



Dining for Women

Making Connections August 2006 and May 2007 Nicaragua

Gender is an integral component of globalization, with gender-specific consequences for women's lives.... --Professor Jennifer Bickham Mendez

One can hardly blame poverty on globalization, for the poor have always been hard pressed to satisfy their basic human needs. What is different today is the scale and intensity of the hardships confronted daily by the embattled poor and the erosion of local cultures and national autonomy, as debtor nations mortgage their sovereignty to remote policy-makers responsible to no national institution or group, least of all to ... Indians or country women. --Professor Denis Lynn Daly Heyck

This is a house of struggle. I say that because we women have to work constantly to raise up our home, work the land and keep everything from dying.

--Nubia, a rural women's cooperative member

Women scholars who study the effect of globalization in Nicaragua and women workers who experience it firsthand testify that "progress" as defined in the current world economic order has made life even more difficult in Nicaragua, this "house of struggle," particularly for the women who have become increasingly responsible for "keep(ing) everything from dying" in it. Most policy-makers have missed or ignored this. Fortunately for some of Nicaragua's women, NGO's such as the Center for Development in Central America have not. This edition of *MC* will focus on some of the specific challenges that globalization has brought to Nicaraguan (and other) women. We'll examine how women's cooperatives like the CDCA-supported *Cooperativa Maquiladora Mujeres de Nueva Vida Internacional* (Nueva Vida Women's Sewing Cooperative or COMAMNUVI) are trying to overcome them. And, we'll "hear" what women "cooperativists" want to tell us about their lives, work, and dreams.

Focus: Women, Globalization, and the Cooperative Movement in Nicaragua

Nicaraguan women face age-old difficulties that have become even more intractable since the hope many had in the Sandinista Revolution met with disappointment. Stemming from that movement and the active role it gave to women were reforms that moved toward gender equality under the law and a number of women's organizations, some of which still strive to realize them. But an older "law" continues to rule the lives of women, the law of *machismo*, which is all too often sanctioned by government and social institutions as well as family and community structures and

attitudes. The fertility rate, in this culture in which male virility is honored, is very high: Four children on average for city women and seven for rural women. Four out of ten Nicaraguan girls have at least one child before they turn twenty. While fathering children is a sign of status for men, single motherhood is the norm due to many factors—family breakdown, the decimation of Nicaragua’s male population due to wars and violence, poverty, and the discouragement or lack of contraceptives. Family planning resources are slim. Abortion is once again illegal. Maternal healthcare, especially in rural areas, is low and the maternal mortality rate high. Violence against women is epidemic. Among married women, the UN estimates that the rate of abuse is, shockingly, 75%. Many women face raising multiple children without support in an environment of poverty, unemployment, and street violence. Many who lost what little they had in the devastation of Hurricane Mitch in 1998 have never recovered.

Compounding all this are economic changes that go back several decades. Poor countries like Nicaragua (the second poorest nation in the western hemisphere) struggle to participate in a global economy dominated by wealthy nations and international financial institutions such as the World Bank. They must compete in a scenario in which money, machines, and labor are constantly crossing borders and self-sufficiency is no longer the goal. Policies since the 1970s have increasingly turned Nicaragua into an export-oriented economy. That is, it is focused on marketing its resources to others rather than producing goods and services for itself. Nicaragua’s main resources are its people and its land. Globalization encourages the cheapest possible exploitation of these; only in Haiti is labor cheaper. Thus cheap production costs make Nicaragua an attractive place for multinational corporations to produce goods that they then export elsewhere.

Further, global market policy has also required Nicaragua to “liberalize” its regulation of capital and goods coming into the country. It has established “Free Trade Zones” in which companies may import technology and materials to make export products without paying duty. The vast majority of these companies are North American or Asian-owned. FTZ companies do not pay sales or income tax to Nicaragua or its local governments (revenue that could be used to support public services). At the same time, international lending institutions have called for drastic measures to stabilize Nicaragua’s economy. These include cutting or “privatization” of services. This has come at the expense of poor and working-class people who have less if any access to public employment and services (healthcare, transportation, education), credit, or training and who work (if they can find work) very hard and very cheaply for international employers who may have little interest in their well-being, culture, or land. Most of those working so hard and so cheaply are women with dependent children.

