

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

SITE: NICARAGUA

**Transcript of Vilma Núñez
Interviewer: Shelly Grabe
Interpreter: Julia Baumgartner**

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Vilma Núñez, born in 1938, served as the first woman on Nicaragua's Supreme Court after the triumph of the Sandinista Revolution. As a student she became a member of the FSLN and participated in the anti-Somoza struggle, until she was imprisoned for these efforts in 1979. Núñez is a well respected public figure and has been unofficially banished from the FSLN after running for president against Daniel Ortega and defending Zoilamérica Narvaez's charges of sexual abuse against Ortega. Núñez founded the Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights (CENIDH) in 1990 and has been involved with various international human rights groups.

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 Vilma Núñez



Childhood, Family, Education, Religion

[01:46]

Shelly Grabe: Doña Vilma, first I'd like to thank you for participating in the Global Feminisms Project.

We're going to spend about an hour today first talking about your own personal history, about your first memories, and then talking about your journey from being a grassroots militant to working in the government to your current position now.

I know you're a very important public figure, but I'd like to ask you to start by first talking about yourself, to go back to some of your earliest memories, your childhood, where you are from.

Vilma Núñez: Well, you know, for me one of the hardest things to do is talk about myself, I find it easier to talk about what I do with other people. Well, my name is Vilma, Vilma Núñez. I am from a small town in the middle of the country, which used to be one of the more

underdeveloped regions of Nicaragua: Chontales. I was born in Acoyapa; the town is called Acoyapa. And, well, I was raised there, that's where I spent my childhood. I studied in the public school of Acoyapa, and later, since the public school in Acoyapa only had 1st through 6th grades,¹ I had to move to Managua to go to secondary school, at a school run by nuns. But I was—even this that I'm telling you, in a way it determined the rest of my life.

Well, I am a child born out of wedlock. My father was the most influential man in town, a very good father. He was a good father, but he died when I was about eight years old. So after that my siblings and I were basically victims of discrimination, which was a product of the influence his legal family had among the population. My mother didn't even want me to go to school because she feared that I would be subjected to some uncomfortable situations. Nevertheless, my mother taught us that we were not less than anybody else and that we could do whatever the rest of the people could do and through her attitude she really did support the development of my self-esteem. That, and at a personal level the desire I have always had to side with people who suffer discrimination or who are treated differently. I think that was crucial in my life to get me to the work I do today.

Grabe: Why were they treating you differently?

Núñez: Huh?

Why did they treat you like that? Why did they discriminate against you?

Núñez: Because that's the way people think here, the children born out of wedlock all suffer discrimination. You know even the law in Nicaragua – it wasn't until 1966 or so when the law was reformed to establish that children born in and out of wedlock have the same rights. The Civil Code of Nicaragua, which has not been reformed, still has a law in effect that states, for example, that when distributing the inheritance, a very minimal part of it—very insignificant—goes to the children born out of wedlock, as long as they have been recognized by the father. But preference always went to those children born within marriage, and this wasn't only an issue of legal discrimination, but also a matter of social discrimination in the environment where you grow and develop, you were definitely treated differently, depending on the influence of the legal family, or the attitude of the legal family.

And in school, well, I was basically subjected to this situation. In the public school of Acoyapa the custom was that all children of the same age would receive their First Communion at the same time. I was supposed to receive my First Communion with my brother and the other students in that class, but the day before having our communion, the principal of the school calls me and tells me, “Tell your mother that tomorrow, when we read the names of the students, you will not appear as Vilma Núñez, but as Vilma Ruiz”—my mother's last name. At this time, I was seven or eight years old and I couldn't really comprehend the magnitude of this decision, but, logically, my mother reacted to this, and even the priest was very upset, and well, I had my First Communion separate from the group.

Later on, when I came to study in Managua with the nuns—I wanted to study at the Colegio de la Asunción, but the nuns there would not accept any students who were born out of wedlock, you

¹ Throughout much of Latin America, Primary School is grades 1-6 and Secondary School is grades 1-5 (equivalent to 7-11). Vilma's town only had a primary school.

had to be born within a religious marriage. So I wasn't able to study where the rest of my friends studied. I went to another school, also run by nuns, the Madre del Divino Pastor, and it was a very interesting experience, being in that school. But I tell you—this as an anecdote—these things have a way of scarring you, they scar you and the reactions can be very different; some react well, others react badly. I think I took the best out of those experiences and they built my character.

Something else that also was influential in my life was uh—my father. My father, as I told you before, was the most influential person in this town, and aside from that he was also a political leader in opposition to Somoza's regime.² He belonged to the Conservative Party³ and so every time there was a movement against Somoza's dictatorship, they would always take my father captive, they would send him to prison. So I was the one who would go to the jail and see him, find a way to bring him food, those things. So that also had a profound effect on me, on my contempt for authoritarianism, and my taking a position in opposition to Somoza's dictatorship.

That was my childhood. I can't say that I had a happy childhood, but I think I had neither a super happy childhood nor an unhappy one. I think now at the end of the road, I am very satisfied with what—that we were able to do all this and I acknowledge my mother's efforts in improving our self-esteem, and that is important.

I also want to tell you that I also recognize the role my father played in my life, because my father, despite the situation we were in, he always gave us enough so we would live well. Unfortunately, when he died, that money left us; he left our money in the hands of a friend of his, so that he was the administrator, and basically that person kept us very limited economically and also misused the funds, so we lived with many limitations, I lived with many limitations, but you know, I think that was also a learning experience.

