

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

**SITE: NICARAGUA**

**Transcript of Sandra Ramos  
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**Sandra Ramos** was born in Managua in 1959. She is a leader in the Women's Rights Movement whose activism and organizing focuses on women workers in the *maquila*<sup>1</sup> and other sectors in Nicaragua. She is critical of neoliberal policies, focusing on the consequences of these policies on the wellbeing of women in Nicaragua. She has taken part in global conferences and presented workshops on these issues and notes the importance of global collaboration on such issues. Ramos is a co-founder and director of Nicaragua's María Elena Cuadra Women's Movement,<sup>2</sup> which provides scholarships for nontraditional jobs, has a small credit program for unemployed women, teaches women about their labor rights, and provides training for negotiation techniques.

**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.

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<sup>1</sup> *Maquila*, or *maquiladora*, is a garment factory that produces clothes or shoes for export, commonly referred to in the United States as sweatshops.

<sup>2</sup> María Elena Cuadra Women's Movement (*Movimiento de Mujeres Trabajadoras y Desempleadas María Elena Cuadra*, literally: María Elena Cuadra Movement of Working and Unemployed Women) is an organization founded in 1994 that works for the full and equal participation of women in Nicaraguan society.

## Interview with Sandra Ramos



[00:37]

### *Childhood, Family, Personal Narratives & Inspired Figures*

**Shelly Grabe:** Well, Sandra, I wanted to start by thanking you again for being willing to participate in the Global Feminisms Project.

**So we'll spend about an hour and a half talking about some various things starting with your own personal history and then I'll ask you questions about how you got involved in some of the work that you're doing and then we'll end with talking about the current issues you're working on now.**

**I'm very interested in the work of your organization but I'd ask you to start back even further, with your own personal history and tell me a little bit about your childhood, some of your earliest memories, what kind of family you were from, those kind of things.**

**Sandra Ramos:** Looking that way? Well, my name is Sandra Ramos. I'm Nicaraguan. I was born in the city of Managua. Well, from my childhood, what I can remember is that it was a childhood

similar to that of all the children in this country who grow up with only a mother, who is mother and father at the same time. My mother is a working woman; she worked at the Mercado Oriental.<sup>3</sup> She worked, had a shop there so she could support eight girls, we were eight sisters, we are eight sisters. I'm in the middle; I'm the one in the middle, right, in the middle of the sisters. So my life was normal, as normal as it is for the poor children in this country who have to work with their mothers to—to be able to access the basic necessities of life.

I think if there is anything that at this point I can remember and have as a fixed memory in my mind is that I come from—that in my life the strongest images and figures are those of my grandmother and my mother. I think their example really marked my life. What I mean is that they are women who worked hard. They were always fair women, women with a big heart and they are women who marked my life because despite their poverty, despite their limitations, they always shared what little they had with the people around them. This is an example that I have in my memory, in my life and their example marked in me a way to practice life, to the point that I cannot eat alone. When I eat, it's always me and someone else, or me and three others, or me and four others, right. My mother's example as a workingwoman, as a strong worker also marked my life and that is the sector of women with whom I work. They are women who, when I talk to them, I also remember my childhood and I remember my mother's struggle to get ahead and to improve the life conditions of her eight daughters. So I don't know what else to tell you. I studied; I finished primary and secondary school. I went to the university. Of all my sisters, I am the only one who survived that model, none of my other sisters were able to finish college, almost all of them did go—a group, the oldest ones, only did primary school.