In rural areas, the export-oriented economy has been one reason why there are so many women heads of households. Men who migrate with agribusinesses often just don’t return home. But women also form a large part of the agricultural labor force of multinationals, in cotton and coffee production especially. Health is a main concern for these women, as cotton and coffee are “the two most pesticide-laden crops in the world.” Many of these women have a long personal history or family heritage of working the land. Some remember colonial conditions on large plantations; today’s corporate system may seem not very different to them. Others benefited from land reform under the Sandinista government only to have their land taken away during the Contra War or lost to natural disaster or the pressures of large-scale capitalist agribusiness that came with

liberalization. Women who have held onto farmland find it increasingly difficult to keep going. Their titular claims to land are often contested and the pressures of trying to farm small in a multinational agribusiness context are intense, especially when they must go it alone.

Part of a worldwide phenomenon of globalization, increasing numbers of young Nicaraguan women are finding that factory work is both their best hope and worst nightmare. As Dr. Jennifer Bickham Mendez explains, “In search of an ever cheaper, more docile workforce, transnational corporations locate production in the developing world, targeting a young female labor force for employment in assembly factories where they face long workdays, harsh working conditions, sexual harassment, and other human and labor rights violations.” Today, 90% of workers in FTZs are female.

In Nicaragua, most FTZ workers, the large majority of whom are women, work in clothing factories. Many factories will only hire women under 35 and only after they have taken a pregnancy test. Many qualify as “sweatshops” with long hours, a ban on union organization, dubious benefits if any, and dangerous or inhumane conditions. Workers make about \$2 a day on average.

Yet neither trouble nor work end at the factory for these women. According to Professors Mendez and Heyck, globalization has doubled women’s workload. They’ve become the “breadwinners” but remained domestic workers as well. Even when men are present, they do little to no domestic work. It’s also placed another double burden on many women with unemployed, despairing men in their lives. Exploited at work, these women come home to men prone to violence and alcohol or drug abuse. With the reduction or privatization of healthcare, education, childcare, and job training, poor working women can hardly turn to their government for support in taking care of themselves and their children.

How do Nicaraguan women survive? Is there any hope that they might not just survive but thrive? Both Professors Mendez and Heyck are quick to point out that Nicaraguan women’s internal resources are impressive, citing especially their tenacity and personal faith, as are their informal networks of friends and family and the support given by some religious groups—especially those for which social justice is mission. A few indigenous agencies offer support. *Maria Elena Cuadra*, for example, is an independent women’s agency formed in 1994 that advocates on behalf of FTZ workers, assists unemployed women, and raises awareness about gender-related issues. Most of the help comes from or is supported by NGOs. They provide, for example, over 70% of training opportunities available to Nicaraguan women.

Women’s cooperatives are among the most hopeful means of support. The history of women’s cooperatives goes back to the Revolution. Its basic ideals of women’s equality and worker-ownership are being kept alive in today’s cooperatives. Several types of cooperatives exist. They are small relative to the large FTZ factories and agribusinesses, but the potential and hope they offer to the women involved in them is great. Some consist of just a few women helping each other process farm produce. Others are savings and loan associations for women entrepreneurs. A few, such as COMAMNUVI, aspire to grow into businesses that can compete on the world marketplace—not just surviving globalization but thriving in it.

COMAMNUVI was generated by and depends on CDCA and other NGOs for financial, technical, and administrative support. It is owned, however, by the women

workers themselves, who put in “sweat equity” before becoming full members of the cooperative. Everyone (including “pre-members”) has social security and health benefits, including paid maternity leave. Retirement benefits, management and technical training, weekends off (when many attend school), overtime pay, and profit-sharing as well as a voice in decision-making and ownership are considered “rights” at COMAMNUVI. Members make about \$4.50 a day—over twice what FTZ workers can make.

The women of COMAMNUVI took an enormous gamble in creating the cooperative. The original members worked without pay for over two years, even building the factory themselves. They are just beginning to reap the benefits of their struggle, and still have enormous obstacles to overcome. But what they’ve accomplished so far is remarkable. The factory opened in spring 2001. By August 2002, 65 women working two shifts had completed 26,000 organic t-shirts for Maggie's Clean Clothes a socially-responsible internet company based in Michigan. In 2004, the women became pioneers of globalization when COMAMNUVI, under the name FAIR TRADE ZONE, received FTZ status—the first cooperative worldwide to do so.