Politics, Activism, Education

[11:40]

Grabe: Did your experiences influence your choice to become politically involved?

Núñez: You know, I think they did, in some way. Like I say, when you join the struggle of defending human rights, this struggle for human rights, there is always a reason. There is a reason that leads you to it, so definitely I think that these events in my childhood and in my youth helped me to appreciate and to realize the differences, the exclusions, and all those inequalities that exist.

Grabe: How old were you when you first became involved in political work?

Núñez: Let's see, it was in—I was 18 years old, 18 years old and it was basically the first year of university after finishing high school at the Divinia Pastora, a school run by nuns here in

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)

³ The oldest political party in Nicaragua, founded in 1830, part of the Somoza opposition.

Managua. So I decided to study law⁴ and you know, that decision to study law—because I could have chosen something else—was in part because I wanted to know why that person had been able to do what they did with all our money. I already sensed that there were many injustices committed at the tribunals, so I decided to study law and at 18 years old I arrived at the University of León.⁵ So I got there, and I always say that the best years in life are at university. This was a time in which you could see the university's autonomy, and this was the only university in the country that had autonomy, and it was visible; it was a—a period of great agitation, lots of activism against Somoza's dictatorship as he was going for re-election.

Grabe: What years were those that you were at university?

Núñez: I entered university in 1958, and the first thing I did was to get involved with the Student Movement and one of the first activities I did was to start—with a group of classmates, I was the only woman—a committee for the liberation of political prisoners who were university students. Two university professors were being held in Somoza's jails, along with Tomás Borges, who was a student at the time, but later was the founder of the FSLN,⁶ so they were all accused of participating in the execution of the dictator's father, of Somoza García.

Grabe: What was it like to be a female law student in the fifties?

Núñez: What was it like?

As a woman.

Núñez: It was real strange, it was strange. That year there were 110 students entering law school, and only eleven of us were women. And even fewer finished school, a lot fewer, only five. But, despite this, I cannot say to you that—I did not notice any ill will toward me from my classmates nor from my professors, I didn't feel discrimination or anything like that. I was always able to be myself and develop within the student environment in a very normal way. I noticed that I had to make a bigger effort to get ahead, but I was always almost the best student. I was always listed among the top of my class. If I didn't get the first place, it was second place, and all that didn't prevent me from participating in the student struggles.

I participated actively in many of the student struggles, fighting on the streets alongside my male classmates against members of the National Guard.⁷ Not with arms, but in demonstrations, in protests, and those things. During my second year at university we had one of the bloodiest acts of repression from the Somoza dictatorship, it was a student massacre⁸ where Somoza's Guard

⁴ In Nicaragua first year students at university may enter Law School, it is not a graduate degree as in the United States.

⁵ La UNAN: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Nicaragua. English: The National Autonomous University of Nicaragua in León.

⁶ Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional, English: 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.

⁷ In Spanish: Guardia Nacional, was Somoza's military-security force. It was created during the U.S. occupation of Nicaragua (1909-1930) and was known for committing human rights abuses.

⁸ July 23, 1959 attack on students in León. This event was a pivotal moment in the student movement, and energized and mobilized many more young people to be involved.

attacked the students. We were in a peaceful rally and they attacked us. I am a survivor of that massacre, but four of my classmates died. So that group of students, we came to be called the July 23rd Generation, and it is precisely the group from which the FSLN was born. The people who founded the FSLN came out of the July 23rd Generation.

Politics, Activism, Work

[17:47]

Grabe: And what kind of activities were you involved in after the university?

Núñez: No, I want to tell you something else first. My first political experiences after university and before belonging to the FSLN were with the Conservative Party, which traditionally was the party opposing Somoza. There were only two political forces here, the liberals—which belonged to Somoza—and the conservatives. And I joined the conservatives because I liked my father's friends; really it was more because of that than an affinity to the ideology. I didn't really see the distinctions between one party and the other, ideologically speaking, but it was more because it connected me to my father, with my father's struggles. So after that, after being in the Conservative Party, my first political experience, then later I joined the FSLN, it was more or less in 1975, '74-'75.

But when I joined the FSLN, it wasn't something I pursued, it was more of a spontaneous thing. Sure, I was already aware of the historic parallels, which was how the liberals and conservatives were called, and how neither were going to solve the country's problems. By that time there was already a new and charismatic leader among the Conservatives, but I could see that no, they were not going to be able to solve all the problems of social inequalities and much more. So for me joining the FSLN was like I said, more casual. I became involved by defending the political prisoners, the prisoners from the FSLN who were captured. Also, once I finished university, I specialized in Criminal Law, I always preferred defending, and I don't think I prosecuted much. I think if at all, I prosecuted only two or three times in my entire professional career—and I always defended the political prisoners, regardless of the party they belonged to, and I defended them without charging a single penny. I never charged them. So that led the people who worked with the FSLN to know me to the point that there was a time when in León, which is the city where I attended university and developed [as a lawyer], I was somewhat the official lawyer of all the prisoners who were imprisoned for fighting against the Somoza dictatorship.

[21:02]

Grabe: Can you give us an example of some of the cases that you would take?

Núñez: What?

Can you give us an example of some of the cases you defended?

