

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

SITE: NICARAGUA

**Transcript of Sofia Montenegro
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Sofía Montenegro was born in Ciudad Darío, Matagalpa Province, Nicaragua in 1954. She spent her teenage years in the United States, and talks about the formative experience of witnessing the emergence of the feminist movement of those years. After returning to Nicaragua, she studied Journalism in the Nicaraguan National University in Managua and joined the Sandinistas while still a student. After the Sandinista's triumph in 1979, Ms. Montenegro became editor of the official Sandinista newspaper, *Barricada*, and was responsible for the funding of the weekly supplement *Gente*. Ms. Montenegro is one of the most prominent feminist activists in Latin America. Currently she is Executive Director of the Centro de Investigación de la Comunicación (CINCO), a Managua-based think-tank that focuses on communication, culture, democracy, and public opinion.

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 Sofía Montenegro



Shelley Grabe: Okay Sofía, I'd like to start just by thanking you again for giving so much of your time today and for participating in the Global Feminisms Project. As I mentioned we'll start with me asking you some questions about your history and a little bit about your background and your childhood, things that you can remember. And then I'll move to asking you questions about how you got involved in the work that you're doing now and then we'll end by talking a little bit about relationships you might have built with women's organizations within Nicaragua as well as outside. And I know you've been asked these questions countless times, so I thank you for participating again. I'd like to ask first for you just to go back and talk a little bit about your personal history and things that you might remember that were formative from your childhood or things you remember about your family.

Childhood, Family

Sofía Montenegro: Okay, I'll try, [laughter]. Well, I am Sofía Montenegro. I am 57; well I think I got involved in feminism at a very early age. I think I was 15 or something, and my memories of being different because I was a woman. I am one of the smallest children of nine brothers and sisters. And six of them were males, so therefore I think I was quite conscious that there was a difference in treatment between my brothers and myself and my two other sisters. So I think I told in an interview to Margaret Randall¹ that one of the earliest images I have—or recollections I have—was a permanent discussion with my mother about why my brothers could do this and why I couldn't? And my mother's answers were always, "well, it's because you're a woman." And this was constant, you know. And I wanted to find out what a woman was all about, and I think this established the curiosity to find out about myself and why the difference, because I couldn't understand it as a child. I only understood that they could go out into the streets any time and I couldn't. And I had a lot of rules that didn't apply to them and I had the hardest work in the house, even though we had help. In the house, my mother always tried to prepare me to be a wife. That meant to do all the chores in the house, help the maids, learn how to wash and to iron, and to make food; that sort of—and to keep the house tidy. But very small—being a very small girl and my brothers didn't have to do that, and I always thought it was unfair because they were bigger, they were stronger, and I was very small and tiny and, and skinny, and obviously this was a, for me as a child I remember I couldn't understand why we women had to have the burden and they didn't have any. And, I don't know, as soon as I grew up and when I became a teenager, things became more strict, in the sense that I couldn't use shorts anymore, couldn't have, um... Dresses—I have to wear dresses. I think you have to cut because that thing won't stop; is it possible? [rush to turn off Ms. Montenegro's cell phone, which is ringing inside her purse] Sorry. So where were we? Oh yeah. So I have to wear dresses, in terms that uh, I was becoming a *señorita*, a young lady, and I should behave like one. So this meant more restrictions and I was absolutely fed up that I couldn't get up and go out in a bicycle in the streets, etc. And, after that, after the turmoil—political turmoil, because I always had in the background that there was this political turmoil in Nicaragua—

Grabe: How were you aware of that, as a child?

Montenegro: Because my father was a Major in Somoza's² army and I also had a brother who was a Lieutenant Colonel in Somoza's army, so there were guns around and uniforms and the stress of having people who, at that time, they were guerrillas. The Sandinista Front hadn't come to power but, I always remember that there was something going on in the mountains. The guerrillas, you know, they always spoke about politics in a hushed voice and obviously I was excluded of hearing what the males in the house were talking about; particularly if they were talking about politics because that was not, you know, ladies' business. But eventually, I think

¹ Margaret Randall is a feminist poet, writer, photographer and social activist. Her book *Sandino's Daughters*, is one of the most widely read books on the Sandinista Revolution.

² 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. pp. 68.)

that was after a big massacre³ in which my—my brother was shot. It was a famous, 1967, that they decided that I should go out and study abroad and that's the way I got into the United States to study high school, finish high school.

Grabe: What made you decide to do that?

[00:07:36]

Feminism, Education, Activism

Montenegro: Well, my parents did, I had no say. Um, well they want to protect me, you know, from anything they were expecting, I don't know what—well I suppose that they were expecting that the turmoil would increase and things will get even more dangerous and they didn't want me to be here for whatever thing happened. So they packed me up with my sister and, but I arrived in the States just in a moment in which there was the Pacifist movement and there was the Feminist movement, which was going strong. Obviously I went to Florida. Not much was happening there, but I still watched TV and I began to get curious to see all these American women, you know, burning their bras and doing things like that. I said “wow!” And I began to read, with my half English; by the way, that's the way I learned English—

Grabe: From reading...

Montenegro: From reading with a dictionary and reading the feminists. So I learned English with the feminists and with a dictionary on the side and I began to—I was, I don't know, 15, 16.

Grabe: And who were you reading? Which feminist?