Women’s cooperatives are still primarily tiny seeds that strive to blossom in the harsh climate of globalization. Even one that has grown so beautifully, such as COMAMNUVI, faces elements that could wither it. Recent new restrictions and red-tape placed on NGOs in Nicaragua are hurting cooperatives in general. New CAFTA (Central American Free Trade Agreement) regulations are limiting the amount of duty-free shipments and thus threaten the steadiness of production and profit potential. Developing the basic skills to run a complex organization and constantly updating them is challenging for the women, most of whom were unskilled laborers before COMAMNUVI. Yet they keep going. By the end of this year, COMAMNUVI hopes to build its own spinning factory that will use Nicaraguan-grown organic cotton, thus aiding Nicaraguan farmers and creating employment for more women. (It currently buys organic cotton from Peru, which is not a CAFTA country and thus its cotton is subject to import tariffs). As of this spring, the funds for the spinning plant were “on hold” but CDCA and COMAMNUVI members are going ahead with preparation and training for the new enterprise. Hope keeps growing.

And this is the primary impression one is left with by women’s cooperatives: despite enormous odds, women cooperativists persist not only because of the very real need to make money to survive but also because the cooperatives help them grow and thrive even in the midst of struggle. As Professor Heyck summarizes:

The cooperative endeavor has only sporadically brought monetary benefits, but it has brought rich rewards of a personal, social and cultural nature. The women ... have developed organizational, technical, social, problem-solving and negotiating skills, which have improved their productivity, contributed to the creation of alternatives to ease their plight, and strengthened their tenacity and determination to succeed.... (It) has also fostered their sense of personal dignity, their ability to...envision a different future, and to connect with others beyond their borders.

This month, DFW becomes part of that connection across borders by supporting CDCA and COMAMNUVI and learning about Nicaragua’s women. At the end of this edition, you’ll find an appendix that contains quotations from women

cooperativists, telling us about themselves. I encourage you to “invite them into your meeting” this month by reading them aloud together.

Socially-Responsible Shopping

- 1) See what the women of COMAMNUVI can do and do your wardrobe a favor to boot! Or rather, enhance it with the lovely (and very reasonably-priced) camisoles, fitted T-shirts, and criss-cross tops made of organic cotton by COMAMNUVI. These are available from Maggie’s Clean Clothes at <http://www.maggiesorganics.com/index.asp>. (The online catalogue will indicate the items produced in Nicaragua by “worker-owned” or “women’s sewing” cooperative).
- 2) For other North American organizations and businesses that carry products made by the COMAMNUVI (Any Presbyterians out there?), see <http://www.fairtradezone.jhc-cdca.org/order.htm>.

Btw, did you know that it takes about a 1/3lb of chemicals to grow the conventionally-produced cotton in one T-shirt? And that 5 of 9 major chemicals used in cotton production are carcinogenic? It’s something to think about.... For more, see <http://www.organicclothes.com/pages-beyond/environmental.html>.

Book of the Month

In her recent memoir, *The Country Under My Skin*, Nicaraguan activist and author Gioconda Belli said of herself, “I have been two women and I have lived two lives.” From Sandinista Revolutionary to stay-at-home-mom in L.A., Belli writes of reconciling those two lives, allowing “both women to live beneath the same skin.” Her activism goes on in her writing. She reminds one of the cooperativist women when she writes, “What is important is the stubborn determination to continue dreaming.” While her memoir and poetry are internationally acclaimed and compelling, I highlight her novel, *The Inhabited Woman*. Set against the backdrop of a revolutionary movement not unlike the Sandinista, it tells the story of a young woman of privilege who becomes a revolutionary as her life entwines with the life of an ancient Indian woman and women’s perpetual struggle for love and freedom.

Gioconda Belli, *The Inhabited Woman (La mujer habitada)*, Warner Books, 1994.