Núñez: Oh, sure, yes, there's one that almost seems anecdotal, but I always like to remember it. There was a seizure, a land seizure by an indigenous community. I mean, it was, they were reclaiming the lands from which they had been evicted, and one person died during this seizure. So some people were accused of being responsible for that death and I was the attorney who defended them. I defended them and got them out. And this is a case that has linked me to the

FSLN, but at the time I didn't know that it was an action backed by the FSLN. I thought it was just the indigenous community fighting for their lands. I didn't know that it had been an action fueled by the FSLN, in support of the indigenous community. So this was one of my first cases.

After that I defended many more, for example, right now, as we are speaking, there is a person in León who is currently suffering a great injustice. His name is Edmundo Icaza, he was one of the young men who fought—a young man back then, of course, who fought against the dictatorship, within the FSLN and who, along with other *compañeros*, was able to start a radio station, a radio station called *Radio Venceremos*,⁹ and today they want to take it from him. Well, back then when they were young men, they placed some bombs, which didn't kill anyone, they just created some mayhem, at a movie theatre in León. I defended them.

All that was before the insurrection. After the Sandinista insurrection, one of the most notable cases I know was a case where I formed part of the defense. It was a blow directed at the economic powers and consisted of burning the cotton gins, which are the businesses where they process the cotton and turn it into cloth. So this was an action directed by the FSLN and I took on that case, and it was one of the most well-known cases I can tell you about. But there are lots of them, lots of them. I also defended some people here in Managua, I went to the war councils, I was present at the war councils that the Somoza dictatorship would conduct against members of the FSLN who were captured.

Grabe: Can you talk about some of the consequences that you experienced for your participation during the revolution?

[24:51]

Núñez: Well, the—the hardest was at the end of the insurrection where one of the FSLN collaborators actually reported me and my husband, and early one morning the Guard came to our house and took us in. I was imprisoned for five months in different prisons, I was tortured, and I was judged by a military tribunal and condemned to ten years of prison and ordered to pay an enormous fine. I was able to get out before the triumph of the revolution, I probably would have spent more time there, but then the revolution triumphed. That was probably the hardest experience.

It was the hardest, but it's a—a situation that gave me—that I feel that I was, how to say—I was able to endure it. Because I think that when they take you prisoner in a dictatorship, the merit is not that you are tortured, or that they do this or that to you, but rather that you don't reveal what you know, and I knew a lot. I knew a lot of the organizational structure of the FSLN, all the names, the houses where the arms were kept. If the Guard would have been able to get all that information out of me, through torture—because they even applied the electric shock to me—if they would have gotten me to speak, if I had not had, I don't know where I got it from, the courage to resist, I don't know that the revolution would have been successful at the time that it was. Because you probably know that the first city to be liberated militarily was precisely León.

⁹ *Radio Venceremos*, in English: We Shall Overcome Radio, known as the Official Voice of the FORLP (Frente Occidental Rigoberto Lopez Perez), which was the western front of the FSLN. Located in León, it was led by Edmundo Icaza and was instrumental to the final offensive. It should not be confused with *Radio Venceremos* from El Salvador, which was also a revolutionary radio led by the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN).

And I worked with that command, which was directed by the Comandante Dora María Téllez,¹⁰ and I worked with them. So if I had spoken, or if I had revealed who the collaborators were, the different places where the arms were hidden, they would have basically disrupted the FSLN—the western front.

But you know, this doesn't just happen spontaneously, it's not just an act of—an act of heroism. For example, I had the opportunity to work with members of the FSLN, very, very valuable members who were killed and whom we call the Heroes of Veracruz, they were the military staff who directed Dora María, and there was a *compañero* named Oscar Pérez Cassar,¹¹ and I was in charge of driving him from Managua to León or from León to Managua, and when we were on the road, he was always—to an extent, I guess, he was indoctrinating me, but he would give me advice on how to react, what I needed to do if I was ever captured.

So that helped me so much, because when the Guard came to my house, I had in my house—they basically found the entire archives for the western front, and they found a box filled with arms and so I had to find a way to—but I couldn't deny anything at this point, I couldn't deny, but I had to find a way to explain those weapons, to say whom they belonged to, but without compromising the structure. In those days I had helped to get Lencho—that's the guy who I told you had led the operation to burn the cotton gins, and so I said that the arms belonged to Lencho, whom I had recently defended. So then they asked me, "Why didn't you turn them in?" I told them I couldn't incriminate my own client, I held that I had a professional relationship with my client and so that's how we were able to justify it.

[29:31]

Grabe: And what happened after you got out of prison?

Núñez: Well, after I got out of jail, I can tell you another story, because it's really incredible. I was still imprisoned at the Modelo de Tipitapa Prison,¹² in solitary confinement. I was there for almost 45 days in solitary confinement, when a guard comes to tell me—he was one of the guards that move around the jail, because you know they wouldn't let me talk to anyone there, it was a men's prison, it was full of men and so they had me in a different cell, but there was always someone who would come to speak to me. So then this guard comes up to me and tells me, "Listen now, they're gonna kill you." "Why? Who is going to kill me?" "Because the radio stations in Costa Rica are announcing that you are going to work for the new government, for the revolutionary government." So that was a strange and very contradictory sensation that I felt at that time, happy to see that the revolution was so close to being successful, and on the other hand the uncertainty of whether I would be killed or not, maybe not because of what the radio is saying, but because, I told myself, "Nobody knows I'm here. Nobody knows and the guys will all be freed and they'll leave me in here and the Guard will come and kill me." So there was that contradiction, but I was actually able to leave prison five days before the triumph of the revolution.

