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The Nicaraguan agrarian reform which began with the Sandinista victory of July 1979 is unusual in at least two respects. First, the process of cooperative development has been the result of a large-scale mobilization of peasants and rural workers by their own mass organizations and these rural organizations have largely shaped the course of the agrarian reform. And second, the new cooperative members benefited through the agrarian reform have included both men and women.

The origins of Nicaragua's cooperative movement are found in the struggle led by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) against the Somoza dictatorship in the late 1970s. By that time, landless rural workers, the majority without access to permanent employment, and smallholders, who also formed part of the seasonal wage labor force for agro-export production, accounted for over 75% of the rural economically active population (EAP) of 430,065 (Deere and Marchetti, p. 42). The FSLN successfully organized both groups around wage demands and working conditions on the coffee and cotton estates, and in 1978 the local committees merged to form Nicaragua's first rural union, the Rural Worker's Association (ATC). By the time of the Sandinista victory, the ATC had over 50,000 men and women members; a year later, its membership included over one-quarter of the rural EAP.

The Sandinista agrarian reform began with the confiscation

of the land owned by Somoza and his close associates; reflecting the degree of land concentration under the dictatorship, approximately 23 percent of the nation's farm land passed to the newly constituted state sector. Since the confiscated farms were among the most modern agro-export farms in the country, there was little discussion of dividing these up. Rather, in the first six months, the Sandinistas opted for a policy of employment generation on the state farms to begin accomodating the landless rural work force.

But by the spring of 1980 the ATC was demanding access to land for its membership, and in some cases, leading land takeovers. The Sandinista response was to issue a series of land rental regulations which required landlords to rent unused and underutilized land at officially regulated rates. In addition, lands on the state farms were made available free of charge to groups of landless workers willing to work collectively. The land rental policy was complemented by a liberal agricultural credit policy in order to spur basic grain production and cooperative development.

As a result of ATC organizing efforts and Sandinista policy, some 1,327 production cooperatives were organized on either state land or land rented from the private sector. In addition, 1,185 credit and service cooperatives were formed of small and medium-sized farmers. All told, in 1980, 73,854 cooperative members received credit from the National Development Bank as compared with only some 3,500 during the end of the Somoza period (CIERA).

While the cooperative movement swelled in the first year of the Sandinista agrarian reform, problems abounded. Production

performance was disappointing given the large amount of credit distributed. Moreover, transportation and storage deficiencies resulted in significant marketing losses. Organizationally, the cooperatives were weak; many dissolved after receiving credit. Often, the ATC proved more adept at organizing landless workers than in assuring that farmers receive timely technical assistance or agricultural inputs.

As a result of the first year's experience, credit practices and the delivery of technical assistance were streamlined (Barraclough). In addition, in early 1981 the ATC gave birth to a new farmer's organization, the National Union of Agriculturalists and Cattlemen (UNAG). From then on, the ATC would focus its activities on union organizing on the state and private farms and UNAG would focus on cooperative development.

UNAG quickly took up the demand for a thorough agrarian reform which would consolidate the nascent production cooperatives through the transfer of property rights and make available additional lands to smallholders. The 1981 Agrarian Reform Law was the result. The new law provided for the expropriation of unused, underutilized, and rented land on farms greater than 350 hectares in the Pacific and central interior regions and on farms greater than 700 hectares in the rest of the country. Also affected were lands ceded by their owners under precapitalist forms of tenancy if farm size exceeded 35 or 70 hectares, depending on region of the country. Owners are to be compensated in the form of agrarian reform bonds except for abandoned farms which are subject to confiscation.

A rather novel feature of this reform is that farmers producing on a capitalist basis are exempt from expropriation irrespective of farm size. The intended effect of the law is to protect efficient producers no matter what the size of their holding. Nonetheless, it has been estimated that approximately 1 million hectares could be subject to expropriation, accounting for roughly one-quarter of Nicaragua's farm lands.