[05:14]

### *Education, Class, Work & Research, Social Movements*

#### **Grabe: Why were you different?**

Ramos: Because the conditions were different. They entered the labor force from a very young age, because we all had to work alongside my mother. My other younger sisters lived different conditions, these conditions changed and my mother was able to send her daughters not only to secondary school, you see, not only to primary school but also secondary school and vocational school, but they did not go beyond that. They didn't go beyond that because at the end, my two groups of sisters, the older ones and the younger ones, I think because of the traditional role that we women have been brought up with. It's like life finally arrives when—or rather that our life is over when we marry and we take care of a man, because we are the ones who take care of the men, it's not the man who takes care of us. And when we have kids, well that turns into a limitation for women to get ahead. It may have also been genetics, right. Possibly because of my genes because my father is not the same man who is the father of my older sisters, nor the man who is the father of my younger sisters. But also my rebellious attitude. I was always a rebel. I think from the moment I was born I was rebellious, but also, possibly because of the competition I had, because I was the middle child, the ones after me pushed and the ones before me pushed. So possibly that made me somewhat of a survivor because I really fought to graduate, I really fought to go to college, I fought to become a professional, even having my son. Even as I was

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<sup>3</sup> The largest market in Managua.

mother-father to one of my sons, I kept on studying. Then I got married, I married and had my second son and I stayed in school. I had a fixed goal in my life and it was that I did not want to follow the same path or the same lifestyle as my sisters.

**Grabe: Can you tell me when you first became involved in the work you're doing now in a centralized way, what was the process?**

Ramos: Well, look, I lived in what is now known as—in what was known as the La Bolsa Neighborhood; this is the neighborhood behind the Cathedral. That was in the center of Managua, right. We lived near there; my mother rented a place there, okay. And I started to become involved because that area was key. The students were constantly taking over the Cathedral, the university students, the high school students. It was like protest central.

**Grabe: What years were these?**

Ramos: We're talking about the '70s, sixty-something, because I was born in '59. From the time I was very young I had been exposed to the protests, so that is something that marked me, right, but also because everyday I had to walk past the Cathedral and the Palace<sup>4</sup>, which is very close by, to get to the central market where my mother worked. So on this route I would bump into all the protests, I would bump into the students' movement struggle and I would observe them, well my eyes would watch, right. Maybe I didn't understand it all, as young as I was, but I would follow that route to the point that, my mother says that a BECAT<sup>5</sup> drove by one day—that's what they called the police patrols that were from the EVI, the specialized group of the Somoza Guard, and I saw them and I grabbed a rock and threw it at them. Ask me why I did it, I don't know, but I threw that rock at them because everyone used to say that they were bad. [laughter] My mother had the fright of her life because she says that the BECAT stopped and they said, who, they said, who is the son of a bitch who threw that rock, and it was me! My mother was very concerned, she even smacked me in the head that day, but I was just a little girl. I think I was in primary school back then.

So you see, my life took place within that sector because I studied in the Joséfa Toledo de Ayeres School, which was close to my house. Then, in secondary school I went to the Andrés Bello School, which was also very close to my house, so back then, really, that whole perimeter was like a vicious circle, full of revolutionaries. And I remember that I would beg my mother to let me go to school because for my mother, because of the culture and her being a businesswoman, a small-business owner herself. Well, she considered that we should all be businesswomen, it was not necessary to study so much, because she had not had that many years of schooling and she was supporting her family, that was the way to do it. I remember that I would beg for her to let me go to school and sometimes she would say "No, you're not going today" and I would cry and cry and cry and cry, because I wanted to go to school. Or sometimes, I remember, sometimes there would be strikes and demonstrations at the school and I would go, I would tell my mother that we had classes, but there were no classes. There was a strike. When I turned around, my mother had me by the hand and was asking, "What are you doing?" But those were my surroundings, and it seems that they also marked my life.

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<sup>4</sup> National Palace

<sup>5</sup> *Brigadas Especiales contra Actos de Terrorismo* (BECAT, Special Counter-insurgency Brigades), part of the National Guard police force during the Somoza regime.

So then, when I went to college it happened as well, I was already going to UNAN<sup>6</sup> in Managua, and all the heavily involved people from the Sandinista Front were at the UNAN-Managua Campus. The Student Movement was there, and there were lots of people and we would protest all the time, we would protest all the time, I think I didn't go to many classes because I was out protesting. So that's how I was making connections, connections, connections until, well, I was involved. I became completely involved with the Sandinista Front,<sup>7</sup> extremely involved. Then came the Revolution<sup>8</sup> and I went to work for the Nicaraguan Film Institute, by chance really. That's where I began to learn about the workers' unions, well, that the government had ordered the creation of the unions because we needed to organize the entire society, so the workers in unions, the youth as youth, the teachers as teachers and it all got set up.