¹⁰ The Global Feminisms Project includes an interview with Dora María Téllez. She was a commander for the FSLN and was later appointed to the Ministry of Health by the revolutionary government before becoming a member of the National Assembly. She is now an outspoken historian and advocate; she was denied a visa to the United States to receive an award because the Patriot Act classified her as a terrorist.

¹¹ A Sandinista fighter who was killed in an attack by Somoza's National Guard.

¹² The largest prison in Nicaragua. After the triumph of the revolution, many National Guardsmen were held here.

So I leave the jail, but immediately there is a warrant out for my arrest. The national security forces were after me. So the Permanent Commission on Human Rights, which was the non-governmental agency whose León chapter I had helped found, they got me out of the country in an airplane to Venezuela, and other people on that plane included Monsignor Obando y Bravo.¹³ So while I'm on the plane I realize that one of the people there was going to Venezuela to negotiate so that the FSLN wouldn't openly win, and to establish what they called a Somosismo without Somoza; with the same National Guard, but just getting Somoza out. Oh, I felt such a contradictory feeling, such incredible distress. I didn't know what to do, but then, right then, the revolution was successful. We turned around and so then the Governing Junta¹⁴ named me vice-president of the Supreme Court of Justice.

I was the first female judge in the history of Nicaragua's Supreme Court of Justice, and I worked there from 1979 until 1998—'88, sorry, until '88, two years before the FSLN's defeat. After that, after they moved me from the Supreme Court, they sent me to work somewhere—well, because of my experience with human rights, they sent me to work with the government's commission. So I had to work with members of Somoza's Guard, which for me was a very contradictory situation, it just generated contradictory feelings in me, but it helped me so much, it helped me realize that not everyone was bad. Just because they had been a member of the Guard, that didn't mean that they were bad people. There were some people who perhaps were unjustly held, they had not had the opportunity of a trial, of a fair trial.

Work, Politics

Grabe: Can you tell us about your experience being the first female Supreme Court judge?

[34:16]

Núñez: Yes, well, when I first got to the Supreme Court I had to work with colleagues who belonged to different political parties, maybe just a couple of us were Sandinistas. I was Sandinista. Um, the rest were from the Conservative Party, or from the Liberal Independent Party¹⁵—but they were all lawyers with a long history, very respectful and with great credibility. And I was also a person who was very well known, with my own impeccable professional history, so I entered the Supreme Court and I cannot tell you that I suffered discrimination at the hands of my colleagues. We treated each other as equals, we debated things that had to be discussed judicially, we did this—well, logically we didn't always see eye to eye, politically speaking, but this was, I was one of them, one more [judge] in the Supreme Court. I can't tell you that I was given preference because I was a woman, nor the other way around. I think all this is because of the type of people who were there at the time, they are people with whom I still have—with the ones who are still alive—I have the fondest memories of them and also I learned a lot from them as well, because they were all older—older than me.

¹³ Miguel Obando y Bravo was critical of both the Somoza regime and the Sandinista Revolution. In 1985, he went to the Vatican to be installed as Cardinal. Currently, he is one of the main supporters of Daniel Ortega's government.

¹⁴ Governing Junta for National Reconstruction, which took power following the July 19, 1979 success of the Sandinista revolution. It was formed by 5 members and ruled the country until the 1984 elections.

¹⁵ Center-right party born out of Somoza's National Liberal Party in the 1940's.

It was a nice experience, and as a professional, because I liked my career, I liked my career and so for a lawyer who likes her career, to reach the Supreme Court, and to get to the Supreme Court via a revolution where the main purpose we had was to change the corruption that took place within Somoza's judicial powers, it was such a great task to have. It was very difficult because, you know, there was no infrastructure. The first day we went to work at the Supreme Court, it was at a schoolhouse because there had recently been an earthquake and Somoza stole all the funds that came in and he never reconstructed the buildings. So the Supreme Court functioned in this old schoolhouse, so we started working at this schoolhouse, we began to appoint. There wasn't a single judge, so we started to look to see who we could appoint, there was no judicial career, so then how to decide who to appoint? Who to nominate as secretary?

One thing that I remember is that we didn't—supposedly everyone who worked at the Supreme Court belonged to the Somoza regime or had links to it, but we decided not to fire anyone. Instead we were going to work with them and observe their behavior as time went on, and for example, the person who was my secretary began working with me on July 20, 1979 and was still working with me when I left the Court. And the same with all the other judges; whoever they did fire, it was for other reasons. We began to form the new judges and to organize the new structure of the judicial powers.

But you know, your question is interesting, because nobody can imagine how to respond to—how can you make justice with old laws and with a revolution that wants to make changes and has the intent of eliminating injustices? A contradiction happens when you try to respond, but stay within the law, stay within what the law says. This was one of the hardest things to work on, and it caused a bit of misunderstanding with the revolutionary leadership, the political leadership, because they saw us as too legalistic—too attached to the law, like reactionaries.

But we couldn't—if they had left, if the revolution had allowed this old judicial system to remain valid, then that was the judicial system we had to use to apply the law, as long as it didn't violate either of the two fundamental laws the revolution had promulgated, which were the Fundamental Statute and the Statute for the Rights and Guarantees of the People of Nicaragua. But this led to some contradictions between the political and revolutionary leadership, and some of the measures that, for example in the judicial environment, the leadership took some measures such as the establishment of the popular tribunals to judge the members of the Guard. We opposed it. I opposed it emphatically because I thought, first of all, it takes away from the—it limited the unity of the jurisdiction, which is one of the principles that governs an independent judicial power. Second, because these people wouldn't have the opportunity for a fair trial because of the agitated spirits of the families of all the victims the dictatorship had produced. It was logical to believe that they would try to find a way to promote vengeance, which actually did happen in many cases.