[00:09:01]

Montenegro: I was reading, the first book which struck me, because—was the same thing I always told my mother and what my mother told me, and well, I don't remember quite well her name right now, but I do remember the title of the book, it was *Born Female*,⁴ and obviously this was the first book I read and was very quite complex for me, but anyway I did my best. And I began to see that they always, then this brought me to Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* and all, you know, the famous books. Then I read, Shulamith Firestone⁵ and all the rest. And they always sent me the footnotes to some gentlemen. They were called Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels and that's the way I got introduced to Marxism. So I, I had no idea you know, who these guys were but they kept on mentioning them, and I began to get interested to know a little bit more and that's the way I taught myself to find out about capitalism and all this story. I remember that I

³ On January 22, 1967 the Nicaragua political coalition National Opposition Union (Unión Nacional Opositora, UNO) staged a demonstration in the capital city of Managua in support of their candidate, Fernando Agüero. Anastasio Somoza ordered the National Guard to attack the march, killing over 500 people.

⁴ *Born Female: The High Cost of Keeping Women Down*, by Caroline Bird, was published in 1978. An earlier version in the form of an article was published in 1968 in the journal *Vital Speeches of the Day*.

⁵ Shulamith Firestone is a Jewish, Canadian-born author, artist, and feminist. In 1970 she published *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*.

read Zillah Einsentein⁶ and it was, you know, it opened my eyes forever. So that's the way I say, what am I doing here, you know, I have to go back and I became a feminist, you know, that way. Not through an organization, and not through any contact. I was an isolated teenager, and the only thing I had was the books. And, but eventually I couldn't take it any more in the States and I wanted to come back to Nicaragua and I came back. And at the beginning I didn't know much what to do and so I went to study in Bellas Artes,⁷ in the school of painting, I wanted to be a painter.

Grabe: And how old were you at that time?

[00:11:27]

Montenegro: I don't know, I came back when I was 18 maybe? And, but I kept on reading—on feminism, on politics. But in the school—with painting school I find out, the School of Bellas Artes it's called, and there were poets and painters and sculptors and these people were always talking about politics, particularly the painters, and the teachers [unclear]. And I began to hang around with the group. Yeah, and they were so heated, the discussions of what was going on, that I decided, well, I just realized that I didn't want to paint the world, but change it. And the moment, that's the reason I decided to go out of painting school and went to the university and decided that since I was not going to be a big combatant hero, yeah, who would fight the— 'cause I was just a woman. So I could only use my words and my intelligence and I decided to study journalism. And there and then, I entered the university which was, [unclear], conspiracies and everybody was organizing and I started journalism amidst this agitation, agitated situation. And then I make contact with people in the Front⁸ and that's the way I got involved with the revolution.

Grabe: Were there many women involved with journalism at the time?

[00:13:19]

Montenegro: No, not many, it was basically at that time a—something that men studied, and many few—there were a few of us. And

Grabe: Were you accepted as a woman student in journalism?

Montenegro: Yeah. Yeah, the thing was that, most of the time we spent in protests and I began to make political work for the Association of Students, association in the university. Then I had to have read the whole classics because at that time everything was censored, was forbidden. It was very dangerous to have a political book. I remember that the list of forbidden titles was as big as the Bible that the government had. So you had to smuggle the books and since you cannot sell it in the open, when all the students have to read philosophy typed in stencils. Probably you don't

⁶ Zillah Eisenstein is a feminist activist, author and professor. In 1979 she edited the book *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism* and in 1981 she wrote *The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism*, which made a strong case for Marxist feminism.

⁷ *Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes*, National School of Fine Arts.

⁸ Sandinista Front for National Liberation, *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN)

remember or know what a stencil is all about, but it was a portable printing machine that you time [sic—probably type (see below para)] from a sort of um, film and then you put ink on it and with a rolling thing you print.⁹

Grabe: Where some of the titles you were reading, like Karl Marx—

Montenegro: *The Capital*,¹⁰ I copied it [laughter]. And um, and copied ten pieces of Feuerbach¹¹ and Hegel on Feuerbach, and countless of that things because—and what we did was we were a team of volunteers from the students, from the—who did this thing, you know, type and then print and sell it for ten pesos, you know, copied, because to make to the rest of the university students these books or this thing accessible. I also read General Vo Nguyen Giap¹² from Vietnam who was the mastermind and strategist of the Vietnam war. He wrote a book that was called *Lucha del Pueblo*, the People's Struggle and that sort of thing. But I was countless because we have to work a lot, you know, to promote the political thinking.

Grabe: The student organization you were affiliated with, were they part of the Front or were they separate?

[00:13:19]

Montenegro: No, they were separate, but it was basically, it was like a pre- I don't know how you say that, it was novitiate, you did in this organization. And obviously only the best could go to the mountains, because that was the place where they recruited the future guerrilla fighters. But, you have to have a commitment to do different sort of voluntary political work, which was, anyway, was very risky. It was not simple things, you know, because the university, even though it was an autonomous—because of the autonomy of the university, it was like an island of freedom, the university, during Somoza's time. It's the only thing they had of the ground,¹³ but when you went out of the university you were in trouble, you know, because they were waiting outside for you. But sometimes, when things got—years later—things got heated and complicated, they intervened into the university with helicopters and everything. A lot of people got killed. And, well, that was my younger years.

Grabe: You started to say that journalism was your, the way you started to become involved in the Front. Can you talk a little about your involvement with the Sandinistas?

[00:18:08]

Montenegro: Yeah, I began from the extreme left. I remember I belonged to a group that just, at that time, you know, Mao¹⁴ was the big thing, and—but obviously they were too way out for my

⁹ Mimeograph or stencil duplicator machine.