So, in this case I went—became one of the union activists at my job; I became involved with the Sandinista Workers' Centre, and I'm a founder of the Sandinista Workers' Centre,<sup>9</sup> the CST, I am one of their founding members. And well, then I started to take on responsibilities; I think taking on responsibilities happens gradually, little by little, bit by bit. It's a process, right? Nobody is born with open eyes, today I'm going to be a guerilla fighter and tomorrow I'm going to be something else, no, it's a process that you take on, and it's a life process, an analysis of life when you see the struggles that other women and men have and you want to help them overcome those struggles.

But I do think that for me, two great women in my life influenced me: my grandmother and my mother. My grandmother and my mother as these great, persevering women. The men in my life have no weight in my history. Not in my historic memory, here in this thing, in one's hard drive. I cannot find strong men in my family. I find strong women, determined women who were able to raise their daughters as best they could, their very own lives.

So that's how I became involved. I was in the Atlantic coast, as a result of that involvement I was in the Atlantic coast, in—North, in the Northern Region for almost four years. I was there supporting the organizations, supporting the indigenous communities. Then I came back because I wanted to continue with my studies. I had not finished college and well, I continued my studies until I graduated and I kept working with the unions until 1994, because I had a falling out with the leadership of the union movement. It was a falling out over the agenda.

We made great strides around feminism, around gender struggles. We insisted that the working class was not just one class, because it is not asexual. Men and women form the working class, and we have—though they insist on our demands over class—but in the case of women, we have another demand, not just our salary, not just collective bargaining, not just the right to organize,

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<sup>6</sup> Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Nicaragua.

<sup>7</sup> 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.

<sup>8</sup> From 1937 to 1979 Nicaragua was ruled by a political dynasty dictatorship, beginning with Anastasio Somoza García and followed by his two sons, Luis Somoza Debayle and Anastasio Somoza Debayle. When Nicaraguans talk about the Revolution, they refer to the period that roughly encompasses the 1960s and '70s, when opposition to the Somoza dictatorship grew and eventually led to the resignation of Somoza in 1979.

<sup>9</sup> *Central Sandinista de Trabajadores* (CST) is Nicaragua's dominant national trade union center. It is affiliated to the International Trade Union Confederation. The most important trade union in Nicaragua.

but the right to a life free of violence, free of sexual harassment in the workplace, the issue of maternity, right, the issue of sexual and reproductive health—that's to say, that for women there was a whole other world. But the workers' movement in those times wasn't prepared for these matters. It's like the women, we advanced, and they stayed behind, backwards. There was a point where they believed that what we were doing was weakening the working class of our country. We were diverting the working class from its historic mission, which is the struggle between capitalism and the proletariat; but they didn't understand that within that struggle there is another hidden struggle, which is also important, and that's the women's struggle.

So, our brandishing the flag for the women's struggle led to a very, very, very strong rupture within the Sandinista union workers' movement, in this case, particularly with the Sandinista Workers' Centre, to the point that we decided to leave that space. The thing is that it was such a violent rupture that the union leaders decided that the women needed to be taught a lesson. So they accused us, the women who had done this—this was in '93, '94—were accused of a crime, and the crime they accused us of was of stealing. The leaders accused us of stealing sophisticated technological equipment, the air conditioning units, the desks—seems like we stole everything but the men! This was an organization that had security personnel, men with guns, who said that we came at night under the guise of darkness with a truck, in the middle of the night, and that we—right in front of the security guards, because they went to the trial and testified that they had seen us with their very own eyes. Well, and why did you not stop me? They said “That one—