The land is to be distributed free of charge to the beneficiaries who are to include landless workers, tenant farmers, smallholders with insufficient land, cooperatives, and state farms. An unusual feature of the law is that the beneficiaries may receive land either individually as private holdings, or collectively as part of a production cooperative. Peasants and rural workers are not being compelled into predetermined forms of production. Rather, the degree of individual choice and local autonomy in the process makes this reform process unique in the Latin American experience. This itself reflects the degree of peasant and rural worker participation in the process of designing the agrarian reform, and currently in its implementation.

The land reform beneficiaries are issued agrarian reform titles which guarantee dominion, possession, and the usufruct of land. These titles differ from those governing private property in that the lands adjudicated under the agrarian reform cannot be sold. This new form of property is designed to avoid the process of peasant dispossession that characterized the development of the agro-export economy in the 1950s and 1960s. While the adjudicated land cannot be sold, it may be inherited as long as

the land is not subdivided among the heirs.

The agrarian reform law was a great boost to the process of consolidation of both the production cooperatives and the credit and service cooperatives. The October 1982 cooperative census revealed that there were 2,796 cooperatives in the Pacific and central interior regions of the country, with some 64,891 members.[1] Production cooperatives, based on collective property and labor, make up some 18% of the total number with 10% of the total land area in cooperatives and 11% of cooperative members. By far the largest number of cooperative members, 80%, belong to credit and service cooperatives which account for 57% of the total number, but 78.5% of the total land area in cooperatives. The bulk of this land is farmed individually. The remaining cooperatives, 25%, are either pre-cooperatives (not yet considered consolidated) or collective work arrangements of various types; these account for 9% of cooperative membership and 11.5% of the land.

As of July 19, 1983, over 200,000 has. had been distributed through the agrarian reform to approximately 8,000 families. According to the October 1982 cooperative census, up to that time, 68% of the land distributed under the agrarian reform had gone to production cooperatives, 22% to individual producers organized in credit and service cooperatives, and 10% to other forms of cooperative groups. The amount of land being distributed to individual farmers appears to have increased in recent months. In addition, a sizable amount of land is currently being transfered from the state sector to cooperatives

(Barricada). These latter trends point to the active role of the UNAG and ATC in assuring that the agrarian reform respond to the demands of rural workers and peasants.

Assuring Women's Participation

The Nicaraguan agrarian reform law is the first in Latin America to establish the legal pre-conditions for the incorporation of a significant number of rural women. This it has done, first, by not requiring that the beneficiaries of the agrarian reform be heads of households, and second, by explicitly including among its agrarian reform objectives the incorporation of women into the agricultural cooperatives.

Most previous agrarian reforms in Latin America have required that beneficiaries be heads of households with dependent children. Since by cultural practice, men are always considered the household head if present, this limitation has resulted in generally only men receiving land whether individually or as members of production cooperatives. Thus in Peru (Deere) and Chile (Garret) the only women that were eligible were widows or single mothers whose sons where under 18 years of age, and few of the eligible women were actually benefited since women are rarely considered to be agriculturalists and there was no state policy in effect to override the prejudice of agrarian reform officials.

The Nicaraguan agrarian reform is novel in that neither sex nor kinship position is a limitation to be an agrarian reform beneficiary. And the Agricultural Cooperative Law of 1982 (Article 132) states explicitly that women should be integrated into the cooperatives under the same conditions as men, with the

same rights and duties. The agrarian legislation conforms to the Statute of Rights and Guarantees of Nicaraguans (Decree No. 52, 1979, Article 3) which establishes the equality of the sexes before the law and requires the state "to remove by all means all obstacles that impede the equality of its citizens and their participation in the political, economic and social life of the country".

While the progressive Nicaraguan legislation is a reflection of the egalitarian ideology of the Sandinista Revolution, it also responds to Nicaraguan economic reality: women are an important component of the agricultural labor force and a significant number of households are headed by women. According to the most recent census, for 1977, women represented 18.6% of the rural EAP (INEC). While this figure is high by Latin American standards, it still appears to underestimate both women's participation on family farms and as agricultural wage workers (Deere and Leon; Buvinic). For example, a 1981 CIERA survey found that women represented 36% of the cotton harvest workers and at least 28% of the coffee harvest workers. Nationally, women represent approximately 28% of Nicaraguan heads of households (Envio, p. 2c). The incidence of female headed households is even higher among poor urban and rural women. If the standard of living of the poorest Nicaraguans is to improve, equality of opportunity for women is a precondition.

