

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: NICARAGUA

**Transcript of Mónica Baltodano
Interviewer: Shelly Grabe
Interpreter: Julia Baumgartner**

**Location: Managua, Nicaragua
Date: June 2011**

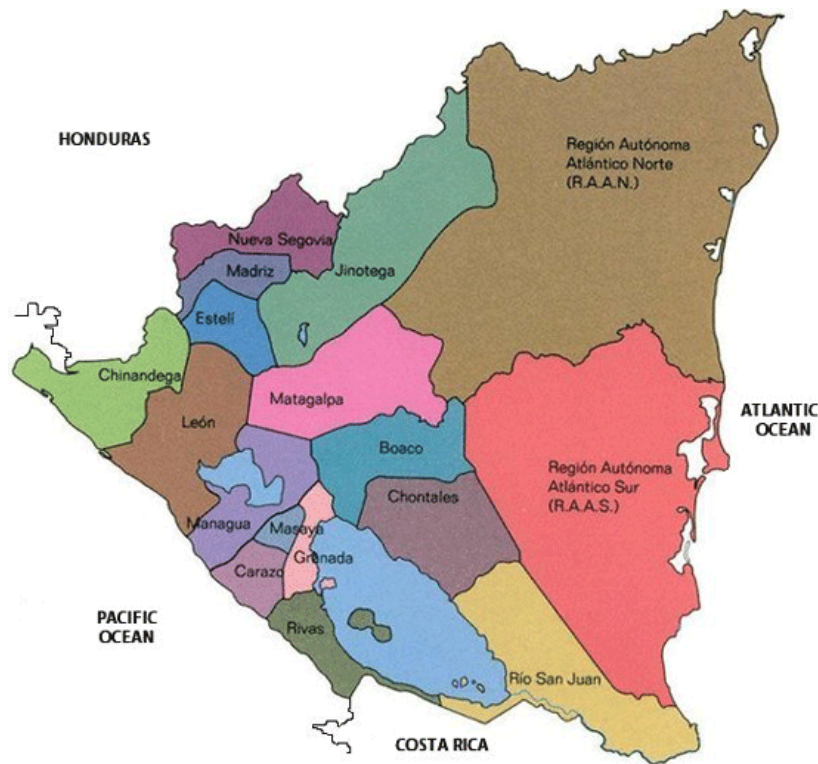
**University of Michigan
Institute for Research on Women and Gender
1136 Lane Hall
Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1290
Tel: (734) 764-9537
E-mail: um.gfp@umich.edu
Website: <http://www.umich.edu/~glbfem>**

Mónica Baltodano, born in León in 1954, is a former revolutionary guerrilla and longtime political activist. She began her activism with the Sandinistas by joining the student movement when she was 15 years old and continued her efforts through underground mobilization throughout the Revolution. In 1977, she was imprisoned and tortured for her role in the movement. In 1979, after the triumph of the Revolution, she was awarded the title of Commander Guerrilla for her service. She held a number of political offices including Vice Minister of the Presidency and Minister of Regional Affairs. Upon leaving the FSLN in 2005 because of corruption and authoritarian leadership within the party, Ms. Baltodano helped to found the Movement to Reclaim Sandinismo (known as El Rescate). She has been a strong voice both in confronting corruption within Nicaraguan politics and making demands for women's rights.

Shelly Grabe is an Assistant Professor in Social Psychology, Feminist Studies, and Latino and Latin American Studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Shelly received her degree in clinical psychology with a minor in quantitative statistical methods. After completing her doctorate, she switched course and became a community organizer in Madison, WI involved primarily with CODEPINK and the then Wisconsin Coordinating Council on Nicaragua (WCCN). Through solidarity relationships with the women's social movement in Nicaragua (Movimiento Autónomo de Mujeres), Grabe became learned in women of Color and "Third World" feminisms from a grassroots, decolonial perspective. She has since coupled her interest in structural inequities, gender, and globalization with her academic training to work with transnational women's social organizations in Nicaragua and Tanzania. As a scholar-activist, Shelly partners with women's organizations to test new areas of inquiry that can support positive social change for women. She joined the UCSC faculty in 2008 after a Visiting Position in the Department of Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. In California Shelly has partnered with the Santa Cruz County Women's Commission on efforts to ratify a local draft of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Walnut Avenue Women's Center to support youth outreach surrounding sexuality and violence against girls and women.