¹⁰ *Das Kapital*, in English: *Capital, Critique of Political Economy*

¹¹ Ludwig Andreas von Feuerbach, German philosopher

¹² Võ Nguyên Giáp (born August 25, 1911) is a retired Vietnamese officer in the Vietnamese People's Army and a politician.

¹³ The university's autonomy meant that the grounds were off limits to Somoza's army, so it was the only space dissidents had where they were not in danger.

¹⁴ Mao Tse-Tung, leader of the Chinese Revolution.

taste. And until, through the university and through friends I met, one, some people, who still up to this day are my friends and have survived, like myself, who were from one of the tendencies in which the Sandinista Front was organized and divided, which was the Proletarian Tendency.¹⁵ It was basically rural, mostly middle-class and intellectuals, who were around this. There was the other tendency, the Popular War, was at the mountains, and what is called and known as the *Terceristas*, which is from where Ortega comes. We don't come from the same faction [laughter]. And which eventually they did take power because they, I remember, we used to call them *duchistas*¹⁶ and reckless, irresponsible, militarists who wanted to make a coup.¹⁷ While the conditions were not ready and you know that sort of language which is typical from the Latin American Left and from youngsters. But eventually I moved from the Maoist because this group, that Maoist-leaning, just, I didn't sort of find Chinese thinking much amusing. And talking with these friends, they recruited me and they persuaded me that I belonged better in the Proletarian Tendency, so I started working with them. So I became, that's the way I got involved. They began to give me tasks and I had to drive underground people in and out of town and move things around and be a courier, etc. I spent most of the time doing that and, until eventually the insurrections came. We had a big discussion with Ortega's faction, because the two insurrections were a failure and a lot of people got killed, which proved our point, you know, that it was risking too much to sublevate¹⁸ the cities without weapons and without organization and that there was going to be a massacre, which eventually, sometimes it did happen a lot. But, when some of us decided to, to, the same way, but the only way out, there's no way out but to fight. That's what, my definite breaking with the people from the Maoist group, 'cause they said well, you know, we only want as a fighter, people from pure proletarian stock, which I wasn't, obviously. So if you want to fight, it's your thing. And I got very angry and I said well, I have earned my [right]. But this is not a picnic and you have been absurd you know. This is a war, we don't say, well if you want to go, well you can't come. I mean this is ridiculous. So I quit with them and I decided that in the end, the Sandinista Front was right. The only way to deal with Somoza was by insurrection and by force. So I joined the thousands, that's basically the story.

Work, Activism

Grabe: And what were some of your first activities? Did you—were you able to put your journalism training to work?

[00:23:01]

¹⁵ The front was divided internally into three ideological factions, based on how they thought the war should be fought. After the 1967 defeat, the FSLN adopted a strategy called Prolonged Popular War, which consisted in accumulating arms and followers to build up a strong guerilla warfare force. In the mid '70s young Marxist intellectuals recruited from the universities began to question the Popular War strategy in favor of organizing factory and farm workers, this was called the Proletariat Tendency. A third tendency, called the Insurreccional or Third Way, surfaced shortly thereafter led by the Ortega brothers, Daniel, who would later become president, and Humberto who would later become Sandinista Army's main commander.

¹⁶ It is not clear what she is saying, but "duchista" could be correct. It may refer to the followers of the "Duche," Mussolini, the Italian fascist leader. It could be a way to make the point that they were authoritarian.

¹⁷ Coup d'état

¹⁸ From the Spanish *sublevar*, to incite, to stir up revolt.

Montenegro: Afterwards. Well, at the beginning, yes, because I began to use my credential as a student of journalism, because I was hired by some people as a stringer for some foreign journalist who either did not speak Spanish—didn't speak Spanish, did not know the way around, or they wanted someone to help them to, you know, to make contacts and to make interviews in Spanish and those things, give them tips on what was going on. But at the same time, I used this possibility to find out what was going on, you know, on the side of the regime because I could go to the press conferences and I have this pass in which I could move in different parts of the country. Because mobilization was also quite restricted, but journalists still could—foreign journalists, could move around better. So that's where I started, you know. And I saw what happened through this, the combats and the insurrections in Masaya and Estelí, and obviously this had an impact and you know, consolidated my decision, you know, that it was a necessity to get rid of the dictatorship, no matter what.

So at the end, well you know, Somoza fell and the Revolution had its victory and well, the people in the tendency in which I was, were given the task to print the paper for the Revolution.

Grabe: And the name of that paper?

[00:25:09]

Montenegro: *Barricada*.¹⁹ It was later the Revolution's official newspaper. So we built it on the ruins of Somoza's paper, which was called *Novedades*.²⁰ And I was there from day one of the revolution.

Grabe: And what was that experience like for you?

[00:25:32]

Montenegro: Well, I spent, from basically the ten years, and maybe even a little bit more, from the whole Revolution, from 1979 to 1994, in the paper, building the paper and doing whatever it takes to make it. And to make a long story short, I spent this, more than a decade—14 years in the paper with some going on to other tasks. I was head of—I was first a journalist, then I was promoted to be head of the international page, then I was editor of the editorial page, and then I was given the task to diversify the supplements of the papers, then was named the director of *Gente*²¹, and so forth.

Grabe: And how did *Gente* diversify the newspaper, can you say something about that?

[00:27:00]

¹⁹ *Barricada* was the official FSLN newspaper and ran from 1979 to 1998.

²⁰ Means novelties or news.

