

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

SITE: NICARAGUA

**Transcript of Bertha Inés Cabrales
Interviewer: Shelly Grabe
Interpreter: Julia Baumgartner**

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

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Bertha Inés Cabrales was born in 1943 and is, along with her twin brother, the eldest of five siblings. During her childhood she spent time in Honduras and El Salvador due to her father's exile. She joined the Sandinista Front during college and in the late 1970s was sent to Sweden to organize Solidarity events in Europe. Upon her return to Nicaragua Ms. Cabrales focused her work on issues of land reform, and in the late 1980s became involved in women's issues. She was active in the Luisa Amanda Espinoza Association of Nicaraguan Women and currently heads the *Colectivo de Mujeres Itza*, an organization that provides sexual and reproductive health counseling as well as legal assistance for victims of gender-based violence.

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 Bertha Inés Cabrales



Bertha Inés Cabrales: I used to speak louder, it's the hypothyroidism, it's affected my voice levels; I didn't used to need microphones or megaphones.

Childhood, Family, Motherhood, Marriage, Religion, Education

Shelly Grabe: 1, 2, 3, checking sound. Okay Berta Inés, I want to start by thanking you for being willing to participate in the Global Feminisms Project today. As we discussed, we'll spend about an hour talking about your personal history, and then we'll move on to discuss the work that you're doing now. I know you're probably more used to talking about the collective work of the women's movement, but I'd like to ask you to start with your own beginning and tell us first a little bit about your personal history. Can you tell me some of your earliest memories, what your childhood was like? Your family?

[01:27]

Cabrales: Well, let's start with the fact that I was born into a family with a father with Communist ideas, or with Communist sympathies. My mother was a housewife, but an avid reader; particularly of political and health issues; she read a lot about health. And well, I am the only daughter in my family, we are five siblings: four boys and me. I was my mother's first pregnancy and have a twin brother. Yes, it was a pregnancy tha—well, my mother tells me that I weighed 8½ pounds and my brother 9½, and I would say, 'Ouch!' and I would ask her how she was able to handle that much weight and in her first pregnancy, that's terrible, at least it's what I think, I think it must have been terrible. But she says, no, she says she would still walk about the house, doing housework. She also liked to plant, she says she didn't feel bad because of all the weight and that it wasn't until the eighth and ninth months that my dad would pitch in more, because the weight became a bit too much for her.

What can I say about my family? Well, my father was an orphan. His mother died during labor, he never met his mother. Why do I tell you about my father's history? Well, because it has a lot to do with the story of my life. One carries it along, not just biologically, but also the history, the historic memory of oneself and of one's body. My father studied in a school run by monks and he, well, he was not able to continue his studies at the university, like his older brother—who is a historian of Nicaragua, he's a very well known poet, avant-garde, he studied in France and was the eldest. Their father died while he was away in France and so he came back. My mother, well, she had nine siblings, there were two boys and seven girls. In my father's family, there were five siblings, one girl and four boys, just like my family. Ever since I was a little girl they would call me, since I was the only girl, "you are the queen of the house," but it turns out that the 'queen of the house' would be sent to wash the dishes, fold her clothes, make her bed. "Queens don't work," I would tell my father. "Why do you make me work if I'm the queen of the house?" So he would tell me that modern queens have to know how to do it all, they have to study, they have to do different things. Our immediate family—my father's family was very close, but he had us exiled, he was anti-Somoza.¹ He took us with him to Honduras, we were in El Salvador, wherever he went, he went with his children and my mother, it was incredible. So I grew up in a political world. In my family, for example, my father had Communist-Socialist sympathies, but I had an uncle who was a conservative, he was a congressman, he was one of the congressmen who were then called *diputados zancudos*² because they made pacts with Somoza. I had another uncle, the one who studied in France, who sympathized with fascism, with Hitler, and my aunt was a teacher. So, there were always discussions about literature, about politics. I was very young and I would sit there and they wouldn't tell me to go, so I was there and listened to everything. So I mean to say that I think, I believe that this type of family, with these conversations every afternoon after work, where we would all sit down for lunch, my father's siblings, my cousins, everyone, they were incredible conversations, because there were huge contradictions, don't you think?

¹ Anastacio Somoza García took power of Nicaragua in 1933 after betraying the peace agreements. He was officially the President of Nicaragua from January 1, 1937 to May 1, 1947 and from May 21, 1950 to September 29, 1956, but ruled effectively as dictator from 1936 until his assassination in 1956. 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.)

² Traitors.

I studied at a religious school and so I was educated, well, let's say that my first contact with religion was at school. It was a bit strange because at home we would have conversations, my father did not believe in Mary's virginity, he questioned her virginity, and I would hear that. My aunt defended Mary's virginity, so I was raised in this world of great contradictions of ideas and they filled me with lots of questions. I remember that when we returned to Nicaragua we moved to a neighborhood called San Sebastian, that was a strong working-class neighborhood, where people were also anti-Somoza, although there were some pro-Somoza people too. This is where the first large protests against Somoza took place, during election-time. I would sit on the sidewalk in front of my house to watch all the election movement, and I very much wanted to go and vote against Somoza, but of course I couldn't vote because I was underage. That was the first time.

Grabe: What year was that?

Cabrales: That was about, 1967, around then.

Childhood, Politics, Personal Narrative, Feminism/Women, Education

Grabe: And what year were you born?

[08:15]

Cabrales: I was born in '48, I will be 63 years old this coming July 24th, pretty old. Time has passed me by quickly.