Julia Baumgartner holds a degree in Spanish and Sociology from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. She works as coordinator of Farmer Relations and Delegations for Just Coffee Cooperative in Madison, WI and is currently living in Nicaragua coordinating a project with Fundación Entre Mujeres, a feminist organization working for the empowerment of rural women in northern Nicaragua.

Interview with Mónica Baltodano



Shelly Grabe: I'd like to start, Monica, by thanking you for being able to participate in this global project. As I mentioned, we'll talk for about an hour, starting with your personal history, your work during the Revolution, and we'll end up talking about the work that you're doing now.

Mónica Baltodano: That's fine.

Grabe: I know you are a very highly regarded public figure and you are renowned for being a Commander during the war, but I'd like you to go back to the beginning and tell me a little about your personal history—your childhood, your earliest memories.

Baltodano: Well, I'm originally from a middle class family even though my parents come from humble beginnings. My father was able to study law and later became a cotton producer in a way that by my adolescence we were in a comfortable economic position. So I studied in a private religious school, and from a very young age I showed a tendency to protect the poor, a social sensibility. I was involved in the events that the nuns organized to collect clothing for poor children, etcetera. And in this way I was—I came into contact with social inequality very early, with inequity, with justice. It really bothered me to see the situation of workers, of children who went to cut cotton at my father's *haciendas* and I tried to do something for them and that's why I became involved with activities of a social character. A nun who was my sociology teacher

pushed me to question ourselves about injustice, and I believe this led me to some activities at a very early age. [cough] Excuse me but I have to drink a little water.

I studied in a very exclusive school and there was discrimination towards people with less money, of a lower social status. This made me rebel a little bit against this attitude toward inequality at an early age, to question the Christian discourse versus Christian practice. And then when I was fourteen, fifteen years old, I became involved in my first political activities, my first big action was a march to demand Doris Tijerino's freedom, a guerilla woman who had been captured, she had been raped, humiliated, and she appeared with bruises from her capturers, with marks from the aggression that she suffered. So we mobilized with the school to protest and demand her freedom.

And later I organized at my school to demand, for example, better salaries for our teachers. In the year 1969 there was a big strike and I was fifteen years old at the time and we became involved in the strike to back up the teachers and later in what were called school takeovers, that we took the schools and interrupted classes to demand freedom for the political prisoners. This led to accusations against me from some of the nuns who were very reactionary and who started to accuse me of being red, communist, even though all of my first actions I did as a part of the youth movement and we expressed it as a Christian youth movement and together we were going through a process of reflection about the necessity of political action to change the conditions in Nicaragua.

And that's it, well, in this effort we found the Marxists, the student revolutionary movement—the Revolutionary Student Front. This coincided—this coincided with a movement of reflection throughout the world about the role of Christians, about the injustices of the world. We are talking about the letters that obligated the priests and religious leaders to reflect about the injustice in the world, the Second Vatican Council,¹ the Latin American Episcopal Conference in Medellin² that had an impact in what was later called the popular church or liberation theology. The youth gravitated around all of this, young guys and women who were organized in the Christian youth movements, and later we were connected to the Sandinista Front for National Liberation.³

Grabe: And how did you rise to such a high position within the Sandinistas?

[7:18]

Baltodano: Well, we were first involved in the Sandinista Front's effort to develop organizations that permitted it to connect to popular sectors – intermediary organizations is how they designated them, and they even theorized about the role of intermediary organizations. And the Christian Movement played the role of an intermediary organization. We would go to the

¹ The Second Vatican Council took place between 1962 and 1965 to address the way the Roman Catholic Church was addressing issues of the modern world.

² A conference of Latin American bishops held in Medellín, Colombia in 1968 with the goal of addressing poverty and tending in particular to poor people. The movement inspired by these bishops eventually became known as "liberation theology."