We opposed it and effectively time was on our side because one of the biggest political costs that the revolution paid for—is still paying for—was the establishment of those popular tribunals. Besides, another thing I disliked about those tribunals was that the only ones who ended up on trial there were the poor Guards, the troops who were out on the street, but the leaders of the Guard, the colonels, the generals, the ones who gave the orders for all the crimes, they all left, they fled, and they were never brought to trial. So the only ones who were brought to trial were the “little Guards” as I called them and that—I just didn't like that.

[41:38]

Grabe: And how did your position come to an end in 1988?

Núñez: What ended?

Why did your position end in '88?

Núñez: Well, it ended because they decided to transfer me, to send me to work at the—with the Human Rights Commission, which would be like the Secretary for Human Rights. At this time in Nicaragua, people were questioning the Revolution, deeply questioning it. The Revolution was being accused of great human rights violations. This was one of the main arguments of attack coming with the North American¹⁶ aggression against the Revolution. There were violations, yes, there were violations, but not the way in which they painted them. So there was work to be done there. For example, the peace process was already under way and we were moving forward with the Peace Accords where a series of amnesties would be included, pardons would be granted. And the commission that I was in charge of, we were in charge of issuing the rulings on whether a person should be granted pardon or not. So they sent me to work on this, mostly because of my experience on matters of human rights. But there were also some internal dissonances with the political leadership that we—well, that since we wanted to follow the law, one *compañero* who had begun, well, the president, Doctor Roberto Argüello Hurtado¹⁷ had also asked to be removed because we didn't want to be subject to any orders from the commandants, so that's why—

Grabe: And did that position change with the electoral defeat?

Núñez: In '90 I was at the Commission, I was at the Commission and when Doña Violeta¹⁸ won I could have stayed there, but I decided not to. So I turned in an exhaustive inventory of all that I had received at the office and for which I was responsible and turned in the keys to the office and I never went back after April 25th, which is the date Doña Violeta took office.

After that I worked with some other *compañeros*, among them Father César Jerez,¹⁹ who was the rector at the Central American University and had also worked with me at the Commission, and other people too. We thought that all that knowledge and experience that I had in matters of human rights should not go to waste, and that the people of Nicaragua were going to need—with the new government and the policies of that new government—they would need people who, or

¹⁶ North America here means the United States.

¹⁷ Doctor Roberto Argüello Hurtado was an anti-Somoza activist who became president of the Supreme Court of Justice in 1979 with the triumph of the Sandinista Revolution. Later he became Nicaragua's ambassador to France and implemented a series of rules to make the embassy more professional, limiting Nicaraguan officials' abilities to take advantage of services provided by the embassy.

¹⁸ Violeta Barrios Torres de Chamorro, also known as Violeta Chamorro, was elected president in 1990, marking the first time the FSLN lost an election since the revolution's triumph in 1979. She ran under the National Opposition Union (Union Nacional Opositora, UNO) party, which was a coalition of fourteen anti-Sandinista parties. Chamorro's campaign was run on the idea that she was a good wife, mother, and Catholic. In many ways she was anti-feminist and implemented policies that were against the interest of women. She was often compared to Mary and referred to as the Mother of the Nicaraguans. The Catholic Church was very influential in the policies Chamorro's government implemented and enforced.

¹⁹ Father César Jerez was a Catholic priest who wrote books about the Church's role in Nicaraguan politics and about Liberation Theology. A number of schools have been named after him.

an independent organization that would defend low-income people, that would defend what had been achieved by the revolution, and that's how we created the CENIDH,²⁰ which we founded on May 16, 1990 and here we are today.

And here we—we also have a long story to tell. At the beginning the main problem we had was about credibility, particularly because of my involvement with the FSLN. Many people questioned that and thought that this was not going to be an independent organization; that this was going to be an organization servicing the party interests of the FSLN. But slowly we began to prove through the work that we did, we proved that indeed we had an authentic commitment to human rights. And now we have been able to position ourselves as the organization with the most credibility, and also, I think, with the most possibilities to help the people.

We are not perfect, there's so much left to do. I have always tried from the beginning to make this a learning experience for others because I've never believed I will be here forever. I would like to find someone who will take over from here, a leader from the next generation. Every time we have elections in the Board of Directors, I ask who is going to replace me as president? But no, we haven't found anyone yet, maybe this year, there's always a reason for staying, always a "No, you can't leave now." Of course, I won't ever quit defending human rights, as long as I can. But we have been able to form a good team here that, well, the team has practically, little by little, been able to manage all the day-to-day work.

Work, Activism, Politics, Media

Grabe: Will you tell me the whole name of your organization and what the mission and aims are?

[47:27]

Núñez: Well, it is the Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights. Its acronym is CENIDH, that's how it is known here, as CENIDH. We defend human rights from an integral and interdependent perspective. We don't just defend the civil and political rights, but also the economic, social and cultural rights. We also follow the principle that the struggle for political rights is not a religious struggle, it's not a confessional struggle, and it's not a struggle to do charity work or favors. The struggle for human rights is a political struggle in the best sense of the work. Not political-partisan, but political in genuine terms because it is in practicality the daily confrontation with the power that abuses us. People always say, or for example, Daniel Ortega's government is always accusing us of being oppositional. Well of course! How could we not be opponents to a government that is violating human rights? We have to confront it, confront the power that commits those violations.