But that was where I saw for the first time how one of Somoza's guards killed a man, a tall man from our neighborhood, who was part of the opposition. This event impacted me profoundly because the man was running and his friend was also running and two guards were chasing them. So then, the tall friend, in an attempt to prevent his shorter friend from being captured, stuck out his leg and tripped one of the guards. The guard fell to the ground and then stood up, furious, and shot him. It was a thin bullet, it made a hole here and his back just split open. I saw how his back exploded. So that impacted me a lot and I developed a lot of rage against Somoza, yes. And we were under siege for several days, our neighborhood was, we couldn't leave the neighborhood because the Guard³ had us surrounded, the entire neighborhood was surrounded—the Guard with their armored cars, and planes and small aircraft would fly above, and the people were in the streets. The kids and the youth were in the streets and the parents would come out and take us inside and we would find a way to go back out. So it impacted me deeply. I think that is what created in me this profound anti-dictatorship sentiment, and you can see how even today I still have that profound anti-dictatorship sentiment that I reject what is going on these days. Sure, it's not as crude as it was before, but it's starting to show; when we take to the streets they beat us with sticks, and treat us as if we had no rights. With the Revolution⁴, we said with the Revolution, that we had the right to mobilize and now they are falling back on that.

³ "The Guard" refers to Somoza's security regime, The National Guard.

⁴ The Revolution refers to the movement of the FSLN (The Sandinista Front for National Liberation) to overthrow the existing government. The revolution eventually succeeded in 1979, overthrowing Somoza.

Well, that's part of the political motivations – the situation the country was in. There were women who would become involved, there were women back then, and those women caught my attention, they would ask me, “Why do you want to join the *Juventud Comunista*⁵?” and I said, “Well, because in my house, my father is Communist and I think that it's a good thing.” So they said, “But you can't be here if you don't think for yourself, you can't be [a communist] because your father is one, you have to get there, you have to mature.” And so that created a boom inside my brain, you see. So then time passed by and I was in secondary school, I think I was in 5th or 6th year⁶, I was studying at the Divina Pastora and there were many protests going on.

For example, I wanted to meet Doris María Tijerino,⁷ who had been captured. I didn't know her but I wanted to meet her. To me she was a great example of a woman, because she had been captured when she was in a house with Julio Buitrago,⁸ and they were members of the Sandinista Front⁹—I was already beginning to sympathize with the ideas of the Sandinista Front, you never saw the Sandinista Front anywhere, but you heard of them all over the place, it was like a mysterious and striking thing for us youth. So then, when she passed by the school, I was on the second or third floor and I ran to see her and I told a classmate, “That's Doris Tijerino, she's a heroine” and I don't know where I had gotten all that, and we all went out to see her. The nuns, scared, came to get us, “Come back inside girls, come inside.” So for me, that was another person who impacted me.

Later, when I left school and went to the university, I went to enroll and—sometimes I laugh when I tell this story—because when I went to enroll at the university, what I really wanted to know is how I could enroll with the Sandinista Front. At the time, the Sandinista Front was still a clandestine movement, but I was so naïve about the danger that I went into an office and I asked a professor who had a long beard, because the beard, back then, the beard was a revolutionary symbol, like Ché¹⁰ and all that. And so, I approach him and ask, “Where are the offices of the Sandinista Front?” And the professor looks at me and says, “Don't ask those things in public. There are no offices of the Sandinista Front here, but you can go to the offices of the Student Movement.” So then I go to their office and knock and say, “I want to be part of the Sandinista Front, how do I become involved with the Sandinista Front?” And everyone there was just so scared. I remember that among them were Edgard Munguía¹¹, Bayardo Arce¹², Hugo Mejía, and others, and they all said, “No, no, nope. No, this has nothing to do with the Sandinista Front, we are student leaders of the Student Movement.” Later, when we got to know each other, they

⁵ Communist Youth

⁶ In Nicaragua years in school are numbered 1st through 6th of primary school followed by 1st through 6th of secondary school, 5th or 6th of secondary school is equivalent to 11th or 12th grade in high school.

⁷ Doris Maria Tijerino was a member of the Sandinista Front.

⁸ Julio Buitrago was a member of the FSLN, and was killed by the National Guard in 1969.

⁹ The Sandinista Front for National Liberation, in 1979, 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. pp. 31.) The FSLN maintained control of the government until 1990.

¹⁰ Ernesto “Ché” Guevara was a Marxist Revolutionary who was a major figure in the Cuban Revolution and has since become an international symbol for revolution.

¹¹ Edgar Munguia was a member of the Sandinista Front, he was tortured and killed by Somoza's guard in 1976.

¹² Bayardo Arce continues to be involved in the FSLN and is now Daniel Ortega's top economic advisor.
<http://www.nicaraguadispatch.com/business-travel/arce-we-have-to-generate-wealth/588>

laughed at me, you know, they said “You were crazy, you walked into our office asking if you could sign up for the Sandinista Front, when it was still a clandestine movement.” So, I eventually found out how it all worked, and I was there.

After that I was imprisoned for a little while, at night, for a few hours. This happened when we would organize protests with the Revolutionary Student Front, asking for the political prisoners to be freed, not to be tortured, all that. I remember that La Aviación¹³ was here; and now this is [a gym called] Ajax Delgado.¹⁴ Life is ironic, don’t you think? Now they’re my neighbors. And I was there many times, but I was never imprisoned for three, four or five months, no, never like that. I was there for days, two or three days and then the Rectors from the university would come to ask for us to be freed, saying that we were young and all. And then we would be freed.

Education, Family, Feminism/Women, History

Grabe: What did you study at the university?

[15:04]

Cabrales: That year I was in basic—basic, it’s the basic year, it’s when you first get into the university, and it’s like a preparatory year at the university. Well, I became more involved in the political life of the Revolutionary Student Front, we would go to the factories, we went to the barrios to hand out flyers from the Sandinista Front, we would have meetings in the barrios. So then the people began to collaborate with us, they’d let us know the Guard was coming, and we would hide in the churches or someone’s house.

After that, before the triumph of the Revolution, I had to choose to go on a self-imposed exile. I already had a son, a son born of a romance with someone in the revolutionary groups. I had met a young man from Guatemala who had studied in Czechoslovakia, he was a Physicist-Mathematician, and we fell in love, you know, student love. He was already a professor, he had graduated already, and I was a student—but he was not my professor. We fell in love and soon after I became pregnant at the age of 24. Why do I mention my age? My mother had me when she was 28, which was very strange because back then women became pregnant very young, but my mother married and got pregnant at 28. So I came from a household with a mother who was a little more—not as young. Although you might say that 24 years old is young, sure, but in the Nicaraguan context they would say, “What happened? You’re not going to have kids? You’re not going to get married?” There is a lot of social pressure.