**Grabe: What organization were you working with at the time?**

Ramos: At the Sandinista Workers' Central, with the unions. So that was the rupture. Then we left, we left the organization, and they took us to trial. Personally, there was an arrest warrant issued against me, issued by a judge who was also a member of the national security force. We had arrest warrants, but I did not let them arrest me. I had to go on the run for a year. I was on the run throughout the country for a year, because they were determined to make an example out of me that those who decide how—well, that the ones who decided how women were to leave the movement were them, the male leaders. We had been the ones who decided to leave them—

**Grabe: What year was it that you had to leave?**

Ramos: In '94, I spent the entire year on the run. Then in '95 and thanks to—well, in '94, thanks to the Austrian Embassy, the ambassador called for us and offered us two things: political asylum, and I just laughed. How is it that I am going to seek asylum because of these assholes? No, it's not possible. I am not leaving my country. How can that be, if I am a woman who has struggled all her life in this country? How can I leave? So we told them that if they wanted to help us, they could pay for the lawyer. And they paid for the legal services for our defense and in '95 we won the case! We won the case against all those big shots who were protected by everyone because they were high-level leaders. So we won the case—well, you see the María Elena Cuadra was organized on May 7<sup>th</sup>, 1994 and on May 9<sup>th</sup> we already had arrest warrants. So, just two days after organizing the María Elena Cuadra, there was an arrest warrant issued against me. So this doesn't—this reflects—what happened to us reflects the patriarchal power that, just as today we see in the acts of violence against women when women decide to leave their husbands. The husbands believe they are the ones who decide how the relationship will end, how, when, and where. They are the ones who are supposed to leave us because when we leave them

we hurt their pride, their self love, their macho love and that's when they decide to hurt the women, right, sometimes to point of killing them.

**Grabe: What was your role in establishing María Elena?**

Ramos: Well, I'm one of the founders of the María Elena Cuadra, one of the main founders of that organization. I, along with two other people, came up with the idea of how we were going to reorganize, but really it was more like a collective convocation among all of us, and what now? What are we going to do? Okay, so we're not there anymore but are we going to stay like that? So we made lots of phone calls and we established a meeting place and we met and we decided to found an organization. Eight hundred hardworking women leaders got together and we organized the women's movement known today as María Elena Cuadra and we organized it in six different departments within the country. We were born in the way in which women give birth to multiple children. Usually an organization starts simple and then gets complicated, right? It usually starts in Managua and then grows. Not us, we were born in six different departments simultaneously.

**Grabe: And how did you name the organization?**

Ramos: Well, the day we organized, on May 7<sup>th</sup> when we had the large assembly meeting, everyone suggested a name. What will we call ourselves? There were some that wanted us to call ourselves Virgin of Guadalupe,<sup>10</sup> or that we call ourselves this or that, well, a large number of names. I proposed the name María Elena Cuadra, because she was a woman leader of ANMLAE,<sup>11</sup> the Luisa Amanda Espinoza Association of Nicaraguan Women, and a person we knew. She was a leader of the Department of Carazo, from Diriomo and we know of the love she had for women and her unconditional support, her strong work and well, we proposed that name—well, I proposed it and the assembly approved it. But also, she was a woman—a woman leader who had died just one month before organizing the María Elena Cuadra. So, she had been a member of her organization and we decided to recognize her work by naming our organization in her honor, but aside from that we came to an agreement, a moral agreement that we should not go on recognizing women's ability and dedication once they have passed, because she didn't even realize that we all loved her so much. So we decided that we must honor women in life, not when they have passed away, because they won't be able to see it, they won't be able to see how the rest of the women see her as such a valuable part of the struggle for women's rights.

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<sup>10</sup> The Virgin of Guadalupe, also our Lady of Guadalupe, is a Roman Catholic icon of the Virgin Mary, a central figure in Mexico and Central America. During the colonial period in Mexico, a young indigenous boy, Juan Diego, had a vision while on the Tepeyac Hill, near Mexico City. In his vision he saw a lovely lady who asked him to build a church right there where he stood. Juan Diego told the local ecclesiastical authorities, but they did not believe him. The next day he saw the vision again and the lady in his vision told him to collect flowers from the Tepeyac Hill and take them to the Bishop in Mexico City. Juan Diego collected the cut flowers in his apron and took them to the Bishop. Once he delivered the flowers, his apron had an imprint of the Virgin Mary—albeit a brown-skinned one, who looked very much like the indigenous Aztec descendants of Mexico.