Dining with Women

Nicaraguan food reflects its rich history and varied geography. Corn products are essential to the diet as they have been for centuries. Along with tropical fruits and indigenous vegetables, foods and techniques brought by Europeans over the years have become traditional parts of this “creolized” cuisine. *Nacatamal* is considered the national dish by many Nicaraguans. It is a cornmeal dough filled with meat, potatoes, and other vegetables, then wrapped in banana leaves and steamed for hours. Very labor intensive, *nacatamal*-making is a women’s cottage industry in Nicaragua. *Gallo pinto* is an everyday food that also reflects the blended heritage. It is made of cooked rice, onions, peppers, and red beans mixed together and fried. (Red beans, rather than the black beans more typical of other Latin American countries, are traditional in Nicaragua.)

The recipe below is an example of the continuous process of tradition-making in cuisine and the influence of global marketing on diet. (In this case, that influence at least tastes good.) Some of you—especially you Texans—will know *Pastel de tres leches* (Three Milk Cake) since it has become a popular dessert in Mexican restaurants and bakeries (and more recently in trendy gourmet spots.) The cake’s popularity began in Nicaragua, however. Some food historians trace it to a recipe that appeared on cans of evaporated milk after World War II. But it also harkens further back to the European tradition of sweet cakes soaked in custard, milk, or spirits. It has become a favorite, “traditional” celebration cake in Nicaragua. It may not be something that the cooperativist women get to eat very often, but let’s celebrate their hopes for a sweeter life with this sweet cake they would enjoy.

The version here has been adapted for North American kitchens by Texas pastry chef, Dorothy Sobeles. Note: I use dark rum for the spirits—about 1/4 cup to soak the cake and 1t rum plus 1t vanilla to the cream when it’s about half-whipped. It is often served with fresh fruit on the side or decorating the top. Some other versions use meringue instead of cream on top. This is very sweet (and addictive!). I recommend small pieces—to start with anyway.

Pastel de Tres Leches

1 1/2 cups All-purpose flour

1 teaspoon Baking powder

1/2 cup Unsalted butter

2 cups White sugar (divided)

5 Eggs

1 1/2 teaspoon Vanilla extract (divided)

1 cup Milk

1/2 of a 14-ounce can Sweetened condensed milk

1/2 of a 12-ounce can Evaporated milk

1/3 cup Liqueur, Frangelico, Brandy or Chambord, for example (optional)

1 1/2 cups Heavy whipping cream

Preheat oven to 350F degrees. Grease and flour a 9x13-inch baking pan.

Sift flour and baking powder together and set aside. Cream the butter and 1 cup of the sugar together until fluffy. Add the eggs and 1/2 teaspoon of the vanilla. Beat well. Add the flour mixture to the butter mixture, 2 tablespoons at a time, mixing well until blended. Pour batter into prepared pan. Bake for 30 minutes.

When cake has finished baking, pierce it in 8 or 10 places with a fork or skewer, and let it cool. Combine the whole milk, evaporated milk, condensed milk and liqueur and pour over the top of the cooled cake. Refrigerate for at least 2 hours before serving.

Whipped Cream Topping: When ready to serve, combine the whipping cream and the remaining 1 teaspoon of vanilla and 1 cup of sugar, whipping until thick. Spread over top of cake. Because of the milk in the cake, it is very important that you keep the cake refrigerated until ready to serve. Serve chilled.

From <http://www.texascooking.com/features/sept2002treslechescakerecipe.htm>

For more Nicaraguan recipes see

<http://www.nicaragua.com/recipes/>

<http://www.elca.org/countrypackets/nicaragua/recipe.html>

Trudy Espinoza-Abrams, *Nicaraguan Cooking: My Grandmother's Recipes* (Exlibris, 2004; available at amazon.com).

Resources

<http://www.wccnica.org/women.html>

<http://www.peacewomen.org/campaigns/Nicaragua/Initiatives.html>-- connection between
<http://countrystudies.us/nicaragua/29.htm>

<http://www.organicclothes.com/nicaragua.asp>

<http://www.fairtradezone.jhc-cdca.org/members.htm>

<http://www.unfpa.org/focus/nicaragua/photos.htm>

<http://www.bombsite.com/belli/belli.html>

<http://www.pen.org/page.php/prmID/1164>

<http://www.endicott.edu/newprod/iwli/nicaragua.htm> women's writers initiative

<http://whatscookingamerica.net/History/Cakes/TresLechesCake.htm>

<http://www.texascooking.com/features/sept2002treslechescakerecipe.htm>

<http://www.austinchronicle.com/gyrobase/Issue/story?oid=oid%3A196888>

<http://www.historical-museum.org/folklife/folknica-2.htm>

http://www.vianica.com/go/specials/2-nicaraguan_food.html

Denis Lynn Daly Heyck, *Surviving Globalization In Three Latin American Communities* (Broadview Press, 2002).