But I decided, as I said before, on a self-imposed exile and I spoke with the comrades from the Sandinista Front because I was feeling lots of pressure, and I was very scared, I was terrified, I wanted to go up into the mountains and they wouldn’t take us into the mountains. There was work to do in the city. When I was in Sweden, we began to strengthen the committee in solidarity with the struggles of the people of Nicaragua. We were there, working hard, and we were able to get Olof Palme¹⁵ to be the honorary president of the committee of solidarity, as well

¹³ La Aviación was a Prison where political prisoners were kept and often tortured.

¹⁴ This is now a public gym run by the government and named after Ajax Delgado, a martyr of the Revolution.

¹⁵ Olof Palme was a Swedish politician who led the Swedish Social Democratic Party from 1969 until being assassinated in 1986.

as other well-known Swedish personalities who were social-democrats. We did lots of work at the European level, we organized solidarity conferences. After the triumph of the Revolution I decided to come back. They asked me to stay and help out with the embassy, but I didn't stay, I didn't want to stay. I came back and became involved and really wanted to work with land reform. I took an intensive course to learn more about land reform throughout the world: China, France, Chile, Guatemala, and Krakow.

Politics, Feminism/Women/Gender

Grabe: In the early 80s?

Cabrales: Yes, early '80s because I came back in November of '79. I came back when they had the first massive public tribute to Carlos Fonseca Amador¹⁶ and I joined that tribute. I got off the plane and I joined. So then we began working on the land reform training and I was made responsible for the training at the institute in Ciudad Rivas. I applied to work in Rivas, and it's quite an odyssey, I'll keep it short. Afterwards, around 1984, I was able to get them to relocate me to Managua, because I was in the Fourth Region,¹⁷ the country had regionalized in '84, it was starting to regionalize. I began to do follow up work with all the radio stations in the Fourth Region, in journalism, campaigns, all that. The first program I worked on in the southern front, in Rivas, was a program where we spoke about women, about women's health, and we talked about abortion—because I had just returned from Sweden, and over there I was able to see how women handled their sexuality, they were free, “*libertinas*”¹⁸ we would call them here, but I say they were free, they had sexual experiences before getting married. It was the complete opposite of Nicaragua. In the environment I grew up in, if you had sexual experiences before marriage it was a social scandal, whereas over there it was the norm. So I was inspired by how Swedish women lived their lives, how they didn't have kids at a very young age, they weren't worried about having kids

Feminism/Women/Gender, Politics, Activism, History

Grabe: Who were you working with at that time?

Cabrales: In Sweden?

Grabe: No, when you—you said when you moved to Managua you started to work in radio.

Cabrales: Still with the Sandinista Front.

Grabe: Okay.

Cabrales: Yes, still with the Sandinista Front, with the Regional Committee. The selection process for the second promotion of the Sandinista Front was going on when I asked to be relocated. So I was sent to an office that was more about party organization, and I didn't like it because I had come from working more on advertising and promotion and the people who

¹⁶ Carlos Fonseca Amador was the founder of the FSLN but was killed in 1976, before the organization took power.

¹⁷ A narrow region located between the lakes and the Pacific.

¹⁸ Libertine, licentious

worked there were more open, they liked discussing different things. The people in my new office were more symbolic. I didn't like it but I had to take it.

That is where I had my first experience in putting together questions for the committees to evaluate the new FSLN militants. So I included a question on how they got along with their partners, if they hit them, if they respected them, if they forbade them from participating in politics, because I had seen that there were many militants who were great militants, but they didn't allow their women to participate in the FSLN politics. Well, I went ahead and included many questions like this, but my superior said no, she said, "No, they'll never approve it." I made my case and we had a meeting about it in the office, about what relationships between men and women were like, honestly. For me it was important for the new militants to be evaluated on this, maybe not to measure whether or not they were well qualified to militate in the FSLN, but as a mechanism for self-reflection, so that the men would start thinking about how their relationships with women needed to change. I remember that we had a discussion about this and the psychologist came and told me, "These questions are good, they're excellent. You should be the one to take them to the regional committee." So I went, I went by myself; the team didn't come with me. So I go present my proposal, the questions, and I make my case and all, and then Carlos Carrión, who at the time was the Political Secretary, he says, "But with those questions, we won't have any new militants for the FSLN!" What a shame, I told him, but we have to reflect on these things, we need to change the behaviors of our *compañeras*,¹⁹ as well as their daughters and sons. And the proposal was not approved.

So I think that was my contribution, based on my intuition, in what I had seen and what I had read. I saw, for example, that in the rural areas in the Fourth Region, how men would hit their women or they would burn them, and it was something like mindset, a feeling that grew inside me, that if they walked too far away from the house they were reprimanded by having their feet burned, or little girls who would have their private parts scalded if they wet themselves. So that also had an impact on me, how could there be so much cruelty in a relationship? So all those things I had seen, I wanted to ask questions about. Well, after that—there's a *compañera* I want to mention, Rose Mary Vega. She was political secretary in Managua and had been my supervisor in Rivas, in the propaganda office. The FSLN named her to be coordinator for AMNLAE²⁰ in Managua. The FSLN said she would be the coordinator for all the people's movements, as they called them back then. So she called me and asked if I wanted to work with her, right, to work with her.

Activism, Feminism, Politics, History

¹⁹ In English, *compañera* means (female) "partner" or "companion." It is often used in the context of work or school. However it is a multi faceted word, and was left untranslated in this text because here it is a specific reference to women who are involved in the FSLN.