And if there are human rights violations, then we have to point out who is committing those violations. There are no violations in the abstract. If someone's rights are violated, then there is a perpetrator. This could be a state-run organism, it could also be an economic power, a group of economic powers, now we have the drug traffickers, the terrorists. They all violate human rights. And even regular people, because one of the most serious problems we have right now in Nicaragua in terms of human rights violations is sexual and domestic violence against women. It is really mind-boggling. And here at CENIDH we are an organization that works on a variety of

²⁰ Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights; in Spanish: Centro Nicaragüense de Derechos Humanos (CENIDH).

issues, but our human rights work is done with a focus on gender and across several areas. So we give priority to human rights violations against women—not only in reaction to them, after the violation has occurred, but also preventively, through workshops.

So, how are we organized? Well, we are organized in programs. We have a report and defense program, which deals with all the individual reports of violations, civil law, as we call it, and also the defense against government agencies. We also follow the cases, when we don't have a national response to them, we take them to the international level, for example to the Inter American Commission on Human Rights or to different branches of the United Nations. For example, last year we presented the alternative reports to the Universal Periodic Review,²¹ which looked into the human rights situation in Nicaragua and we got very good results, they made recommendations to the government, but unfortunately the government has not put them into effect.

We have another program that focuses on promotion. This promotion program has many sub areas. One of them is training about human rights. For us it is the strategic work, because when you train people to know their rights, they will also learn to defend them and will become an empowered agent of those rights. So in our training program we have been able to train a large network of volunteer promoters throughout the country. We have about 1500 or 1600 human rights promoters throughout the country. The program is named after Father César Jerez, because he passed away. Well, it's not named after him because he passed away but we don't use names of living people anymore.

We also have a communications program that focuses on reporting what goes on around here and also works on campaigns. For example right now we are about to start a campaign to promote participation in the elections through exercising the right to vote, but a conscious exercise of that right, a well-informed vote.

Another program we have is on impact, it strives to impact, not only decision-makers, but people in general, so that they may find ways to make a difference. We have several alliances at the national and international level. We are part of many networks, the Network of Women Against Violence²²—with lots of the women who you have there on your list; we constantly work with the Network of Women Against Violence, with the network of organizations that works with children²³, with the Network of Migrants,²⁴ that is something that has a lot of—and many other networks, the Federation of Non-Governmental Organizations, so all this at the national level.

²¹ Universal Periodic Review at the Office for the High Commissioner on Human Rights reviews the human rights record of all member states once every four years.

²² The Network of Women Against Violence is an organization that has been active in pushing for policy and cultural changes to reduce domestic violence in Nicaragua. Triumphs have included passing laws that outlaw domestic violence, running women's empowerment workshops, and creating women's police stations that permit women to be comfortable reporting abuse.

²³ Nicaragua Federation of NGOs that Work with Children and Youth; in Spanish, Federación Organizadora Nicaragüense de ONG que trabajan con la Niñez y la Adolescencia.

²⁴ Nicaraguan Network of Civil Society for Migrations; in Spanish, Red Nicaragüense de la Sociedad Civil para las Migraciones.

At the international level we are part of the International Federation of Human Rights,²⁵ which is based in Paris. For ten years I was vice-president of that Federation and now I am the representative for the Federation before the OAS, Organization of American States.²⁶ We are also members of the World Organization Against Torture²⁷ and the Inter-American Platform on Human Rights, Democracy and Development,²⁸ which is a Latin American network. So we work very closely with Amnesty International,²⁹ and they are coming in a few days on a tour.

Politics

[54:25]

Grabe: I know you've been very active in each election following 1990. Can you talk about your role in the first election following 1990?

Núñez: After the—after the 1990 elections I began to work more closely with the FSLN, or rather the FSLN's leadership sought me out because during all the time that I was at the Supreme Court—[pause, laughter, "I thought it was a mouse," more laughter]—during the time that I was, after the revolution triumphed, I was an activist from the 2nd promotion of FSLN activists, or as they call them, the Distinguished Activists, which means that we followed, in importance, the national leadership, and this was because of the work we had done for the Revolution, those things. But while I was at the Supreme Court, I was an activist for the party but in a passive way, I had no active participation in the party, which is the way it should be, I think. Now today it is regrettable to see how the Supreme Court Judges are activists for their party. So when we lost the 1990 elections, they sought me and I—well, then I did become more active and I took over the leadership of the FSLN's infrastructure.

The first post I occupied was that of coordinating the FSLN elections during the First Congress, and in that First Congress that the FSLN conducted I was—I was selected by unanimous vote, I was the one with the most votes, to be the President of the Ethical Commission of the FSLN.³⁰ In that moment there was a lot of questioning about the ethics of the FSLN, so for me that was a challenge I really wanted to take on, and that's how I like to feel about everything I become involved with. And that was one of my biggest frustrations when I realized that there was no real desire to correct the mistakes—the abuses, not just the mistakes, but rather the abuses that some leaders were committing.

After that, I just didn't want to stay in that post, so during the Second Congress I was elected to preside over the Sandinista Assembly; in this case I was also the one with the majority of the

²⁵ The International Federation of Human Rights is a federation based in Paris of 164 human rights organizations throughout the world.

²⁶ OAS, Organization of American States. Made up of 35 independent American countries, maintains relationships between countries in the Americas, and supports and promotes the interests of member states internationally.