³ In 1979, the Sandinista Front became the only guerrilla movement to overthrow a Latin American government since the Cuban Revolution. (Wright, Thomas C. *State Terrorism in Latin America: Chile, Argentina, and International Human Rights*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. New York. 2007.) The FSLN maintained control of the government until 1990.

*barrios*⁴ to do social work and at the same time raise awareness and recruit. And in this work, we were playing a leadership role, we had—we were part of the Executive Committee of the Christian Movement and we began to have a dialogue at a high level with the leadership of the Sandinista Front.

In this work, I went underground, a little prematurely. In 1974, there was an assault on Chema Castillo's house. It was a collective, massive seizure and—a young woman whom I had recruited was selected to participate in this operation. Her mother, when she realized that her daughter had joined the guerilla fight, she filed a report against me. She went—she despaired and went to the National Guard, to Somoza's security,⁵ to say that I had recruited her [daughter] and I had to go underground early. And the underground work, well I got to have political and military responsibilities. When the Revolution triumphed, I had been imprisoned one year, I had participated in distinct political and military actions and I became part of the general security staff of Managua, the capital. During the first part, I was in the north, in Ocotal,⁶ in Estelí, in Matagalpa.⁷ But when I was imprisoned they didn't take me back to the north, I stayed in Managua and was part of the political-military directive of Managua, yes.

Grabe: Can you tell me how, as a woman, you rose to such a high rank?

[10:12]

Baltodano: It helped that I had participated as a director of a movement that had its own force, it helped that I had received formal education, it helped that the leaders who were directly in charge of me valued my capacity, my disposition to get work done. I think that I had qualities, I mean, I had the innate gift of leadership that I developed in school, in college, in the Christian Movement, and well they were recognized in the structure of the Sandinista Front. You see, I played the role of director in the tasks they assigned me and I fully committed myself and so this was recognized to continue assuming more and more responsibility.

Grabe: What was the title of your position?

[11:33]

Baltodano: In the north I was responsible for political organizing in Ocotal, later I was director of the whole region, I was in charge of the North Region—Estelí, Nueva Segovia, Madriz. Later they gave me responsibilities in Matagalpa, where our task was to organize, create supply networks, militarily direct small combat units for some actions and I sincerely feel that my condition as a woman did not create particular difficulties for me. More accurately, there were some collaborators or women who always thought that men had to have certain prerogatives; but from an organizational point of view, I didn't have more difficulty. And when I was in charge,

⁴ *Barrios* can technically be translated to “neighborhood” however the word carries a different connotation, like a working-class neighborhood. At times, can be translated it as “hood” but this often implies a rougher, more dangerous place than *barrio* often does in Spanish.

⁵ Anastacio Somoza García took power of Nicaragua in 1933 after betraying the peace agreements. He was succeeded by his sons and the Somoza dynasty ruled Nicaragua until the triumph of the Sandinista Revolution in 1979. (Vanden, Harry E. & Prevost, Gary. *Politics of Latin America: The Power Game*. Oxford University Press. New York. 2006, 2nd edition.)

⁶ Capital of Nueva Segovia—a department in the northwestern part of Nicaragua.

⁷ A department in central Nicaragua.

like at the end of the fight, of a battalion with which we organized the capture of Granada, well there was recognition of the role of women, and the difficulties became secondary. I think that this is a stage when we had less difficulty than later with the triumph of the Revolution, yes.

Grabe: And why were you imprisoned?

[13:12]

Baltodano: They reported me, they had infiltrated us, and when we were going to a meeting they shot at us. I was able to come out alive, but the next day, when I tried to go to the safety house, they followed me, they saw that I was a strange person leaving a peasant area and I didn't look like a peasant so then they ambushed and captured me.

Grabe: A year is a long time, how did you cope during that time?

[13:55]

Baltodano: Well, we had strong convictions. There were comrades who stayed many more years, eight, six, five years; we really were there a short time, having only been there one year. And we endured it well, continuing the fight from within the prison, converting the prison into a trench because we found ourselves together—a group of women—and we were very organized. I personally recruited female police officers to collaborate with our cause. We had a very big capacity for persuasion and we converted the jail into a trench and this allowed us to endure.