²⁰ AMNLAE- Asociación de Mujeres Nicaragüenes Luisa Amanda Espinoza, English: Amanda Espinoza Association of Nicaraguan Women. This was the original Sandinista women's movement established in 1977 under the name Association of Women Concerned about National Crisis (*Asociación de Mujeres ante la Problemática Nacional*, AMPRONAC). Due to its close links to the FSLN, feminist issues such as abortion and women's rights were pushed aside to organize around FSLN issues. (Bayard de Volo, Lorraine. *Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs: Gender Identity and Politics in Nicaragua, 1979-1999*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore. 2001. p. 22.)

Grabe: Were you already a member of AMNLAE?

[25:12]

Cabrales: She brought me in, I think it was in '86 or '87. I loved working with her because she was very open minded, we talked a lot, we had long conversations, sometimes we agreed and other times we didn't, but she was a woman I could have a conversation with.

Grabe: Can you tell us briefly, for viewers outside, what AMNLAE means?

Cabrales: It's the Luisa Amanda Espinoza Association of Nicaraguan Women. This organization was born out of the triumph of the Revolution, because before that there was an organization called the Association of Women Concerned about the National Crisis, so when the Revolution triumphed, they renamed it and they also added the name of a woman who was a martyr of the Revolution. That was in Managua. So then they asked me to create a training plan for the AMNLAE leaders and to see how the leaders could then replicate it in the barrios. So we draw up the plan and she approves it, but there's some resistance from the various leaders because they were used to working with issues related to party politics. For example, AMNLAE decides to make the rucksacks for all the mobilized individuals, both the reserves as well as those in the military service. That used to be the work that AMNLAE would do.

So we need to transform it so that it does more work related to the politics of women's rights and to have it's own politics, independent from the party because times have changed. And there were big contradictions, there was resistance and there were changes at the leadership level in many of the regions of Managua, and they gave me the 5th District. There the work was with, more with the mothers of martyrs, but there was nothing going on that really worked on issues regarding women and it was difficult because there was a lot of labor-related resistance. Afterwards we discussed this at AMNLAE and we said, well okay, so there's resistance, but why is there resistance if it's something that helps women advance? But in a sense, I think there were also some expectations that we would lose the status quo.

Later on they sent me to work in the 4th District with the same *compañeras*, which I did, and then there were some changes at the regional management level, and there were lots of changes. So then we had to work without funds—AMNLAE did not give us funds for the work we did, we had to go and look for our own funds. In that sense, the 4th District—I came here as part of the party's structure, but I wanted to make it clear that I didn't have to work according to the party lines out here, but rather that we had our own lines and we wanted to integrate them into the party, but all the while remaining faithful to our lines of action, which were to benefit women. They accepted this diplomatically, but in practice they didn't. Eventually, some time later, we had some discussions at the AMNLAE assembly. It was on March 8, there were three groups that wanted to really go deeper in our work regarding violence towards women, to go deeper in our work regarding the reality of pregnancies that were forced into being through rape, because it was a man's decision, not a woman's. So we shared those ideas with these three leaders. There was Nora Meneses from Xochitl,²¹ Luz Marina from 8 de Marzo,²² and there was me, with Itza,²³

²¹ Xochilt Acalt Foundation for the Comprehensive Development of the Indigenous Women of Sutiava is a Women's Center that began as a clinic in 1991 and has since evolved into an organization with a variety of different focuses, all of which revolve around the empowerment of women.

representing the collective. However, before we weren't a collective, we were grouped as a territory under the FSLN. So we struggled in the assembly, but really we had arrived there already with the idea of becoming independent from AMNLAE and from the FSLN. We had some meetings amongst ourselves and discussed how it was impossible to change the ideas of AMNLAE's management. They wanted to remain within the FSLN, while we wanted to focus on women's issues.

History, Politics, Activism, Feminism, Personal Narrative

Grabe: What year were you addressing those issues?

Cabrales: We started really focusing on these issues in '89, it was a process from '88 to '89, but by the end of '89, the need for us to become independent was much stronger.

Grabe: And at the time you were talking about Itza becoming independent from AMNLAE?

[30:38]

Cabrales: We weren't called Itza. We relied on the participation of women from the entire zone surrounding the lake: from San José Oriental, from Edén, from San Cristóbal, because we worked in the barrios. We didn't have a house, so some women would let us use their yards to do our work or for discussion sessions or reflection sessions. We used their yards. We didn't have an office or typewriters, just backpacks, paper and the desire to create change.

Grabe: And were all these women members of AMNLAE?

[31:28]

Cabrales: AMNLAE was the only women's organization that came out of the Revolution. So any woman who wanted to work for the Revolution had to be part of AMNLAE. Many of us opted to work with the FSLN—we were inside the party. But we learned that there were also organizations that shared our thoughts of autonomy, we talked about autonomy from the FSLN and from AMNLAE and so then we began to assume that concept of autonomy—to have political autonomy, ideological autonomy, to do what we wanted to do, to transform the lives of women, to deal with subordination, with the multiple forms of oppression, such as violence, abuse, rapes, all of that. We were utopic, we had big dreams, really, and we were dreamers. But we also liked to finish the work, and we worked hard to do so, we didn't just stay at dreams.

http://www.capitalforcommunities.org/womens_organizations.html#ochodemarzo

²² Ocho de Marzo is a women's collective that advocates for women and offers services relating to Domestic Violence and Reproductive Health, as well as offering job training classes and open-to-the-public workshops. Luz Marina Torrez is the current Director.

http://www.capitalforcommunities.org/womens_organizations.html#ochodemarzo

²³ The Itza Women's Collective began on January 1, 1989, named after an indigenous woman of the time of the Spanish Conquistadors. The collective focuses on helping women to gain an understanding of their bodies, and currently provides gynecological examinations of all kinds, support groups, and legal advice. Cabrales is the current Director.