²¹ *Gente* (Spanish for people) was a supplement within *Barricada*, the official FSLN newspaper that covered issues from a Feminist perspective.

Montenegro: Well, because basically the paper was like all these ideas of, it was not like *Granma*.²² But it had this frame of—the main agenda of the paper was production and defense, so it was very boring, because you could only talk about defense and production, you know. Because this was the big necessity of the society and the country. But then we decided that life must go on, even in the midst of the war, and you have to diversify and think of not only the collective and public needs, but the individual needs, differentiated needs. We just wanted to, *Gente* wanted to promote—I was involved within the movement from day one too, the women’s movement, building the women’s movement. At the same time, my life since then has run parallel between building the movement and building the paper or the communication process, yeah.

Work, Women’s Movement, Feminism, Activism

Grabe: And what was your role in getting *Gente* started?

[00:28:18]

Montenegro: I designed it.

Grabe: Can you talk about that?

Montenegro: Yeah, well, the idea was—it was a little bit before the fall of the Revolution,²³ in the elections of 1990, and we thought that the war was going into a process—a peace process was going to begin. We had to prepare for a post-conflict society, we had to stop doing partisan journalism. But to pacify society you have to have another offer. So the people of different walks could recognize themselves in the paper, and the task of the paper during the war was defense and production and a partisan journalism. This time you needed to, the paper, to create civilian society, help civilian society, and reintegration and cohesion of society. And, obviously, already a women’s movement has emerged and it was obvious that the, this future pacified, democratic, civilian society, after the war, women will have to have a very strong voice and a way to prepare the mechanism for that. *Gente* was—the magazine was designed as a, from a ‘70s point of view, but addressing a mixed audience, that is men and women, and particularly to make it appeal to the young.

Grabe: And how did it go over when you proposed that idea for *Gente*? Were people excited about it or did they want it to be part of the newspaper? Did you experience some difficulties surrounding it?

[00:30:25]

Montenegro: Well, people liked it, it was a hit from the very beginning. It was, became, very popular. But there were some people in the Party who raised eyebrows because I had the first open sexuality section, health section, that didn’t talk about [unclear], but you could talk about

²² *Granma* is the official newspaper of the Cuban Communist Party, founded in 1965.

²³ After successfully tumbling the Somoza regime in 1980, the FSLN held on to power until the 1990 elections when they lost the presidency to Violeta Chamorro. This is often referred to as the fall of the Revolution.

real problems that people had. And questions on gender and sex and things you didn't talk about in the Revolution, came to talk about. That was called, that's the reason it was called "People," you know, it was about real people and people's needs, not political needs in the sense that you saw it in the big paper. So this is, this was basically the idea. Being a feminist was not a thing, the Revolution that the Commanders liked. So I was always quite in trouble because of that, 'cause I was outspoken, I was a feminist out of the closet, in the sense that nobody, I mean, in 1979 there were perhaps only a dozen or so feminists in this country, and the rest, all the women, all the rest of the women, as far as they went was to, to think in class terms. To make everybody to understand the dimension of gender was a whole battle, a whole political battle.

Grabe: What were some of the troubles you experienced as a woman trying to introduce these ideas?

[00:32:22]

Montenegro: Well, feminism was, you must remember that the way of thinking of the traditional Left in Nicaragua was basically that the Revolution was necessary and it only took the change in production here, and emancipation of women will come almost by itself. And they saw no need for women, an organization of our own. So the first big battle was to win the right to have our own organization, girls-only organization. It took a couple of years, but at the end we won. We won, and a group of us who were demanding that we were not the servants of the Revolution, and we had a, we needed a room of our own inside the Revolution, otherwise we couldn't push our interests. So that was the first discussion. The second thing was when we began to, to push what was called the gender perspective, or the feminist perspective, on all other issues. Well, some people accused us of being, particularly me because I was the one who was public and I was writing things, of making political diversions and promoting bourgeois thinking. And obviously I was a suspect because I studied in the United States, I have read all these crazy women, and I had the French, and this and the other, and I was an intellectual, and I was from a liberal profession, and obviously I was a *petit-bourgeois*²⁴ that could be very dangerous for the masses. That was the point. So—but anyway, inside the paper, obviously it was more of a liberal stance than an organic thing of the party and journalists were—the milieu of the journalists is always something I fit in, you know, because at least we were all freaks inside the paper. So we got along well and they laughed a little about the things I said that they found preposterous and absurd or whatever. But all in all it went well, so I had a space in the paper.

Grabe: Did you ever experience having anyone trying to silence you or keep you from writing what you were writing?

[00:35:33]

Montenegro: Absolutely.

Grabe: What was that like? Can you tell me a little bit about that?

²⁴ *Petit-bourgeois*, (Spanish term: *pequeño-burgués*, though the French term is commonly used as well) in Latin America, particularly in the '80s, the term refers to the middle-class who in theory support Marxism/Revolution, but who live by subjugating the proletariat and peasant classes.

