over party policy, albeit within certain necessary constraints. In other words, the issue of gender interests and their means of representation cannot be resolved in the absence of a discussion of Socialist democracy and the forms of state appropriate to the transition to socialism; it is a question therefore not just of *what* interests are represented in the state, but ultimately and critically of *how* they are represented.

Notes

1. The Association of Women Confronting the National Problem was founded in 1977 to counter Somoza's excesses and promote gender equality. Its general secretary was Lea Guido, now minister of health. See AMNLAE, *Documentos de la Asamblea de AMNLAE*, Managua, 1981, for an account of AMPRONAC's history and its list of aims; and Margaret Randall, *Sandinista Daughters* (London: Zed Press, 1982).
2. For firsthand accounts of these activities see Randall; Jane Deighton, Rossana Horsley, Sarah Stewart, and Cathy Cain, *Sweet Ramparts* (London: War on Want/Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign, 1983); and Susan Ramirez-Horton, "The Role of Women in the Nicaraguan Revolution," in *Nicaragua in Revolution*, ed. Thomas Walker (New York: Praeger, 1982).
3. The women writers have been more interested in this question. See especially Elisabeth Maier, *Nicaragua, La Mujer en la Revolución* (Mexico: Ediciones de Cultura Popular, 1980).
4. José Luis Corrajo, "Posibilidades y límites de la política en los procesos de transición: el caso de Nicaragua" (Paper presented at the Amsterdam Latin American Centre [CEDLA] Conference on Nicaragua, 1983). The paper will be published in a forthcoming collection edited by David Slater, CEDLA.
5. Margaret Randall, *Inside the Nicaraguan Revolution* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1978); and *Sandinista Daughters*.
6. This is usually translated as "poor neighborhoods."
7. This organization is involved in various anti-imperialist and propeace campaigns and gives support to the bereaved and those anxious about daughters or sons in the battle zones.
8. The term "socialist" is used here for the sake of brevity. In relation to most of these states, some qualification is required along the lines suggested by Rudolf Bahro ("actually existing socialism"), for the reasons he advanced in his *The Alternative in Eastern Europe* (London: NLB, 1979). Others have not reached the level of economic socialization that qualifies them for inclusion in this category.
9. See, for example, the attitudes of women to this in Carola Hansson and Karin Liden's book of interviews, *Moscow Women* (New York: Pantheon, 1983).
10. Quoted in Catherine MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory," *Signs* (Spring 1982). For critical discussions, from differing perspectives, of the record of socialist states, see Maria Markus, "Women and Work: Emancipation at a Dead End," in *The Humanisation of Socialism*, ed. A. Hegedus et al. (London: Alison & Busby, 1976); and Judith Stacey, *Patriarchy and Socialist Revolution in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).
11. It is precisely around these issues, which also have an ethical significance, that the theoretical and political debate must focus. The list of strategic gender interest noted here is not exhaustive, but is merely exemplary.
12. See, for example, Temma Kaplan, "Female Consciousness and Collective Action: The Case of Barcelona, 1910-1918," *Signs* 7 (Spring 1982): 546-66; and Olwen Hufton, "Women in Revolution, 1789-1796," *Past and Present*, no. 53 (1971): 90-108.
13. This is the position of some radical feminist groups in Europe.
14. For a fuller account of Sandinista social policies see Thomas Walker, ed., *Nicaragua Five Years On* (New York: Praeger, 1985); and for their policies on women, see my article "Women," chap. 6 in the same volume.
15. See Walker.
16. For a discussion of the agrarian reform and its effects on women, see Carmen Diana Deere, "Co-operative Development and Women's Participation in Nicaragua's Agrarian Reform," *American Journal of Agrarian Economics* (December 1983).
17. MNLAE argued that the implications of women conserving resources under a socialist government were radically different from those under capitalism because in the first case the beneficiaries were the people, and in the second, private interests.
18. This argument was put forward to quash the new Family Law in the council of state. See reports in the national press during November 1982.