http://www.capitalforcommunities.org/womens_organizations.html#ochodemarzo

After that we had some discussions, we realized that there was an Office on Women, that the unions were also being heavily criticized, the Office of the Secretary of the Sandinista Central was also criticizing the unions. So there were many processes of detachment that were of a political-ideological nature—there were detachments at the ATC,²⁴ leaders from the ATC and leaders from CONAPRO,²⁵ which was for those with professional degrees, where Milú Vargas²⁶ and other *compañeras* worked. There was a newspaper from the Revolution—a magazine called *Gente*.²⁷ I want to mention this because we really lived that periodical, which was led by Sofía Montenegro.²⁸ And well, Sofía she would write whatever she wanted to write about, because she had very progressive ideas, and we always read it. I don't think she ever realized that we read it. We would buy it and we discussed what she wrote about in the *barrios*,²⁹ we read it and shared it. It was like a support pamphlet for us, in terms of reflecting on our work. We also looked for what Clara Zetkin from Germany wrote,³⁰ or for Inés Armand's Letters to Lenin.³¹ We would read them, try to learn a bit about them and then we would share it with the people. So the people inside the FSLN would say, "These women are crazy—teaching the people theory! What do the people care about theory? What the people are interested in is having food and having good health." Well, I tell you: yes, we were interested in theory, and the women would say, "Oh, I didn't know about this." So there was this Machiavellian manipulation going on that said that theory is something for intellectuals and what not. And we would say, no, no, theory is born out of reality, it picks up on reality and converts it into theory. And what's more, we asked why? Because, you do know, Marxism was theorized and you [the FSLN] followed it. And what about Lenin? He was a reader and was also an author. And who, then, made decisions? It was the proletariat. Why the proletariat? Because his ideas reached them. His ideas had something to do with their lives—labor exploitation and all that. Later on with feminism, it was European feminists, who theorized, and sure, they were highly educated, but their writings also feed our reflections, which is what happens in my life.

So what we did is we began to break down those stereotypes that theory is for intellectuals, just like that. After that we had our cry for autonomy, when we were getting ready for the Festival of the 52%.³² This was the First Festival of the 52%, where we said that women are 52% [of the population] and we want to be free, we want autonomy, we do not want violence, and we do not want prejudiced sexuality. There were many outlets for expression and we were there organizing,

²⁴ Association of Rural Workers

²⁵ Nicaraguan National Confederation of Professionals

²⁶ Milú Vargas founded the AMNLAE.

<http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1300&dat=19840118&id=LFBVAAAIBAJ&sjid=epUDAAAIBAJ&pg=3155,651726>

²⁷ *Gente* means people, but this is not People Magazine. *Gente* was a supplement of *Barricada*, the official Sandinista newspaper.

²⁸ Sofía Montenegro is a revolutionary journalist who joined the FSLN in 1978. She worked most prominently as international editor of *Barricada*, the official Sandinista newspaper from 1979 until 1984. She was also interviewed for the Global Feminisms archive.

²⁹ *Barrios* can technically be translated to "neighborhood" however the word carries a different connotation, more along the lines of a working-class neighborhood. At times, it can be translated it as "hood" but this often implies a rougher, more dangerous place than *barrio* does in Spanish.

³⁰ Clara Zetkin (1857-1933) was a respected socialist in Germany who had many connections with the Women's Movement.

³¹ Inés Armand was a French Communist and Feminist made famous by her alleged affair with Lenin.

³² The first festival of the 52% took place March 8, 1991.

participating and celebrating that we had received autonomy. After that we had a meeting which we called—after a strong discussion—“United in Diversity.” Others had suggested other names, such as “Autonomous and Leaders” and so on, but “United in our Diversity” was what stuck. And people from AMNLAE participated in this too, so there was a little—you can say that they pushed the FSLN’s ideas quite a bit.

That’s when the networks formed, the Network of Women Against Violence, Network of Sexuality, the one for health, the one for economy, about six or seven networks in all, and of all of them the only ones that remain are the Network of Women Against Violence and the Health Network, of all of them.

So then, what can I say? So the autonomy, we translated that to the people by establishing ourselves as nonpartisan and as secular, the organization doesn’t have any religious beliefs, we are secular and we explained what secularism is and that each person can have their own, individual religious beliefs, but that the organization’s policies are secular. We are nonpartisan because we do not answer to any party. We are feminists because we see ourselves as feminists: that as women we want to have a different power, we want to change the relationships between men and women, and then between adult women and young women, because the debacle became deeper as time went on. So, in a way we opened— during those first years, we never had [leadership] meetings, what we did, we did with our hearts and with conviction for our people, but later, we felt more like a movement.

After that it turns out that in order to request funds we had to have legal status, so then we began debating, did we want to have legal status or did we want to remain as we were at the moment. But, we also needed funds to continue the work, because our staff, those of us that were working, we didn’t have money for our life expenses. For example, we had workshops at the factories, and at the factories they would give us clothes. This was TricoTextil,³³ and the women leaders at TricoTextil would say, “Well, we’ll trade, you train us and we’ll get you clothes.” And we would distribute the clothes, but we couldn’t keep on living that way. Another example, the metallurgy workers—there was a house that was abandoned in the Hilario Sanchez neighborhood. That was our first house; it was a house that had been confiscated. So we went to the FSLN’s regional committee and asked, “Are you interested in this house? Do you plan on using it?” They said no. “Well, can we use it?” They said yes. So we took it and the metallurgy workers donated the iron railings, they donated a few iron chairs, and the sharp edges of the chairs would tear our clothes, so they came in and they would sand them down. Meanwhile, we provided people with training. There was a real feeling of solidarity, but we couldn’t keep on living like that.

Activism, Feminism, Women/Gender, History

Grabe: And who were you working for then?

[39:35]

Cabrales: When we broke away from AMNLAE, during the assembly of the 8th of March, we still worked for AMNLAE in ’89, but AMNLAE did not provide us with any resources, nothing. They would mention “the women’s house” when we didn’t even have the house. We didn’t have

³³ Tricotextil is a garment company operating out of Nicaragua.

an office or a typing machine; we would tape papers together to make larger posters. All the materials for the workshops we would make by hand. So then some of us wanted to have better working conditions and to at least have money for food and that's how we ended up getting legal status. We submitted the paperwork and in '92 we were given legal status and our statutes approved. In '94 we had everything in place and we began to work on small projects. We had a small project worth \$500; this was our first project that we conducted by ourselves—oh, did we stretch out those \$500—I don't know how many months it covered!