Montenegro: I had a big fight with Daniel Ortega. It was 19... ,I don't remember, one 8th of March, I remember that. And they forbid me to talk, to write about women's issues [unclear]. But it was basically with him, you know, because, this is the reason some people don't understand why he has taken this position today. He had that position in the '80s, I remember, I was there. And it only has exacerbated with age, you know, because now he has become even worse. He has become Born-Again Christian, so his—but I'm not surprised, I am not absolutely surprised because he was the one who said—because we were, to tell you the order of the conflict is that Nicaragua was—one organization, only, of women. You must remember that they didn't want women to have their own organization. We got it. When we got it, we started building the organization, which was called AMNLAE.²⁵ And then a group of feminists who worked, who functioned in like a lobby or like a logia. You know, you know what a logia is? Well, never mind. But it's a sort of underground lobby in which you conspire inside the structure to push things, not lobbying, in Spanish it's logia, like the Masonic Lodge, the Mason? Mason? Yeah, something like that. Because we were just a bunch of feminists, I mean we were about ten or something. And we were pushing to influence, to build—to write the constitution and this and the other. One of the things we thought it was important was to give this one-organization-only sort of scheme to pass to the movement strategy. I mean, which is diverse, pluralistic, uneven and unequal, because the idea for the leaders of the Revolution was that the only women who mattered were the ones who belonged to the peasants or to the proletarians, and the question was what are you going to do with all the rest of us who are not neither peasants nor workers? Who are technicians, are intellectuals, from the city? Women, the urban women, the liberal—the ones who work in liberal professions. And this is the reason we insist that this classic view of society which the only women that matter were these called—so-called *fuerzas motrices de la Revolución*.²⁶ I don't—I'm sorry that I laugh about it, but—the *matrix forces of the Revolution*, they said, something like that, I don't know, obviously were peasants and workers, and the rest are all petit-bourgeois who have to get themselves proletarianized²⁷ and this is, it was dangerous thinking from my point of view. So our proposal was that the condition of women was, was basically the same, but the situation of women was not the same and this should not necessarily mean a conflict. You you couldn't oppose the politics of difference, could not be of confrontation; you have to include. So you have to make a sort of wide alliance between the women of the fields, the peasants, and the urban women. But urban are not only the workers, urban—the other urban women. Each one with their own demands and specificities and different levels of situation, of gender situation.

Grabe: Were you able to write about these issues in the *Barricada* or *Gente*?

[00:40:27]

Montenegro: Yeah. In some of it and in some of them, inside debates within the Front or within the women's organization to make the allegation that we need to change from this vertical vision, subordinated vision of a women-only organization to a diversified movement, an autonomous

²⁵ AMNLAE, Asociación de Mujeres Luisa Amanda Espinoza.

²⁶ *Fuerzas motrices de la Revolución*, in English: motor forces of the Revolution. Rural and peasant women were considered the forces that would move the Revolution forward. This did not include non-rural, non-peasant women.

²⁷ To become proletariat

one in which each group of women would organize for what they needed, with—how you say that? I mean, you could be your own small organization; if you were Black or you were from the Atlantic coast, okay, you organized as a feminist, as a woman, and fight racism but also fight machismo. And that was the same thing for everybody. So we started organizing, despite the will, and against the will and the resistance of the males in the mass organizations, a Women's Secretariat.²⁸ For example, we—workers in the field who began to push to organize these, in the unions, in the unions this—*sindicatos* es unions, verdad?²⁹—eh, professional guilds, associations of professionals in all of it, in health workers, you name it, state workers. To organize this Secretariat, Women's Secretariat, everywhere.

Grabe: Across different sectors?

Montenegro: Mmhhh. And the idea was that we could have this good philosophical idea that we could have the unity of feminism on one end, with the diversity of real women coming from different walks of life that are fighting for a common, a common ground. And this could only make, this would push the women's energy, protagonism, and presence beyond the borders of the secluded, isolated, organization of women. It was necessary to have first an organization of our own, but not to stay there like nuns, but to go beyond the *claustró*,³⁰ beyond the convent, getting to the world and, that was the strategy at that time. Well, we succeeded, they failed, because I'm here. [laughter]

Grabe: You're living proof.

Montenegro: I'm the living proof that we succeeded.

Grabe: So when did you stop working for the newspaper and why?

[00:43:45]

Montenegro: In the paper?

Grabe: Mmhhh, when did your work at the paper stop?

Montenegro: 1994, and that was because the paper began to, was given its autonomy before the elections, the 1990 elections. With *Gente* and with other issues, we have been discussing with the leaders of the Revolution the necessity of giving the paper its profession stance and its autonomy. Because being, how do you say, an official organ of the party was a straightjacket for thinking, for acting, and because nobody could write anything because immediately it became official. This was killing any possibility of doing good journalism and having credibility on our own as journalists. And this is a battle that has been fought, or proposed along the whole decade and finally the National Directorate accepted that we were right and they said okay, prepare the

²⁸ Secretarías de la Mujer. These were Women's Offices inside "Mass organizations," such as labor unions, farmer workers associations, etc. Those offices played a very important role in the development of the Nicaraguan women's movement by creating autonomous spaces for women inside their male dominated institutions.

²⁹ Ms. Montenegro asks: *sindicatos* means unions, right?

³⁰ Cloister, as in cloistered or secluded life of some religious orders.