I want to tell you that while underground I made the decision to become a mother. And it was a kind of risky decision and I felt the need to have a child. It wasn't an accidental pregnancy, but rather I sought to get pregnant in agreement with my partner and this was a situation that got very tough for me. It was maybe the only time in my life, and I say in my life until now, that I doubted if it was worth it to keep fighting—when I had my baby underground, in very difficult conditions, because without family, without anybody to help me, and I saw my little boy and I had to separate from him, this was—I was filled with a lot of doubt and it was the most difficult for me. And when I was imprisoned, not being able to see my son because the prison conditions of women—we always denounced them—were more difficult than those for men. For example, we didn't have the right to be with family members in the same space, we were separated by two screens. And then it was still very difficult to endure the prison without being able to hold and kiss my son when he came to see me, like, being so young. But the rest was taken on with a fighting spirit because in reality our activism and the Sandinista activism in general was full of heroism at that time, of mysticism, of values, of self-sacrifice, it was a time when our best qualities as human beings were brought out.

Grabe: And can you tell me about your transition from military to civilian life?

Baltodano: Yes, it was also kind of difficult because immediately after the triumph of the Revolution, personally for me, and talking with other friends, they said that I had been, I had assumed a more radical position in rebuilding my family life. For example, I immediately took my son. There were comrades who let several years go by and afterward it really affected their relationships with the children whom they had had to leave or whom they had given birth to underground. But on the other side, our life in the '80s continued being difficult because immediately a new chapter of the war was opened and this changed the Revolution's initial plans

and it imposed certain conditions that made things more difficult—even the democratic functioning of the Sandinista Front was difficult, and a more relaxed life. But in the middle of all this, we made that transition, right? Rebuilding our family life. I had another daughter in ‘80, for example, and I re-established ties with my mother. All of my sisters had actively participated, I lost a sister who was 16 years old, I don’t have—I don’t have a photo here, strangely, I don’t have a photo of her. And another of my sisters who was just fifteen had a bomb explode near her and she lost both her hands and my mother, and a sister of mine was imprisoned, and others underground, so the whole family was spread out, so the reconstruction implied a reunion of the whole family. We were all very involved and this helped. We didn’t have a big split that some family members belonged to the other side,⁸ as it happened with some of my *compañeros*, for example. And I think, well, that rebuilding daily life was a more or less slow process and at the same time very fast, from a certain point of view, right, I had four children. I mean after the two children with my first husband, I got remarried and I had two more children. And then with those two children, I could dedicate myself to being a mother. The first two were more affected and still today they show it in their temperament and insecurity, the other two were more attended to, I gave them more time, right.

Grabe: Did you take a post immediately after the war?

[21:20]

Baltodano: Yes, they gave us a recognition that was only given to three women in the whole Sandinista Front of guerilla combatants, that were linked to history, the trajectory, but in a particular way of having occupied military leadership roles in the final months. And after that I was at the head of the Department of Organization and Work of the Masses, ‘80, ‘81 and part of ‘82. And in ‘82 I was named Minister of Regional Affairs, a position that I occupied until the end, until ‘90, in charge of the processes of decentralization, of the organization of local and municipal power and that’s where my vocation for municipality and territory work emerged. In some way it had to do with the experience that I accumulated as an organizer. I consider myself a good organizer and this was the work that I completed in ‘80.

Grabe: Who were the other two women who were appointed posts?

Baltodano: Dora María Téllez⁹ and Leticia Herrera.¹⁰ Leticia I think is now the consul in Panama, she was the shyest of us. Later, I think that there were more women with those merits. But I think that machismo prevailed, yeah, they awarded the rank of Guerilla Combatant to 30 men and to 3 women, yeah.

Grabe: And what did you do after your work with the Ministry in the ‘80s?

⁸ In some families, some members supported the Sandinista movement, while others supported Somoza.