After that we began to gain experience and we would see that we had to do more but we couldn't go on in the same manner, there was much work to be done and not enough funds. We would go days with no food—it was hard.

Then we began to solicit funds, for example there was a Dutch organization that [inaudible]. The Wisconsin committee would send us a \$1,000 donation per year, through an anonymous donor. We never found out who that was, we were very grateful—and we are still extremely grateful today, because with those \$1,000 we would do magic in one year.

Later we became more consolidated, we began to identify ourselves as a group and we spoke up. We spoke up to join the Network of Women Against Violence, to be part of that network, and well, the “feminist movement,” and we grew and took more interest to issues related to women. We questioned the power that the patriarchs had, that politicians had; we claimed that politicians were the main abusers of women, that the congressmen did not legislate in the best interest of women, but rather against women's interests. We began to publicly question those in power; we organized large mobilizations to demand the National Assembly create laws that would penalize violence against women. The law was not approved in that dimension, but one part of it—domestic violence, which was already included in the penal code, but at the time it didn't have the same weight as the new law did. And still today, we are still trying to get a law that would penalize violence towards women. We are working on it and waiting to see if and how it is approved, and what will remain of those two proposals that the Network of Women Against Violence and other organizations have contributed.

So we are waiting. You know, it's a struggle that takes years. First we had—in 2006, it was such a hard blow for us, for the women's movement, when they repealed a woman's right to abortion when the mother's life was at risk. Following that, the penalization of abortion in these cases, because they were closing the door for women to try to save their lives. How could the state be so brutal as to infringe our rights as women, which had been in our Constitution since 1856, thanks to a liberal president with a progressive mind. Not like today's liberals, where you can't see the difference whether they belong to one party or the other. So that was a huge blow to us, we took to the streets, we went to the Inter-American Court³⁴ and even so, we still have not been able to reinstate that law and so many women are dying because they don't have the opportunity to save their own lives. So many young women and little girls are raped and are forced to go through with a pregnancy that is a result of rape. Girls who do not want to be pregnant or have that baby and who cannot understand why they do not have the right to stay in school. So many girls are asked to leave school, there's such a lack of sensitivity. These are girls who do not receive any type of specialized attention from the Ministry of Health for the special

³⁴ Inter-American Court of Human Rights, headquartered in Costa Rica.

circumstances they are in. And so it seems that the patriarchal powers closed ranks against the sexual and reproductive rights of women. We have many cases, in Somoto we were able to establish a shelter for women victims of domestic violence, in the Department of Madriz,³⁵ and it is the only shelter and the only organization that is active in the defense of women's rights. We do this with support from ACSUR,³⁶ and funds from the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation, and we've had girls raped as a result of all this.

Grabe: Bertha, can I switch gears a little bit and ask you to tell me briefly about Collective Itza specifically. How did it start and what are the areas of focus?

[45:15]

Cabrales: Well, the Itza Women's Collective began, like I said, in '89, '90, or '91. We were groups of women, groups of women from the *barrios* and decided to work as a collective, to work with women and then we went on to—well, there are founders and many of the founders are women that still continue to live in the *barrios*. Afterwards, we incorporated other *compañeras* who worked in the different grassroots movements and were very active women. There were two *compañeras* who were very active among the Christian grassroots groups, and we incorporated them and they took our approach in terms of the rights of women and autonomy. So they began to join with us. After that, the Collective began to feel that we were starting to voice many of our demands to the state, and the state did not respond. For example, we started to see how we could obtain an office to support the women from a legal perspective, and later how to demand access to health care—we later added the access to health care component. However, the area that first worked out well was education, the area of education that we later renamed area of feminist training and community organization, and we decided to do this in order to clearly outline the areas that the Collective worked in. Because, you see, in the beginning we became involved in everything, and we couldn't do that, we had to divide our work and decide who will take care of what and how many people will she need. So that's how we reorganized.

I want to tell you that in the first house there was a project, a legitimate project that the AMNLAE coordinator had presented. She asked us to turn in the house to them because they were going to start a clinic for female laborers, but no one had even asked us about it. So they asked us to hand over the premises, and we responded that the house did not belong to AMNLAE, but since they already had the funds to begin their project, they came to us and said, "Well, we have a house that we can—well, you could see it and if you like it... I don't think you won't like it." She was very curt. So we came to look at the house—we came with all the women, we invaded it, and we saw that, well, in effect it was worth it, but there was just one thing different, a bit strange—the entrance was strange, you couldn't see from there into this part of the house. So we took it, and they agreed to hand over the deeds to the house, and up to this day we still have not received the deeds, but we're here. And so now we are trying to get this house officially in our name, as the Collective. We are already working with the zoning office, and they have agreed that yes, this house belongs to us but they still had to look into it because

³⁵ The Department of Madriz is located in the North; the capital is Somoto.

³⁶ Association for the Cooperation with the South-Las Segovias is a non profit organization whose goal is the completion of development based projects in the south of Spain.
<http://www.eurosur.org/ACSUR.QuItADo/statutes.htm>

it's an area larger than 100 meters and they have to see if we had to pay because it is over 100 meters, but that's still in works. In the meantime we are still working here, we have ownership rights, we are certain of that.

Activism, Feminism, Politics

Grabe: What are some of the current issues that Collectivo Itza is working on?

[49:28]

Cabrales: We are like at the beginning, way at the very bottom. We have serious funding limitations because in Nicaragua the cooperation has left due to the political development of the country, all of the democratic institutionalism, and also because some donors have prioritized other areas of the world. So we, at Itza, are short on funds, but not just Itza, in general, this is the main problem for all the women's organizations. We have to compete for funds amongst us, but there's nowhere to compete. Organizations, for example, the European Union, we've presented projects but their technical parameters are so high that we are unable to access those funds. We've built alliances with other organizations and worked on joint projects but they haven't been accepted. They'll tell us, "Well, you received 85 or 90 points, but regrettably you cannot access the funds." So if we have a grade of 90, why can't we get the funds? Because 90 is a good grade, it's not bad. So the EU is an area where there are funding opportunities, but it's very difficult for us women's organizations to get it. We don't have a way, they're the ones that have all that money, and they say they want to work in the area of women, but those of us that work on women's issues, we just find it impossible to access those funds.