paper to be an autonomous paper, leftist autonomous paper. Make it professional; prepare the people, your staff, for that task because when peace comes—because everybody was waiting for peace—we’re going to need this, another role for the paper. The only one who opposed that decision of the National Directorate of the Sandinistas was, guess who? Daniel Ortega! He opposed it, since 1990, independence of the paper. And we decided—and this is something that Comandante Ortega didn’t like either—is that after the fall of the Revolution, we opened the paper, particularly to all the Sandinista audience, but militants, who wanted to know what the hell went wrong with the Revolution? And we, as editors, saw that it was the right of the Nicaraguan people to know and to discuss because these people have lost thousands of people in that war and they deserve the truth, the right to question and the right to know. And that was the position of Carlos Chamorro³¹ and myself, and the rest of the staff. So since that was our position that was what we did, and obviously then demanded explanation from the leadership, particularly from Daniel Ortega and from others, it was—everyone had to assume the collective and personal responsibility for whatever failure you consider the Revolution. Immediately after that when the debates started and people, obviously the audience, began pointing fingers and responsibilities and so forth, Daniel Ortega thought that it was extremely dangerous for his own figure and leadership and tried to shut this process down, and that’s where the conflict started. And obviously they began—his wife is now First Lady for the second time, Rosario Murillo, began a campaign, a violent campaign, just like now, that was in 1991 or something, against the paper and particularly against Carlos and myself, accusing us that we were oligarchs, that we were bourgeois, that we were sold to the United States and to the imperialists and bla, bla, bla, bla, bla. And obviously, the idea was to shut us down and we resisted, they persisted, until in the Congress, which was very decisive for the Sandinista Front, I mean, we had a Congress after Violeta Chamorro³² won the elections of 1990, who just happened to be Carlos Fernando’s mother, but that was—who could have thought of that. Anyway, the fact is that, besides this campaign and trying to shut down the process of making the balance and taking responsibility for whatever, the accusations began and they decided to take over the paper.

Grabe: And what did you do after the newspaper? Where did you work next?

[00:49:30]

Montenegro: To the streets! [Laughter] No, we went unemployed and, it was a long struggle because we didn’t—at that time we decided that if you, if we couldn’t democratize the Front at that moment, it was going to be very difficult afterwards and Ortega had to pay the highest price for destroying the paper and for shutting out and pushing, because what came after that was a big push for anyone who opposed what was already a taking over by the authoritarians against the democratic tendencies within the Front who wanted a modern democratic political organization and not a tool of power for any other Comandantes. So Ortega not only crushed the rest of the Party, he crushed his own colleagues, the other Comandantes who had an opposition. And he took over the paper, he took over the Front, he took over everything and to tell you how he did it

³¹ Carlos Fernando Chamorro worked as editor of FSLN’s newspaper, *Barricada*. He is the youngest son of Violeta Chamorro and Pedro Joaquín Chamorro. His father was editor of the only anti-Somoza newspaper in the country until his assassination on January 10, 1978. His mother eventually became President of Nicaragua, defeating Daniel Ortega in 1990.

³² Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, President of Nicaragua 1990-1997

that's a book in itself, but to make a long story short, that was what happened. In the end, in the Second Congress he arranged things inside the Congress that the opposition was in such a weak situation and minority that he could crush the opposition inside the Front. And after that they decided that since we were the traitors and whatever, they have to defenestrate? *Defenestrar*, ¿cómo se dice? *Defenestración*, when they throw you out the window? That's *defenestrar* in Spanish.³³ Well, they took over and they expelled the head of the whole paper. It began, it went back again to become an official paper of—in this case not any more of the Sandinista Front, but of Daniel Ortega and his wife, until they destroyed it; it doesn't exist anymore. It went bankrupt and people refused to buy it and it just went down. I went out and I wasn't employed for a year and a half or something and I was very angry, I wanted to kill all the bastards with my bare hands, that's how angry I was. Well, I just make yoga instead. [Laughter] But and then I, we decided to build this, what you see, we came and created this center for research and communications and to start all over again and build small media, independent media—absolutely independent media—we self-decided never to go back to work for anyone: party, boss, anything. And we started with CINCO,³⁴ which is, CINCO is an NGO that deals with investigation research on communication, culture, and politics, essentially.

Grabe: What are some of the current issues that you're trying to address right now?

[00:53:44]

Montenegro: Well so far the problem of who are the, the *ni-ni*,³⁵ which is the voters who don't want to—have no party and have-- Nobody knows how the hell that they are going to vote, and so they are called *ni-ni*. We are making this research but we are also working on youth political culture, yeah, and the succeeding generations from the Revolution are tuned out on youth to see how it's changing and obviously on communication, on media, research on media, on how the market and technology is changing everything, we have an observatory on media and an observatory on governance and democracy to oversee the political process. After we went out of the paper we started building this center and we, besides from the program on research, we have developed two television programs, one radio program, and now we have digital paper, which is called *Confidencial*. And we also publish a bulletin, monthly bulletin, on political analysis and the situation in Nicaragua. That's my professional work and I'm an activist and leader in the Women's Movement—Movimiento Autónomo de Mujeres, and that has been like that since 1995 up to this morning.

Grabe: And what are some of the current issues you're working on as an activist in the Movement?

[00:55:48]

³³ Defenestration (noun), 1: Throwing a person or thing out the window. 2: a usually swift dismissal or expulsion (as from a political party or office). <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/defenestration>

³⁴ Centro de Investigación de la Comunicación (CINCO), in English: Research Center on Communication.

³⁵ *Ni-ni* loosely translates to “neither-neither” or “neither-nor,” refers to those independent voters who identify neither with one party nor another.

Montenegro: Well, how to make women go back to big politics again. To construct resistance against the new dictatorship that is developing and is attacking the Women's Movement. This office was raided in 19—in 2008 by an—and the Women's Movement was raided by the will of the First Lady of this country, Daniel Ortega's wife. Because they wanted to do the same with Carlos and with myself with the Women's Movement, you know, to shut us out.

Grabe: What were they looking for when they raided?

Montenegro: Well, they accused us for whatever, you know, like soap... no; how do you say that, laundering money? Because we have a *convenio*? Contract, no, a deal.

Grabe: An agreement?