⁹ The Dora María Téllez, born in 1955, is a historian and well known icon of the Sandinista Revolution. In 1978, at age 22, Téllez was third in command during the Sandinista takeover of the National Palace, which resulted in release of a number of key Sandinista political prisoners. After the Revolution, her posts included Vice President of the Council of State, Political Chief of Managua, and Minister of Health. After leaving the FSLN, she founded the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS) in 1995. In 2004 she was appointed Robert F. Kennedy Visiting Professor in Latin American studies at the Harvard Divinity School. However, she was unable to obtain an entry visa to the US because the PATRIOT Act classified her as a terrorist. The Global Feminisms Project has an interview with Ms. Téllez.

¹⁰ A Commander for the FSLN who later occupied several positions with the Revolutionary government.

[23:37]

Baltodano: In the '80s my work was to travel around the whole country and organize the presence of the state or of the government in the territories and to favor a horizontal territorial functioning and to favor a less centralized structure than what we had inherited from Somozismo. The country was very centralized, everything was decided on a national level and it was fundamental to reveal the protagonism from the bases. The municipality also had been debilitated, so I promoted the new Municipal Law, municipal autonomy, we created an agency, an institution of municipal promotion and this allowed me to once again be in contact with people.

Grabe: Did you link that work that you were doing with the government to your interest in social change?

Baltodano: Of course, of course, because we wanted—the purpose that motivated us to enter the armed fight was the social situation of the people and we dreamed, and we continue to dream I should say, of a more just society, the social differences were clear and the Revolution—despite all the difficulties to come undone, it was able to develop social programs that diminished inequality, that gave peasants, and women peasants, access—even though not sufficiently—to land, access to education, access to health, social wellness, centers of infant development, and we could develop our feminism because when we were fighting we didn't have enough consciousness that in addition to the general rights of people, we were fighting for our rights as women.

I had some initial contacts before going underground with feminism through some reading, but we couldn't develop it except for a few gestures that were more instinctive. For example, when I had just gone underground, a *compañero* wanted me to wash his clothes and so I told him, "I didn't go underground to wash anybody's clothes." And he was really upset because he was an important leader, he was Commander Pedro Arau Palacios, and so he told me, "We don't consider women to have fewer rights, but I can't wash clothes on this house's patio because"—it was a country house—"because they will immediately notice something strange happening because peasant men don't wash." So I was reflecting on this and I said, "Fine, I'll wash it for you." So then he was already really upset and he told me, "No, don't wash it." So I told him, "Fine then."

And I was going with the decision to take responsibility and to do all of the tasks without distinction for my sex. There was a moment when we were in military training, I concurred with a comrade who is now vice-fiscal leader¹¹ of the country, Ana Julia Guido, and then there was a time when the exercises were very violent, so then I started to try to do fewer exercises and then she tells me, "The men are going to say that women can do less," and she said to me, "You can do more squats, exercises, but you're taking advantage of being a woman" because when the *compañero* saw that I was very tired he said to me, "Stop doing exercises," and then later I thought about it and I said yes, if we want to display all of our abilities, we can't pretend to be weaker because in reality I was pretending to be weak, I could do more. Then these were the thoughts that we had. But it wasn't until the Revolution triumphed that we had the opportunity to collectively, and in the women's organization, to get into contact with feminism—in the

¹¹ Assistant Attorney General.

organizations that arrived in Nicaragua. It wasn't until then that we started to think about our rights, about our historically unequal condition and about the need to fight for women's rights. Even though for many *compañeras*, there were some of us who put our own rights beneath the general rights of people and the general interests of the Revolution, because during the Revolution many of our struggles were postponed because we said the Revolution came first. For example, when we started to debate the topic of abortion, about a woman's right to decide about her body, the topic of violence against women, many of those topics were postponed. Even in the party's activism, they didn't demand early on, that [women's rights] be also part of our private lives. There were occasions where we knew that [*compañeros*] were beating their partners, so some of us decided that we had to establish within our statutes that no revolutionary, no Sandinista activist, could hit his woman, or that they should have personal practices that were governed by respect to our rights. But it was a battle that developed very timidly and those of us who had leadership responsibilities didn't give enough support to these battles started by some *compañeras* and which sometimes resulted in them facing sanctions or discrimination, right? We must say it completely honestly, right. I think that the electoral defeat of the Sandinista Front opened a larger space for radicalism in our feminist positions, yeah.