Not surprisingly, given their precarious economic position, many rural women did not wait until passage of the agrarian reform and cooperative legislation to begin to join the new cooperative movement. Case studies of 10 agricultural

cooperatives with women members revealed that in all but two, women had joined the cooperatives before the legislation had passed.[2]

The vast majority of the women members of production cooperatives were once part of the landless agricultural workforce. Moreover, slightly over one-quarter of the women members were the principal economic providers in their households. Nonetheless, the majority of the women members were married; in most cases, their husbands were cooperative members as well.

Almost all of the women members of the credit and service cooperatives studied were smallholders and the majority were heads of households. Nonetheless, several cases were reported of women members who were married, yet who were the principal agriculturalists on the farm since their husbands engaged in other activities.

Although the cooperative census data on membership by sex is not yet available, preliminary indications suggest that women are a higher proportion of the membership than in other Latin American agrarian reforms. However, the incorporation of women to the agricultural cooperatives, even in a revolutionary setting, has not been easy. In many cases, the resistance of the male members or of male kin has had to be overcome. Traditional notions of the proper sexual division of labor, that women's place is in the home rather than in the fields, still harbor strong in rural Nicaragua, even if few women can afford to conform to cultural norms.

The analysis of cooperatives without women members showed that often these cooperatives were organized without taking the possible participation of women into account. When interviewed, the male members asserted that women were not interested in cooperatives, for they did not perform agricultural work. In fact, women in several cases had demonstrated their interest in joining the cooperative, but the male members ignored their petition.

It was also found that male members were often reluctant to admit women as members since they did not believe that women could carry out a sufficient number of agricultural tasks. In one community, the majority of men refused to join the production cooperative on these grounds and as a result, women constitute 80% of the members of the cooperative which was formed.

The Difference Women's Participation Makes

The incorporation of women within the agrarian cooperatives has been beneficial for cooperative development and provided important pre-conditions towards a more equitable society. The experience of the cooperatives with women members has demonstrated that women are excellent agricultural workers, that they are a force of cohesion and stability within the cooperatives, and that they are a positive force behind collectivization.

On all but one of the production cooperatives studied, women were integrated into the agricultural workforce of the cooperative with the same rights and responsibilities as the men. The women were required to work in the fields six days a week, or

send their replacement, and they were entitled to the same remuneration as the male members, irrespective of the task performed.

The most common pattern of labor organization on the production cooperatives is the mixed work team. Thus, both sexes perform the majority of agricultural tasks such as planting, weeding and harvesting. Within certain agricultural tasks there is a division of labor according to gender; for example, during land clearing operations, the men fell the trees while the women clear away the underbrush.

On cooperatives with sex-segregated work teams there is a greater degree of specialization according to gender. The men tend to carry out those tasks that are considered to require greater physical strength, such as carrying and unloading products. The women carry out the tasks in which they are considered to be more productive than the men, usually those repetitive manual tasks that require dexterity.

Most cooperative members interviewed considered the practice of equal remuneration irrespective of task performed to be fair and the most equitable remuneration rule. While certain male tasks might require more physical strength than those performed by the women, women's tasks were considered to be just as important to the productive activity of the cooperative. The attitudes of the men in the cooperatives with women members differed strikingly from those of men in cooperatives without women in this regard, and reflects how changes in consciousness can be related to material practices.

Not only were the women members considered to be good

agricultural workers, but in the majority of the production cooperatives they were considered to be a force of cohesion and stability within the cooperative. Proportionately many more men than women had left the cooperatives for reasons of personal feuds with other cooperative members or as a result of their not liking collective work. The relatively few women who had abandoned the production cooperatives were more likely to have left due to family problems, such as jealous husbands.