Montenegro: An agreement, an agreement. We have an agreement with the Women's Movement because they have no legal status to receive donations, yeah? So we have an alliance, a political alliance between the Women's Movement and journalists, us, here, to fund the Women's agenda. So there was this, how you call that, eh, contest for money? From, uh, now I'm getting tired, I mean this is funds we were offered by international cooperation in which you can apply with a project, yeah? And this basket fund, which was from the Europeans—eh, Sweden, whatever, all European countries have this basket fund for promoting the rights of citizens and civilian society. So the Women's Movement applied to this fund, to further advance the struggle against—to regain the right of therapeutic abortion, and for demanding political participation and they won the grant, they got the grant, but since they have no formal organization, they have to make an alliance with someone who has an account, an administration and everything for the commitment to administer for them the money, so that's what we did. So that, which is perfectly clear and legal in this country, they used that to accuse us, me in particular, of laundering money like if it was, eh, *narcos*,³⁶ drug money. And it was officially from countries that have a relationship, and is part of the legal thing, with the Government of Nicaragua. So they were saying that we were passing on this money as a third party to these women who are basically, these horrible, feminist women, *abortistas*,³⁷ kind of—they tried to invent a case to penalize us and close the center and close the media but at the same time shut down the Women's Movement. Why the grudge? For old times' sake, but for new times' sake—the Women's Movement gave its support and defended when Zoilamérica Narvaez, the daughter of the First Lady of Nicaragua, made a denunciation of the rape by the President of Nicaragua, her step-father;³⁸ and nobody was there to back her up. But this Women's Movement did and took the risk to back her up, defying the power. And the whole feminist movement in Latin America backed her up, so whatever she's doing now against me, against Carlos, against the Women's Movement is just an act of revenge. When they came to power they decided that they would destroy the Women's Movement.

³⁶ Drug traffickers

³⁷ Abortists, that they support abortion

³⁸ Zoilamérica Narvaez is the step-daughter of Daniel Ortega. In 1998 she accused Ortega of sexual abuse as a child. Women lawyers from the Women's Movement took her case, which had to be tried outside of Nicaragua due to Ortega's immunity as a member of parliament. The case was admitted to the Inter American Human Rights Commission, but was settled out of court.

Grabe: You just referenced this larger movement of Latin American feminists. Can you talk a little bit about that? Do you work across borders with women from other countries to share strategies and work on feminist issues?

Work, Feminism

[01:01:00]

Montenegro: Absolutely.

Grabe: Can you talk a little—just briefly—about that?

Montenegro: Well, we have been since the Revolution. We have been steadily getting acquainted and involved in the different debates, organizations, regional—not only Central America, but in the whole Latin America, through the feminist meetings which are every three years, which is like a big, big congress of feminists in Latin America.

Grabe: And what is the name of that meeting that happens every three years?

Montenegro: It's *Encuentro Feminista Latinoamericano* and I think, this time, I think is in Colombia, Cartagena de Indias, is the next one. And, but at the same time we have been developing networks on health, on violence, against rape, against—you name it, and obviously we have been involved in all that. We keep a close contact through the networking and I think that in this last time, if it hadn't been by the mobilization of the whole feminist movement in Latin America, I don't know what... probably they would have destroyed, closed the Movement 'cause they mobilized and they even went further, they have almost impeded that Daniel Ortega visit any country, because every time that he goes down to—announces that he is going to visit a country, there is picketing of feminist women waiting for him either in the airport and so it's a big scandal because this is the rapist President, coming from Nicaragua, you know? So he's, he now has a fear of going out. Not many places to go, you Gadhafi is going down and—his friends, you know. I don't know, I don't think he likes to go to Iran to see Ahmanineyatu³⁹ or whatever his name is. But anyway, this is the reason why he fell, because it was a big, big scandal as it should be. But the moment they got into power, they came back to power, we knew that we were in trouble and we still are in trouble and if he stays and he makes a fraud of the elections, and stays against the people's will, we—we have to prepare. Obviously we in the women's movement, perhaps not in all the women's movement, but in the Movimiento Autónomo, we are preparing for the worst. We have been preparing for the worst since 2006 and what's coming doesn't look better, it just, it can only get worse if these elections don't give the possibility for the people of Nicaragua to get rid of Daniel Ortega in a pacific, civilized manner, through elections. Because if that doesn't happen, well, probably we will have a new period of violence and turmoil in Nicaragua until we get rid of him like we got rid of Somoza. So we have come full circle.

Grabe: I'd like to also ask you to talk a little bit about neoliberalism and the effect that neoliberalism has on women in particular in Nicaragua.

³⁹ Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, President of the Islamic Republic of Iran at the time of this writing, July 2012.

[01:05:06]

Montenegro: Well, it was very brutal because in the case of Nicaragua there were no small doses. You must remember that in the case of Nicaragua we passed from a State-economy to a market-economy, from a country that was at war, at peace, from a closed, controlled, militarized country to a liberalization and there was—the transition was very short and from one day to the other, the State, who was a sort of protective, father-like State, authoritarian father, but father nevertheless, State, was dismantled. And just make the jump, you know, and so it was the most brutal transition from State- to open-market economy and it had no, how do you say? Eh, network, netting in which you could fall when the net of the State was pulled out,⁴⁰ so everybody had a hit very hard. You have an inflation that had to be controlled, the dismantling of civil services, whatever.

Grabe: And how did that impact women in particular?