Jennifer Bickham Mendez, *From the Revolution to the Maquiladoras: Gender, Labor, and Globalization in Nicaragua* ((Duke University Press, 2005).

SEE VOICES BELOW.

VOICES

Nicaraguan women cooperativists on their lives and work...

These quotations come from Heyck and COMAMNUVI's web site (see resources).
In your chapter meetings, each "voice" might be read aloud by a different member.

Andrea, COMAMNUVI (Nueva Vida Women's Sewing Cooperative)

I was born...into a family with nine children and was never able to go to school. My parents were farmers who grew maize and beans. Hurricane Mitch left us without a house. Now I'm 28 years old, I live in Nueva Vida with my husband and my children, Lester Alexander who's 11 and Jocelyn de los Angeles who is seven. I started in the co-op project so that when I die one day, I will be able to leave something behind for my children. I liked the idea of the cooperative because there was going to be enough work to be able to give jobs to more unemployed people. I hope that in the future we can expand our co-op because I would like to give more people work.

Zoila, Women Producers of Guanacastillo (women farmers' cooperative)

We have a lot of problems and we have a lot of work. But whatever job we are doing, if there is a problem we have to discuss it. Then we see how to resolve the situation and move on. ... We work together so we will succeed.

Work is like therapy for me... I always work, no type of work bothers me, not even under the burning sun. ... I arrive at work happy, content. I arrive home happy, satisfied from working. My children have caused me much suffering. I have a little land, where I have my house. (It) has gone to ruin because my sons don't work... they don't do anything. They were totally corrupted by the (Contra) war; so much violence, it has stayed with them. One son goes around angry and drunk. He learned karate in the war and now he threatens everyone with it; he nearly broke my friend's hand at the bus stop the other day.... The main thing is not to sit... like a cripple. I have to work. I can't depend on my children. Here we are... women working together.... It is work that has sustained our group and that has sustained me.

Maria, Association of Rural Women Workers (savings and loan coop)

It's important to have women's cooperatives because men are more likely to be wastrels and to misuse money than are women, who are more thrifty. We are the ones who manage the home, who are economical, and know how to administer what funds we have.... The majority of women in (our cooperative) are single mothers... We are a group of women who have suffered, and our experience makes us want to help each other advance. We don't want anyone to say of us, "there goes that poor woman with her little suitcase and three rags." No. We have decided to fight to our last breath to help women at least to earn their daily bread; when you can do that you can retain your dignity.

There have been a number of positive changes already... material changes, like (a new) chicken house, and also psychological changes... women's self-esteem. Although the men say, "No, there have been no changes," you can see change in the homes. I have been to home where the woman is tending to the children and the man is trying to figure out how to iron his pants....

Mina, Plan Masaya (rural women's cooperative)

Education is different now, they've changed it. My daughter came home one day telling me that Christopher Columbus was a hero. I told her, "No, he was a thief who came to Nicaragua to steal its treasures and deceive the people with little mirrors," and to tell that to her teacher. Her teacher admitted, "Yes, it's true, but they want us to tell it this way."

Olfania, Multiple Services Cooperative (saving and credit assoc for women farmers)

The environmental challenge is a tremendous one. There is so much use of chemicals, especially in the region where they grow cotton. We are now receiving information from the (health center) about people who all their lives have worked with agrochemicals. It is shocking to see the consequences; there is much cancer in the rural zone, especially among women....

The women of the cooperative have an ecological awareness; they know that they have to take care of the land. Many no longer use chemical fertilizers, just organic ones. One of our cooperativists has done a beautiful job with organic fertilizer. She uses weeds, turkey buzzard droppings, and fumigates with natural insecticides. She also reforests her parcel. She is out there from 4 to 11am every day and she has so far defended her land from very powerful men... who want to take away her title, claiming the land is theirs.