History, Politics, Activism, Feminism, Family, Motherhood

Grabe: Is the Collective active on the femicide³⁷ bill?

[51:27]

Cabrales: Of course, we joined eighteen other organizations in the María Elena Cuadra Movement³⁸ to work on a proposal for a new law, because we had been asking for a new law since 1994 and it passed only as covering "domestic violence," so now we are waiting and working—we're also working with the Network of Women, which also was active in both proposals, they took that proposal to the Supreme Court, it was Dr. Piedad, um—Dr. or Judge—

Grabe: Can you tell me how the Femicide Law is different from the Family Violence Law from the '90s?

³⁷ The femicide bill moved to make all kinds of violence against women illegal, and thus punishable by law. It specifically refers to the killing of women, "femicide", as well as any violence of a physical, psychological, or sexual nature. It goes even further, making illegal not only property and economic violence, but also workplace violence, misogyny, and any violence against women perpetrated by government officials.

<http://en.maquilasolidarity.org/node/1042>

³⁸ A group dedicated to helping women to advocate for and defend their human rights. It was started in 1994. http://www.capitalforcommunities.org/womens_organizations.html#cuadra

[52:13]

Cabrales: Well, the Law Against Domestic Violence is actually an article within the Penal Code, so the main definition of it is that it is violence within the family, and so it doesn't reflect the power dynamics between men and women in the way we want, in a law against violence towards women and against femicide, because femicide is a product of those power dynamics and that control that men have, that's the biggest difference. We're waiting to see what the law will look like. We're demanding that they go back and include all the contributions the various organizations have given them and that the law be re-oriented, because it really is a pressing issue.

Every day the newspapers report on women being killed by men, yesterday there was a story on the radio and in the papers about a woman who was killed in Ciudad Sandino by her partner because another man had walked by the house and had asked for some water, so the woman gave this man some water. Her partner saw this and said, "This is how I wanted to catch you" and killed her! Killed her because she gave a glass of water to another man to drink and because he suspects every man who walks by. Similarly, the day before, in Chontales, a woman was beaten to death with a hammer. So you see, day after day we hear of all these cases and in these last months the killing of women has been even crueler. We need our legislators to stop playing politics when it comes to this law, because that's what always happens, it's what happened with abortion to save the life of the mother, that was a process in which the FSLN negotiated with the other parties, negotiated with the church and they repealed the abortion law and penalized it. So now we don't want that to happen, we don't want this law to be taken advantage of, we want it to be forceful so we can respond with it and end all the femicides happening in the country.

Every day the killings of women are crueler, the rape of girls is—for example, in the Department of Madriz, where we have this shelter, it's a calamity the way this girls are raped because after they end up pregnant [due to rape], the Ministry of Health forces them to breastfeed. How can the Ministry of Health force a girl who was raped and became pregnant to breastfeed when all she feels is a profound rejection? And it's not her fault. The rapist is the one responsible. So then, they interrogate her, they ask "But you are the child's mother?" and she says "But, I don't want to be a mother." So, you see there are great contradictions in this child's life. At the shelter, we have told her, you do not have to give birth, no one can force you to have this baby, and you can put it up for adoption." But this girl's mother is the one who has the authority to make decisions and she decided she wanted to raise that child, and when this girl leaves the shelter, she is going to come face to face with this reality. With this particular girl, we were able to get her to continue her studies, but that's a very rare case. In general, girls who become pregnant after being raped don't go back to school.

And what does the government do? What does the Ministry of Education do with these girls? They exclude them and expel them, because they were raped and became pregnant. And all the while the rapist goes free, yes the rapists, they're out there, free. We are in a complete state of halt regarding the right to live, to live our own lives. So that is what we are focusing our energy on, our struggle, and our demands, against all that because those are strong powers. And in a country that calls itself secular, it is a break from the Constitution to approve laws of a religious character. A country that says it is respectful of human rights, breaks with—does not actually respect human rights. A government that says it believes in gender equality, what kind of

equality is it talking about? Gender equality becomes visible through concrete actions, through policies, through programs, and through specific budgets. We all think that we don't have trust in the government, due to our national history, but we have to keep up the battle, we have to keep fighting.

Feminism/Women, Media, Activism, Art

Grabe: Can you talk about the role of La Boletina³⁹ in the struggle? But can you back up and first tell us your role in the creation of La Boletina?

[57:21]

Cabrales: I didn't have a role in the creation of La Boletina, it's from Puntos de Encuentro,⁴⁰ they created it. What we do is use it as a tool for reflection with the women in the *barrios*, during the workshops or to stimulate women to read. The way it's written helps and encourages women to read. At Itza, we have produced other magazines, for example we have a magazine, or a newsletter, our first, which is on the issue of abortion—this was on purpose, it was at the same time as they were penalizing all abortions. We also questioned the role of the church. We have produced another one about sexual abuse where we have developed and reflected on the dynamics of sexual abuse. This magazine, or newsletter, has been used by teachers in the schools, by leaders, and by *promotoras*.⁴¹ This is a tool that even got us into some schools so that the teaching staff can learn about the dynamics of abuse, so they can detect and refer, so that they can help and assume some level of responsibility as members of an educational institution.

We have another one, very nice one, that was very well received and it made its way to Guatemala, they told us that it was really nice. This is a newsletter on the genesis of women's subordination. We were very subtle and called it "The Dirty Trick History Played on Women." It's written like a story, a bit like Paquín,⁴² but with a lot of questioning and it reflects on what life was like for primitive women, collectively, and how later on, as time went by women's bodies and lives become privatized. Then we see how the struggles of many women have made history, and we reflect on that and we reflect on the struggles, for example women's suffrage. What was it like? Also the right to be a mother or to not be a mother; we are not required to become mothers just because we are biologically women and we have the capacity to become mothers, to reproduce, but it's a decision that belongs to each woman. So we incorporated this analysis in the story, with drawings, cute drawings. That newsletter is a big source of pride for us, because it took many years of hard work and we were able to produce something concrete that is actually used. We have a colleague that took it with her to Guatemala to use with indigenous communities and they liked it a lot, because they identified with the drawings.