²⁷ International organization based in Geneva with 311 affiliated non-governmental organizations working to end torture.

²⁸ International non-governmental organization dedicated to the worldwide defense of human rights as defined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights instruments. Founded in 1922, the FIDH has 105 national affiliates in all regions of the world. (www.fidh.org)

²⁹ International organization present in more than 150 countries working to educate about, and confront and end human rights abuses.

³⁰ Commission created in 1991 to examine the activities of FSLN members and leadership.

votes, and so I was a member of the Assembly—the Sandinista Assembly, which was the main organ within the party, formally speaking, because in reality there has never been, within the party, there has never been any real, internal democracy.

So then, for example in 1996, the FSLN, given all the accusations that it lacked a democratic process and this and that, and also because of the pressure from the women, the women were pressuring the FSLN for their own space and those things, they decided to conduct an open primary election to select the FSLN's presidential candidate. So a group of *compañeros* and *compañeras* from different sectors within the party proposed that I compete against Daniel Ortega. Can you imagine? What an adventure, right? So I said, "I know I am not going to win. I know I am not going to win." I knew it was all more or less already set up, but this will be a good way to test whether the party has any real intentions of internal democratization. It was— from my perspective, I was contributing to the democratization of the party and also contributing to the women's struggle, because at the previous Congress, the party further contributed to the frustration because we had wanted to promote Dora María Téllez to the National Leadership, but they had not agreed to that. So I said to myself, okay so now I will compete against Daniel Ortega, but that's where my misfortunes began. Because it turns out that within the party, they— Daniel Ortega, instead of seeing this as a contribution to the party, because he knew I wouldn't win, he felt challenged, or he felt offended that someone was willing to compete against him. Nevertheless, it was a satisfaction for me to have gotten about 30—28% exactly, of the votes, to have been able to take 28% of the votes away from Daniel Ortega back then was—. So after that I remained with the FSLN, I participated in the campaign, I supported Daniel on everything, and I stayed there, but I began to question, internally, how the members of the Sandinista Assembly and the internal procedures, and I started to question and to protest and, well to demand that the Sandinista Assembly had the right to make the decisions, not Daniel. What was happening was that Daniel would make decisions and then inform the Assembly. So, logically, this led to many within the FSLN who wanted to try to find a way to oust him, or a way to override him, but I stayed there, fighting from within and talking, speaking out.

But then in 1998 I was involved in one of the most painful situations that the FSLN has been involved in, and that was the accusation of Zoilamérica, the accusation of Daniel Ortega's adoptive daughter. Um, you probably already know of that case.³¹ That was a horrible situation for the FSLN because Daniel did not assume any responsibility, and I don't mean to say that he said, "Yes, I am guilty." No, rather, [I mean he did not say] "I am the one being accused, so I should be the one to respond." What Daniel did was, he tried to blame the FSLN. So then the FSLN assumes this charge and decrees that nobody should say anything about this. When I arrived at the FLSN offices, I saw that people were looking at me differently, because you see, Zoilamérica had already come to me for help. So we looked at the case, we analyzed everything, and it wasn't until I was absolutely convinced that there were any grounds to the many, many things she claimed, that we decided to take on that case. I was her lawyer and we took the case

³¹ In March 1998, Zoila América Narváz Murillo, Daniel Ortega's step-daughter, filed a complaint accusing him of sexually and physically abusing her from the time she was 11 years old until a few days prior to the filed complaint. The case went from Nicaraguan courts to the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights, was represented by lawyers from the Women's movement. Zoilamérica won the case at the Inter-American Commission, decided to settle privately with Ortega, and later the family reunited. This was a pivotal moment in the FSLN, and the division of the FSLN is often partially attributed to these accusations.

all the way to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.³² So, logically, from that moment on I was cut off from the FSLN forever. They never kicked me out, you know, they did not kick me out and I did not resign, but um, they hate me. And they have done many things to try to—to see if they can get something against me, but no, I think that’s as far as they’ll get. We won the case for Zoilamérica and with the possibilities that the past government, that of Don Enrique,³³ that they accept a friendly solution and compensate her and all that. But, as it often happens with this job, she abandoned us, she made up with her family, you—you probably know this, she made up with her family. We respect her decision, that’s how it should be. That’s it.

[01:03:59]

Grabe: I know you were also one of the prominent lawyers who has testified about US involvement in prior elections in Nicaragua.

*I know you have also been one of the lawyers who has testified before the United States in past elections.*³⁴

Núñez: What?

Grabe: I know in the past you’ve testified about US involvement in elections in Nicaragua.

That in the past you have testified against the United States, in the States in previous elections.

Núñez: Against the United States?

No, no, no.

Grabe: In past elections, the United States has been involved in influencing elections in Nicaragua.

In the past, the United States has influenced the elections here in Nicaragua.

Are you worried the US is going to be involved in the next election?

Núñez: Oh, yes, yes.

Está preocupada de que los Estados Unidos van a tener—van a involucrar en las elecciones que vienen? Are you worried that the United States will have—are they going to be involved in the upcoming elections?

Núñez: Well, the ambassador, Ambassador Callahan³⁵—his firm promise is that at this moment they have no interest in intervening in Nicaragua, but the history of all types of interventions, from military to political interventions on the part of the United States in Nicaragua is real. It is

³² The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights interprets and enforces the American Convention on Human Rights.

³³ Enrique Bonaños was president (Constitutionalist Liberal Party) of Nicaragua from 2002-2007.