Grabe: What do you mean by feminism?

[32:43]

Baltodano: I think it is to have consciousness. For me, being a feminist is being conscious of the subordinate condition of women in society and to understand the reasons, the historic reasons that led to this subordination and inferior situation as far as rights and harassment. And not only being conscious, being feminist for me is to fight to change the situation of discrimination and inequality that women continue living and that have very concrete agendas in economics, politics, in relationships of power in the struggle for secular states, in the rights of women to control her own body, reproduction, her reproductive role.

Grabe: Do you call yourself a feminist?

Baltodano: Yes, I consider myself a feminist.

Grabe: Are you able to do that publicly without consequences?

Baltodano: Yes, we suffer social consequences, well, we are seen by one sector of society as transgressive women, we transgress the existing morality. If we talk about a woman's right to make decisions about her body, some disqualify us as murderers, right. For example, just for defending the right for a therapeutic abortion, which is abortion, or the interruption of pregnancy that has to do explicitly with the life of the woman, with the right of a woman to interrupt a pregnancy when her own life is at risk, some accuse us of being murderers, right, they yell at us, murderers! If you claim the right to free sexual relations, they call you promiscuous, or call us lesbians even if we aren't. So, right. It's to say, even though we explain, we claim the right to sexual relations without discrimination, but immediately well, there is very strong social pressure.

Grabe: I'm going to take you back to your story, can you tell me what you did after the electoral defeat in 1990?¹²

[36:14]

Baltodano: In '90 I was elected as councilor and it was in an exceedingly disadvantageous situation. We made a tough law and the tough law was applied to us. Because even though we got 40% of the votes, we only had 4 councilors out of 20. So those 4 councilors, we had to be the opposition in the Municipal Council and to be completely frank, the person who had a very outstanding role in the period from '90-'97 was me. The others had a much more—they were men—a much more timid role. I began to fight against the corruption that Mayor Arnoldo Alemán¹³ implemented, the mayor was Arnoldo Alemán, and he began to rob communal funds to build his party. And I began to show, I was more known as Mónica Baltodano in the '90s than in the '80s because I was in the papers everyday denouncing acts of corruption and I even legally accused Arnoldo Alemán. So then, I continued working with the Sandinista Front and I was very well known in the ranks as someone who didn't leave a fight, I mean I continued having a very confrontational position in the struggle, in the new conditions when we were out of power. And that's why later we were able to be deputies and have the recognition that even those who don't share our political position and who don't share our ideological position know that Mónica Baltodano has been a pugnacious woman who defends her points of view passionately, energetically, without fear, and she confronts—I confront adversity with a characteristic that I have that, according to my mother, I have had since I was very young, right. Because I loved taking risks, I loved climbing onto the roof, to see, we'll say, the view of my *barrio* from the roof, even though I could have fallen and split my head open, right. So then it seems like I had a certain tendency toward courage, risk, and I've maintained this character until today. I'm a little controversial in some ways because I'm either loved or hated, because I have a hard time finding the middle ground in things. So then that's how I continued developing my profile after the loss, when we were in very difficult, very difficult conditions.

Grabe: For most of your life you took these risks as a supporter of the FSLN, but then something shifted for you. Can you tell me a bit about what went into your starting the MRS?¹⁴

[40:27]

Baltodano: Well, to clarify, I didn't participate in the MRS. The MRS was founded in '95, and I had a radically different position. You could say that the Congress of '94 was about the confrontations between the leanings of the MRS and the leanings of my group, which was the democratic left. In some ways we were fundamentally for Daniel Ortega remaining Secretary General in '94. We had strong differences with the MRS, we shared democratic ideals about democratizing the Sandinista Front, but we didn't share certain ideological leanings toward the

¹² In 1990, the FSLN (led by Daniel Ortega) lost the presidential election to a coalition led by the UNO party (National Opposition Union) and Doña Violeta Chamorro became president until 1997.

¹³ President of Nicaragua from 1997-2002, member of the Constitutionalist Liberal Party. Was an official of the Somoza dictatorship. Was mayor of Managua from 1990-1995.