Maria Teresa, COMAMNUVI

.... I'm 37 and... I have five children.... The three youngest are in school. I would have so many hopes for my children, but I don't want to wish for the impossible.... In my community there are many people without work, and they aren't able to give their children what they wish they could give. I wish that there were more work for them.

Marina, COMAMNUVI

I was born... in a family with 15 children and I never went to school. My mother took in washing and my father was a peasant farmer.... Before Hurricane Mitch we lived on the edge of the lake ...and we survived by scavenging in Managua's garbage dump there.... I am now 55 years old.... I live...with my granddaughter Rebecca...who I am raising. I wanted to become a member of the co-op in order to be an owner and to do well. I did not want to continue being the same; I wanted to have something in life.

Ruth, COMAMNUVI

My mother was a street vendor and my father made shoes. I studied up through sophomore year in high school. Before Mitch I (was) working making pajamas and blouses, but after Mitch I was left jobless. The hurricane really affected me because we had a house built and we lost everything. There aren't many jobs here... and there is little transport here. I started in the cooperative because I wanted a stable job and I wanted to give work to others. In the co-op we started with a positive attitude and with the willingness to thrive. I'm now 36 years old and I live in Nueva Vida with my two children, José Andrés who is 13 and Carlos Miguel who is six. My hope is that they are able to do well in school and that I am able to offer them a good education. I feel that we have made great strides in the co-op and that we are going to continue forward as long as we are united and we respect the rights of everyone.

Tomasa, COMAMNUVI

The co-op caught my attention because I wanted to get out of all that was happening to us in Nueva Vida. It was very difficult because I was alone then and I didn't have anyone to provide for me. I had to work and sacrifice for my son, but I kept on because I really trusted that this was going to be a success, and I think it was worth it. My personal hope is that I live to be old and that I die before they kick me out of the co-op.

Nubia, Plan Masaya

This is a house of struggle. I say that because we women have to work constantly to raise up our home, work the land and keep everything from dying. And thanks to be God to all the NGOs that help us, because the organizations have played a great role here in Nicaragua, owing to the fact that we receive no assistance from any of our governments.

Verónica, COMAMNUVI

I began working because I saw that here in the co-op I could prosper through having a good job and be able to feed my children. I wanted to be a member because I didn't want to think only about myself: if we have a little business we can give work to more people. It was very difficult at first, we had to mix cement by hand and dig a deep hole for the septic tank. I was not used to that heavy work, but if we have to do it again, I feel ready. I know that if we don't run our business well, then the cooperative fails and we'll all be sent home with only air to eat. But if we are here and we unite, then we can succeed.

The fact that I have so many children (six boys) sometimes means that I sometimes don't have the money to pay the school fees plus the water and the lights. But I want to help my children get ahead because I think that the very best inheritance you can give a child is an education.

Yadira, COMAMNUVI

I was born... into a family of nine children. My father died a long time ago and with my mother we made bread in the house. I'm 28 now.... I'm in my second year studying business administration at college on Saturdays. I live with my mother and my wonderful three-year-old son Elvis Eleazer who will start preschool next year. If God lets us live that long, my hope is that my son studies, that he becomes a good person and a professional.... I don't want to be rich, but my hope is that God gives me my health and my daily bread, as we Nicaraguans say.

Gloria, Multiple Services Cooperative

At first, there was some negative reaction that (our cooperative) was just for women. It hurt the pride of some men to see that women could overcome their hardships and be responsible financial managers, because women generally pay back their debts more responsibly than men.

In my own family we have an example.... Very early on my mother received land under (Sandinista) agrarian reform.... She paid everything back every year.... She held onto her land for a number of years... (but) she was never given ... official title. Things were fine until the pressure began to sell. You know, there are some men who don't value

what is given to them and who also have the vice of alcohol.... The thing is that the men were in debt and they drank too much... so they sold out at a low price.... My mother was left in a bad situation....

I don't know why men drink so much, maybe because it makes them feel more like men. It's the only release they have from the stress of unemployment. But I'd say 90% of the women do not have that mentality and they do not have that vice, because they have to be strong in order to take care of their children.