Feminism/Women/Gender

³⁹ La Boletina is a feminist magazine produced by Puntos de Encuentro with a circulation of approximately 26,000.

⁴⁰ Puntos de Encuentro is a Nicaraguan feminist organization started in 1991, working on violence against women among other issues.

⁴¹ "Promotoras" can be translated to "promoter", "advancer", "forwarder" (female).

<http://www.spanishdict.com/translate/promotora>

⁴² Paquín was a Mexican comic strip in the 1930s, similar to Carl Andersen's "Henry."

Grabe: I'd like to switch gears and ask you about the role of feminism in all these years of struggle for you. What does feminism mean to you?

[1:01]

Cabrales: For me it has meant how to question the power men have, question the system, yes, the system, yes, because these are things you live through, a lifelong process. It's not something you start out with but it evolves, you begin to think, to compare it to life, to compare it to the policies of the country. So, it's about questioning the whole established social order where men are the "the model," so to speak, of how it's done. They are the ones who have the power in the household and in the relationship, and so they dare to be abusive, because the system guarantees that nothing will happen to them. Feminism breaks with that traditional control of men over women. For me it means a philosophy of liberation, a philosophy of liberation at a personal level because that liberation, we don't see it there, in other people, we see it at a personal level and also in women as a collective gender. That's why it's easier for us to voice all these actions with the other organizations, because we know that alone, we could not do it—because the system is so strong, so heavy. For me, for example, within feminism I have been able to know many different feminist currents. In Latin America, feminism was born out of the leftist movements in Latin America, and now we are questioning the left. We say, within the Autonomous Women's Movement, we say that we are the left. We are questioning power, we are questioning power dynamics, we are questioning the oppression dynamics, different oppressions, the indigenous woman, the Black woman, the Misquito woman,⁴³ Garífuna,⁴⁴ white, rich, poor, student, young, or a woman who never had the opportunity to further her studies. We all cross that tragedy of subordination of multiple oppressions. For me feminism is the way for women's liberty, and we women have the right to be free.

Feminism/Women/Gender, History

Grabe: And are you a feminist?

Cabrales: I am a feminist, in our organization we see ourselves as feminists, and that we are secular and nonpartisan. We discuss this with all new staff, so that they clearly understand our philosophy. But also, that more than a philosophy it is part of a philosophy that we delve into each day, a philosophy of life for women. Just like the Greek philosophers talked about philosophy, the feminists scrutinized philosophy and claimed that it belonged to men. In their mind philosophy was all about the big Greek and French philosophers, but the lives of women were not within that philosophy, so it's the feminists who rescue women's philosophy, they are the ones that bring attention to the power dynamics, bring attention to the oppressions, bring attention to the health and sexual life of people. Not that imposed sexuality: sexual relations, children, motherhood, if you are a woman this is the sexuality imposed on you by men. These women broke with this pattern of erotic sexuality. That's why I am passionate about feminism, because it allowed me to think, feel, make my sexual life freely, in a conscious way also, because in order to do this it's important to be conscious about it.

Feminism, Activism, Politics

⁴³ A Native American group of people often of mixed race and often speaking Misquito creole English and Spanish.

⁴⁴ A group of people living in Central America of Caribbean and/or West African descent.

Grabe: You've talked about how some national policies affect women's lives in Nicaragua. I'm also interested in your opinion about international policies, in particular neo-liberal policies, do you think they affect women in Nicaragua?

[1:05:57]

Cabrales: Obviously they affect them because when we talk about gender policies, it's always done from the *machista*⁴⁵ point of view, and they see us women not in the way that we want to feel and see ourselves. The vision they have is one that sustains that subordination. They sell it as a great opportunity for women, but we don't want opportunities, we want to transform the power dynamics between men and women. We want reforms, for example, when we talk about gender and development, what is that? We don't want that, we don't want equality or opportunities if we can't break away from that pattern of subordination, that pattern of violence, that pattern of seeing feminine sexuality from an androcentric point of view, right. That's how I see it, really, and that's why it's hard when we try to request funds, and they put out a request for proposals and then we read the gender policies of the donor, we see it as suspicious. So we say to ourselves, maybe that's why we don't get the funds, because if their policies are very reformative about keeping women in their role within the relationship, or that we are barely getting ahead—that thing they say that if women were rich, then they wouldn't have the problem of domestic violence. Women with money suffer from domestic violence, women who have resources suffer from subordination and other oppressions. So, it's not just about having money, but about owning it, about having it to spend it on ourselves. What happens when both women and men work? Where does his money go and where does her money go? How is money managed within a relationship? Do the women set some money aside for their own entertainment and health care? At least in Nicaragua the answer is no. But men do set aside money that is for their entertainment. The money women make goes to cover family expenses, but it does not go to—because if the woman begins to use her own money for her own recreation, the man says, “oh, she likes to wear makeup” and they are questioned for wanting to wear makeup. Or they say, “It's so wrong that they leave the children alone.” Yes, well, what about the men who abandon their children? This country is made up of children of men who abandoned them, children who are raised only by women. So where are the population policies in this country? Where are the so-called gender policies? This country has a long history in which we women take on all the responsibilities for raising the children. We are not the only ones who should be raising them. Some men are waking up and getting involved, some men are becoming conscious of this, but systematically this situation persists.

Grabe: Well Bertha, I promised to keep you at an hour, so I'm going to end here and thank you very much for your thoughts and your time.

Cabrales: How long has it been?

Grabe: An hour and ten minutes.

Cabrales: I thought I wouldn't have enough to say in one hour.

Grabe: I knew you could do it.

⁴⁵ A male, typically chauvinist, point of view.