¹⁴ Movimiento de Renovación Sandinista (MRS) is a Nicaraguan political party founded in 1995 following a rupture in the FLSN. Shelly Grabe most likely here is referring to the Movement to Reclaim Sandinismo, which Baltodano was involved with and speaks about below, and which has the same initials, MRS.

center, in topics like imperialism, being leftist or not. For example, they pleaded with us to not continue declaring ourselves anti-imperialists. So, I didn't share an ideological agenda and I continued within the Sandinista Front, driving it, but fighting from the inside for the democratic ideals, women's participation, for example. I consider myself to be the creator of some of the changes that happened, and we were able to obtain the 30% quota, and then the 40% quota, but the break, the actual break with the current Sandinista leadership was the—well, it began to manifest itself in '98 when Daniel Ortega, after being accused of rape.¹⁵ This was part of what was happening and I was accused of being responsible.¹⁶

In reality I hadn't had anything to do with Zoilamérica's decision to make the complaint, but they needed to justify the complaint with a plot and there was an accusation that I was responsible. After this accusation, Daniel began to turn the Sandinista Front toward a policy of transactions, of agreements, of arrangements with Arnaldo Alemán and I radically opposed, and as a Deputy—and being bound by the statutes to vote for the constitutional reforms that Ortega and Alemán had created—I voted against them. There were only four of us who opposed, two women and two men. And this meant being sanctioned by the Sandinista Front, that is to say that they excluded me, I couldn't be a candidate for Deputy again, they sanctioned me, they took disciplinary actions and so then they left me without a single task and I began to work in social movements, trying to build independent social movements.

We were against privatization so we were making connections with other movements. I got into contact with social movements in the south, with the movement of the landless, with the Zapatista movement,¹⁷ and I began to work with social movements—I mean, I didn't belong to the partisan structures anymore. So I began to connect a lot more with social movements and doing this work was how the Movement to Reclaim Sandinismo began. There is confusion because it has the same initials, and I want to say here that the Renovation Movement that was founded in '95 entered into alliance with Daniel Ortega in 2001 and formed part of what was called the Convergence, which is how Daniel Ortega participated in elections in 2001 and later in 2004. So the MRS party formed part of this alliance with the FSLN when the Movement to Reclaim was founded, and the Movement to Reclaim convinced the Renovation Movement—it's the same acronym, but one is Reclaim and the other Renew. The Renovation Movement had legal entity status and so then we made an alliance to participate in the elections of 2006 and that's how I became a Deputy. But I have never been active in the Renovation Party, and I still have slight differences with them, we could say that they are more centrist and I consider myself more of a leftist. So then these differences also manifest themselves in the Movement to Reclaim. The Movement to Reclaim is, we'll say, it didn't want to ally itself with the ALN or with Montealegre¹⁸ because we consider it to be a rightwing alliance, right, and we have certain differences, so then I aligned myself with the Movement to Reclaim. This happened in 2005,

¹⁵ In 1998 Zoilamérica Narváez, Daniel Ortega's stepdaughter, accused him of sexual harassment/misconduct from the time she was 11 years old until a few days before she filed the complaint. She went to court, was represented by Vilma Núñez of the Women's movement. Zoilamérica won the court case, decided to settle privately with Ortega, and later the family reunited. This was a pivotal moment in the FSLN, and the division of the FSLN is often partially attributed to these accusations.

¹⁶ Presumably, the FSLN leadership broke with Boltadano because of a belief that she may have influenced Zoilamérica to press charges against Daniel Ortega.

¹⁷ In southern Mexico.

¹⁸ Other political parties.

right after it was founded, they invited me to support them and they immediately gave me the responsibility of Managua, and to organize Managua was a very important task, and later they nominated me to be a candidate for Deputy. But I'm a Deputy of the Movement to Reclaim, it's a slightly different movement.

Grabe: Can you tell us briefly about the position that you hold now, the job that you're working in and what kind of issues you are trying to address?