Zulema, COMAMNUVI

I'm now 37 and I live in Nueva Vida with my husband and four children. All of my children are studying: Ruth, my 15-year-old daughter, studies on Saturdays so that she can take care of the smaller children during the week. I have to find a way to help them study because Ruth wants to be a doctor, Manuel, my 14 year-old, wants to be an architect, Alvaro at 12 wants to be a lawyer and David, my three year-old likes airplanes. On the weekends I dedicate my time to my kids, but after work at night I teach literacy classes to adults and to children who don't have the opportunity to go to school. In my community there is a lot of poverty: barefooted kids who survive by digging in the garbage dump behind Nueva Vida. There is a lot of family violence, and a lot of child abuse - there are poor people who send their kids to beg on the buses and the children become addicted to glue. There is a woman who grabs a belt and beats her daughter with it every time she asks for food. If this project becomes bigger, my dream is to give work to these poor people in my neighborhood. So many ask me for work, but it would be a lie to promise them something until we can get things under control here. But with the way the project is progressing now, I feel like we will reach that end.

Juanita, Women, Producers of Guanacastillo

My daughter wants to get her university degree and become a (agricultural) technician. I asked her, "Do you know how to castrate a pig?" Of course she said no, so I told her, "I hope you learn there, because I don't want you to practice on mine!"

Rosa, COMAMNUVI

I was... the oldest in my family of 11 children.... I didn't learn to read until I was 13.... I am now 37.... My children - Karen Eloisa who is 12, Jorge Vladimir who is seven, and Haydee Milena who is five - are all in school and I study on Saturdays. I'm in my last year of high school and my second year of an associate's degree in accounting. I want my children to have all the opportunities I never had, and I hope that they become capable of managing by themselves. When I go through the alleyways of the market and I see the glue sniffers on the ground, I feel bad for them and wonder if I will see my children there one day. Each day that a child loses the opportunity to go to school, she loses the opportunity to make something of her life.

I started in the co-op because I didn't have work, and I was taking in washing to feed my children. My oldest daughter was in school and I didn't know if she was going to be able to continue because of the cost. I felt that since the cooperative was starting at zero, I had an opportunity here. The co-op has been a huge achievement for me personally - it has been a real leap because before I was someone who knew nothing of computers, meetings, airplanes, nothing even of high school. I was afraid of everything.

In our community there is a lot of unemployment - if you go to my block on any given day, you will see that all the women are in the free trade zones and all the men are watching television. In the cooperative we have been improving in everything and I hope that we will be able to give more employment and permanent work to people.

Barrera, Plan Masaya

We have been very involved in theater out here in the countryside.... Many of us have a certain flair for theater which we use to expose people to the reality that we live so they can see our problems and try to change them; for example, machismo. We also present our belief that as a gender women are capable and that we can contribute to creating a better world. Women are waking up, but some husbands don't realize this. They still come home and one, two, three, there he is in his hammock saying, "My socks, dear, bring me my coffee, my tortillas." We have just come in from the field too, with our two hands we pat out the tortillas. Of course, there's also the washing, and then finally we go to bed exhausted but there he is with his "come to me" and all that. That was the kind of attitude that we were used to, but women are changing and, thanks to be God, in this zone machismo is decreasing.

This change is because... of the revolution, which for us was an awakening. Today, I am so happy and proud to be a woman because I know that God cares about us and doesn't want us to live as slaves. ... This is the sort of thing that I teach in church; I am an "evangelica"... and... speak from the pulpit and tell everyone that women are not just any old thing.... I also ask them, "Why is it that in the Bible the woman hardly speaks? Why does it say that the woman should be quiet in the congregations? Because it was all written by men and they all stick together!" I try to joke so that people don't get too upset.

Delia, COMAMNUVI

Before Hurricane Mitch...we made our living from fishing. My sons would go out into Lake Managua to fish and I would sell the catch at the market. When Mitch came, we lost everything. Now I'm 52... I have eight children.... The four youngest are studying, Katy and Juan are in their first year of high school; Iris and Mauricio are in primary school.

I wanted to work in the cooperative because I wanted to become something in life. When we were constructing the building, the mango trees here provided our only lunch. It was difficult, but I continued because I had the help of my family and we knew that we were going to make it. Even though they said to us in Nueva Vida that nothing was going to come of this project, our faith has brought us to where we are today, and look, here I am sitting at a machine, working like a 25 year-old. There is no age, love is what matters.