³⁴ A translation of the interpreter (in italics) and the interview are included in this section to illustrate the reason for Ms. Núñez’s confusion.

³⁵ In 2008 Robert J. Callahan was appointed US ambassador to Nicaragua by President George W. Bush. He served as ambassador through July 2011 (this interview took place in June 2011). Currently, in spring 2012, there is no US ambassador serving in Nicaragua.

real and it is long. As a matter of fact the previous ambassador, Ambassador Trivelli,³⁶ he interfered a lot in policy, in national policies. During the 2008 municipal elections there was a clear and obvious interference.

But I think the policies of the United States seem to have changed. It was changed with President Obama,³⁷ but above all I think that the current ambassador is very professional in his behavior. Of course, there's been—there are things, we can't say that it's perfect or the way everyone would like, but I think that Ambassador Callahan has been a very professional ambassador. He's had his problems, but he's been very professional—there were times when I thought, oh things here are going to break down, but no. He's leaving, he's leaving on July 19th, that's when his term ends. Last night we were at a reception at the embassy to celebrate the anniversary of the United States' independence.³⁸ And I think that he has really been able to normalize the relations—in other times it was unthinkable that I would go to a party at the embassy, right, you would not see me there. In other times it was unthinkable that Daniel Ortega would send a very large and public greeting to the newspaper congratulating the ambassador for the independence, right, not in your dreams. And yet last night, some members of the government were at the embassy. It's a matter of convenience, between two states, but things have changed and I have had the opportunity to speak to the ambassador and according to him, they are not interested in Latin America, they have a—too many problems elsewhere.

And you know, one of the things that I have always been involved in, from the time of the Revolution to now, I have had a lot of contact with solidarity groups, these United States solidarity with Nicaragua groups. When we were at the Supreme Court it was professionals, academics, those people who were trying to learn how our justice system worked, and all those things that came when we wrote the new Nicaraguan Constitution in '87.³⁹ Many universities showed interest, and our brothers from Wisconsin, they—I was even nominated, but obviously that didn't work out, to be Counselor for the leadership. There were many solidarity groups, and I've noticed that we, we were always able to tell the difference, or differentiate between the people of the United States and the policies of the United States government. Those are different things, so what they said or what they tried to say that in Nicaragua there is a strong anti-American feeling, they were lying. That's not true. What we did have was a strong feeling against Reagan,⁴⁰ against Reagan's policies or against the policies of Bush, but not against the people of the United States.

Awhile back there was a delegation from the United States and they had questions similar to yours. We talked for a long time and I noticed, or I've noticed, that the level of solidarity, of relationship and exchange has disappeared and I think that North Americans are more interested in overseeing the policies of their country and not just solidarity for the sake of it. Maybe some

³⁶ Paul A. Trivella was appointed by President George W. Bush to serve as US ambassador to Nicaragua from 2005-2008.

³⁷ U.S. President Barack Obama was elected in November 2008 and was sworn in as the 44th President of the United States in January 2009.

³⁸ Many U.S. embassies around the world have Fourth of July celebrations each year.

³⁹ The Sandinista constitution of 1987 was the result of a very broad process of grassroots participation, and it was considered at that time as one of the most advanced constitutions in Latin America.

⁴⁰ U.S. President Ronald Reagan (1981-1989) carried out very aggressive policies against Latin America during his presidency, providing millions of dollars to governments and militant groups to purchase weapons and receive military training in the United States.

of them are but the majority of groups are—they're keeping an eye on their government, whether their government is getting involved in the policies here. That was the objective of that last delegation that came here.

Feminism, Class

[01:10:32]

Grabe: I have one more question for you. Has the role of feminism ever been influential in your work?

Núñez: Of course, logically I have an identity—I have always identified myself with women's rights, but I don't have the label of feminist. Actually I think I was a feminist before the term even appeared, because I have been working on women's rights, for example, since 1975, which was the year that the United Nations declared for the first time International Women's Year⁴¹ with that famous conference in Mexico. The University of León, here in León, Nicaragua asked me to conduct a judicial study to compare the laws of Nicaragua with the—well, with international conventions to see if they concurred. So I was in charge of organizing that and I also organized a series of other activities. But also, I have always had that sort of consciousness and solidarity that we women have. I don't know if it's a little bit of my mother's influence, you know, because of all the things I had to experience as a child, but I've always identified myself [with working women]. And you know, it's not a judgment, but I believe more in women than in men when it comes to efficacy, to honesty, and to commitment. When a woman commits to something, she commits to that cause more than men do. Of course there are exceptions, and in terms of honesty and fulfilling obligations, women are more—

Grabe: That's a good note to end on. Doña Vilma, thank you so much for giving us your time today. I know you're a very, very important woman, it's an honor for you to spend your time with us.

Núñez: Oh no, I'm not important, but I do what I can.

Grabe: Women are so modest.

Núñez: And Juanita too, she helps us out.

Grabe: Can we clear up—ask her one thing about, I was confused about, she escaped from jail or she got—

Núñez: No, when I got out of jail I did so legally. There was an appeals process where I had to pay a fine, and so I was able to get out. My lawyer, who later became a colleague of mine on the Supreme Court, got me out. But the next day—two days after getting out of jail, I was on a plane to Venezuela because the national security forces were searching for me. But I returned two days later because right then the Revolution triumphed.

[End.]

⁴¹ The United Nations declared 1975 International Women's Year. Every year since, March 8th has been celebrated as International Women's Day.