[47:52]

Baltodano: In Parliament, my central agenda has been linked to the struggle for women's rights and we have been able to convince women of other ideologies to become involved in the fight. We have proposed the Family Code, the decriminalization of therapeutic abortion, the Law for Sexual and Reproductive Rights, which has a lot to do with education. We are on the topic of breast cancer, women's rights in relation to illnesses that affect them in particular, but my central task is in the organization of the Movement to Reclaim, in the training of new leaders, youth, and the struggle for democracy. Because the assent of Daniel Ortega to government in 2006 was accompanied by a series of actions clearly directed at controlling the country, at absolute control, he controls the powers that should be independent, judicial powers, electoral powers, the National Finance Office, the Assembly, that's to say he has unfolded a plan to autocratically control all of the government's offices along with his wife. And with this plan, he has pushed aside the law, the Constitution of the Republic, civil and political rights of all Nicaraguans that don't think like him, he has organized groups to attack us. So then for us, who fought against a dictatorship and who know Nicaragua's history, we see that he's constructing a dictatorship.

I'm going to have to take a break just to call my friend and tell her that I'm on my way because it's already one o'clock.

Grabe: I'll only ask you one more question then.

Baltodano: It's because she's very sensitive, she'll get upset. [Baltodano makes a call.]

Look at this graffiti that I saw yesterday and I took a picture of it, *Daniel is my God*.

Grabe: Oh...[laughter] Mónica, what year did you take your position in Parliament?

Baltodano: I was Deputy from '97 until 2002, then I voted against the pact of constitutional reforms, I was a Deputy with the Sandinista Front. Later I had a period without being Deputy and I was elected again in 2006 and my term finishes in 2012.

Grabe: So I have one more question, several women who are as outspoken as you are, who also take risks, have talked about being blacklisted. How are you able to take risks and speak out against Ortega and successfully hold a position in Parliament?

Baltodano: Well first, I have always been active in some movement and joining other people, men, women who have the same positions. They haven't been positions gained along the way, so that gives me some level of strength. And later, we have suffered the consequences of our position. But when we have suffered repression, we have reported it, we haven't stayed quiet. We haven't shown fear, actually we have said, we aren't afraid of you, right. And we report

everything that happens. For example, this foundation in various occasions has been subjected to plans, using the judicial power, to annul, for example, our ownership of this property.¹⁹ Sometimes they have invented cases to take us to court and we have reported them nationally and internationally. Right, and we have said, you aren't going to break us with fear. But we have also tried to be sure that our lives not be dependent on a job, a salary—we've tried to construct self-sufficiency that gives us autonomy. Because when people blacklist you from work, they close off—it's understandable, sometimes, that they begin to be quiet or they begin to leave the fight. And additionally we have always confronted this as family. We have passed through difficult economic times, then for example, I'm going to stop being a Deputy, but just because I'm not going to have that income, I'm not going to stop feeling like I have things to fight for. I mean our struggle doesn't depend on appointments, on positions. In my family we say we are willing to go hungry, to live with difficulties, to confront whatever comes. And since we already lived, we had a very tough life, we say, we can do anything and hopefully it isn't necessary for the country to again become involved in armed conflict because we don't want it, right. And that's why we say, we must be aggressive and fight through civil channels, peacefully, using non-violence to achieve a country that doesn't fall to a dictatorial regime again.

Grabe: Do you also collaborate with the Women's Autonomous Movement when you're addressing women's rights issues?

[57:20]

Baltodano: Yes, yes. We feel that we are part of the Autonomous Movement, we interact with them on all the plans and we work together and when I talk about the autonomous movement, there is a movement that is called the "Autonomous Movement" but we also refer to the women who are organized in fights against violence, the collectives, the group promoting decriminalization of therapeutic abortion. We interact with all of them and in the last few years we have developed the best relationships that we didn't have, many more than we had with the feminist movements.

Grabe: Mónica, I know you have another appointment, so I just want to close by telling you that it is an honor that you would meet with us today.

Baltodano: Thank you.

Grabe: Do you have time for Ansli to take a professional photograph with you?

Baltodano: Yes, of course.

Grabe: And there is so much history on this wall—

[End.]

¹⁹ She refers to Fundación para la Promoción y Desarrollo Municipal- Popol-Na, a non profit organization that Monica Baltodano created in the 1990s.