The strong commitment that was noted of the women members to the production cooperatives and the process of collectivization is in many ways explained by the history of discrimination against women in rural Nicaragua. As previously noted, the majority of women members in the past were landless wage workers. As women, they had fewer agricultural employment opportunities open to them than did the men. Moreover, in the past, women were always paid less than men, even for the same task. For these women the production cooperatives offer security of employment and income for the first time.

The discrimination women have traditionally faced also explains why women seem less prone than men to dream of their own private plot and in some cases, have voluntarily pooled their private parcel to form production cooperatives. Women farm owners have traditionally been excluded from access to credit and technical assistance, for they have not been taken seriously as agricultural producers. Moreover, female household heads often find it more difficult than men to acquire sufficient labor for certain agricultural tasks and to acquire male labor for the key

"male only" tasks. As one woman explained, in the past she would have to work three days to earn enough to hire a man for one day, and then he might not even show up since men "don't respect" women farmers. These reasons were sufficient for her to put her land into a production cooperative in return for the promise of full time employment.

According to bank officials, the cooperatives made up largely of women are among the most trustworthy in the use of credit and among the most reliable in repaying their debt. In addition, extension agents reported that women members are intensely interested in the acquisition of new skills and are favorably disposed to experimentation with new crop varieties and techniques. In fact, the level of technical competence of many of the women cooperative members was striking, particularly in contrast to the wives of male members who were not themselves members of the cooperative.

While the Nicaraguan experience thus far seems to show that women are a positive force for cooperative development, and their incorporation into the cooperatives is rectifying the previous economic discrimination against women, women are not yet participating in the cooperatives on par with men. Women members play a reduced role in cooperative decision-making as compared to the men. They are less likely than male members to offer their opinions in cooperative meetings and to be actively involved in the affairs of the cooperative. Nonetheless, the data on women in leadership positions is encouraging; in half of the cooperatives studied with women members, a woman was a cooperative officer.

Women's participation in cooperative decision-making is limited by their relatively lower degree of education as compared to the men, and by their responsibility for domestic chores and child care. While the majority of women members are literate (many as a result of the 1980 literacy campaign) few have confidence in their ability to deal with the complex affairs of cooperative management. Moreover, household responsibilities often limit the ability of women members to participate in adult literacy classes, thereby reproducing the inequality in functional literacy levels. Women members often must spend two to three hours engaging in domestic labor before going out to the fields, and after a full day's labor, return home to resume their domestic tasks. Housework and child care also limit women's ability to spend time socializing with other cooperative members, time the men usually spend discussing cooperative business.

Few cooperatives have examined the specific problems of the women members. Only one cooperative is currently organizing a child care facility and only on this cooperative was it observed that several men shared some responsibility with their working wives for domestic chores and child care. At least in this one case, the incorporation of women into production was beginning to raise the issues of social responsibility for reproduction and the relationship between the sexual division of labor between production and reproduction.

Equality of opportunity is the first step in ending the economic discrimination against women and the Nicaraguan agrarian

reform is commendable in this regard. However, as the Nicaraguan experience also shows, the incorporation of women into production, even with the same rights and duties as men, does not guarantee that women can participate under the same conditions as men as long as they carry full responsibility for reproduction. Moreover, as long as the ideological bases of women's subordination persist, not all rural women can avail themselves of their legal right to participate in cooperative and rural development.

Notes

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[1] The cooperative census was carried out by CIERA. The cooperative census data pertaining to the Atlantic Coast region of the country is not yet available. Approximately another 1,000 cooperatives are located in this region of the country.

[2] Thirteen case studies, of 8 production cooperatives and 5 credit and service cooperatives, were carried out between August, 1982 and January, 1983. The cooperatives were representative of heterogeneous levels of female membership: 3 cooperatives had no women members; in 8 cooperatives women represented from 4% to 33% of the membership; and in 2 cooperatives, women represented 80% and 100% of the membership. The cooperatives were distributed among nine of the 17 departments of Nicaragua.

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