Montenegro: Big unemployment. Well, women in particular because everything became privatized, you know. The electricity. The only thing they didn't dare to privatize was water, but after that, the state was sold by peanuts and into pieces. So a counter-agrarian reform started, yeah, re-concentration of property and goods, and it was hell, it was hell. I mean people recognized that we needed—everybody who had experience, who was experienced, recognized the role of the market, but it's not unleashed market, it's a market with some democratic regulations is what we need, because capital is very, is a producer of unevenness, inequities... I don't know how you say that?

Grabe: You've got it right, inequities.

Montenegro: While democracy tends to equalize everybody, and that's a contradiction of terms, to have capitalism on one side and democracy on the other because they are always fighting each other, and usually when you unleash the market, democracy is the one that loses. This is the reason that politics must run the economy; I'm convinced, absolutely convinced of that, obviously a democratic regulation.

Grabe: Can you talk about the role of what you call N.G.O.-ization in this process you're discussing right now?

[01:08:39]

Montenegro: Well, it was part in a way of the model, so with exposed, how you say? Reflection. But it's a process that you could, uh! *Constatar*,⁴¹ uh, a process you could—

Grabe: Contest?

⁴⁰ Safety net

⁴¹ To verify, to affirm

Montenegro: Yeah, in reality; but in fact I have written about it, on the process that has been part of the model, because there was an adjustment, not only of the state, yeah? To fit, to have this model of big market, little state,⁴² yeah? Well, in order to have that you have to adjust, not only the economy and the state, you have to adjust civilian society. And so, enters the NGOs, yeah? Because the NGOs have been more efficient operating at the small scale and tend to be cheaper in the sense of an investment, than investing in a welfare state, so in fact I would say that NGOs became during neoliberalism the sort of Mother Theresa of Calcutta of neoliberalism; because it was the NGOs who have to pick up the poor, pick up the—what ever did Mother Theresa of Calcutta, you know, she was running after the poor, feeding the hungry, and the state? *Muy bien, gracias.*⁴³ *Verdad?*⁴⁴ It left the citizens, eh, *desamparados*,⁴⁵ uh, without protection at all. So the only protection that was more or less offered was through NGOs which permitted the small state of—for neoliberals to become quote-on-quote efficient, very *ahorrative*,⁴⁶ very cheap; I mean they don't have expenditures on social things, and try to contain things through what NGOs give to society or to push citizens. But it had a perverse effect because instead of financing the organizations of movements and citizens' fight for the rights—that is, for more equality—they gave it to the NGOs who administer inequality. You see? And this move, it converted, it created a tendency that the movement or the groups of—the organized citizens became institutions to administer foreign aid. And this is the perverse side of N.G.O.-ization. So it weakened the social movement, which's task is to create collective identity, either for women or for youth, or for anyone who is excluded and is fighting for their lives or for their rights. While the institution they have—they can only give what the paper in the institution says, yeah? They don't have a utopia, a political utopia for which they're fighting. They are executing some programs to attend development or the poor or the sick or whatever. But they are not trying to fight powers, the powers that be of change the correlation of courses. Movements do, that's the role of movements, yeah? And obviously they could be in a strategic alliance between institutions—that is NGOs for development, feminist institutions and movements; because power and the change of power is always for—through a correlation of forces, and if civil society is weak and citizens are weak and the women's collective is unorganized and weak, you cannot win the battle. And you don't have to be Vo Nguyen Giap⁴⁷ to realize if you go to war unarmed by knowledge, by thinking, and by—without organization, you are a dead woman.

Grabe: This is my last question, I promise. You've referenced—you've referred to intellectuals before and the role of intellectuals, do you think there's a relationship or a connection between scholarship and feminist activism?

[01:14:08]

Work and Scholarship, Feminism

⁴² Government

⁴³ "Very well, thank you." A statement meant to imply that the state knows what its responsibilities are, but is avoiding them, not because it cannot deal with them but because others are dealing with them.

⁴⁴ Right?

⁴⁵ Helpless, forsaken

⁴⁶ *Ahorrativo*, thrifty

⁴⁷ Võ Nguyên Giáp (born August 25, 1911) is a retired Vietnamese officer in the Vietnamese People's Army and a politician.

Montenegro: Absolutely, absolutely. The only way you can—and this is my personal conviction—but it has been so all over the history of humanity, it's the minority that organizes ideas. No big idea has been won through big assemblies and you may think that I am an elitist; absolutely, feminism started as an elitist movement and still is. Because you have to get out of the box of thinking, of common thinking, in order to re-think the world, and women are at such a disadvantage. As I told once to someone, women are too busy fighting for their own life and on top of that you want the poor to think how they are going to change the whole structure of power of patriarchy and economics and big politics? And that's what you need your intellectuals for. That's what you need your academy for. That's the alliance between the poor women, rich women, middle-class women, intellectual and workers. That's the way it works, this is the only way it can work and establish this unity within diversity for common projects that women can have all over the world. What we want is democracy, freedom, and justice. That's what women want all over the world and that's what we want and I think if this is unique problem for women all over the world. So you need all the forces you can get and all your thinkers, each one of them, all your scientists, all the allies you can find, and all the brightness and intelligence of women all over the world to change this. And obviously you need troops and perhaps generals like me [laughter].

Grabe: Well, Sofia, I just wanted to thank you again very much for being so generous of your time and tell you that it's been an honor for me to speak with you. Thank you very much.

Montenegro: You're welcome.

Grabe: I also really appreciate you speaking to me in English; I know it makes it harder because you get tired quickly trying to go back and forth, so I really appreciate it.