<sup>11</sup> Asociación de Mujeres Nicaragüenses Luisa Amanda Espinoza, English: Luisa Amanda Espinoza Association of Nicaraguan Women. The original Sandinista women's movement. Due to its close links to the FSLN, feminist issues such as abortion and women's rights were pushed aside to organize around FSLN issues. (Bayard de Volo, Lorraine. *Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs: Gender Identity and Politics in Nicaragua, 1979-1999*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore. 2001. pp 22)

## *Activism, Politics*

**Grabe: Can you tell me about some of the strategies that you were first using to organize women when the organization started?**

Ramos: Well, initially we decided to call ourselves Women—Movement of Working and Unemployed Women María Elena Cuadra. Why working? Because we are all workers; that is to say that all the informal work, the unpaid work, the paid work, the concept of workers is to rescue ourselves as active subjects, as subjects with rights; and unemployed because they were—we were—going through a crisis in which, well, women were losing jobs and we wanted to incorporate the women who did not have work, either because they couldn't find work or because they were young women, so we claimed those two fronts.

So the first strategies were about making visible the contribution women make to the nation's economy as subjects with rights. We started—we began the work by organizing the workingwomen of the Zona Franca<sup>12</sup> because there was a very large number of women there whose rights were being violated. Back then there was no union organizing inside those companies and, frankly, the unions weren't even interested in organizing women. So we go in and start to organize the women, to support them in their struggle for their rights, and then the union movement showed up and decided it was also going to organize the women, so that was our first front to work on.

We also worked with women who were domestic workers, with women who were small farmers, helping them diversify their crops, and providing workshops on gender, self-esteem, human rights, labor rights, providing them with technical assistance to improve the yield of their crops. So we started off strong, everything that had to do with gender analysis.

Today the María Elena Cuadra is a strong organization, active in six departments in the country, we have a sixteen-year work history and all that work is not just the work of one leader, there is not a single leadership. Each one of us has been in the company of a large group of leaders, in the barrios, in the communities, in the workplace. Our leadership is not our own, it is a collective leadership. My leadership represents a collective because I am what I am because other women have worked with me. It's not just me and myself, no, my leadership and the recognition that I have and that this organization has is because of the leadership of the thousands of women who participate in this organization, right? So my leadership is a collective leadership. I am what I am because other women work with me.

**Grabe: Have you had to change the strategies that you use to adjust to different political climates or historical moments?**

[29:48]

Ramos: No, our strategies have not changed. Our mission, our vision, and to say, our strategies have remained the same, and it is the defense of women's rights. The methodology, perhaps, is what has changed. We began with a strategy of not denouncing when rights are being violated, but rather to accumulate strength by educating women, educating them, educating them to take ownership of their own rights. This is because it does not help that I go out there and report and

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<sup>12</sup> Free Trade Zone.

denounce that someone's rights are being violated, if the rest of the women do not want to. So we started this process of convincing the women to recognize themselves and to empower themselves to claim their rights, so that once a large group of women is convinced and has appropriated those rights as their own, then the collective action is stronger, right. That is why we started working from the simple things to the complex things in our work in the free trade zones.

Today we are a respected organization in the free trade zones because we have also contributed to the education of the business owners to respect our laws, and in our education endeavor we have incorporated what the law in our country says and when business owners do not uphold the law, we take them to court. But this has all been a process, in these sixteen years of work. Possibly if sixteen years ago someone would tell me that I would seize a company I would say, Oh dear Lord. How am I going to seize a company? What? How? When? Where? Well, for not upholding the workers' rights. Today, if a company violates the workers' rights, we seize them, but this is because within that company there are now workers, men and women, who are cognizant of their rights. If the people are not cognizant, they will think that what we are doing is crazy.

**Grabe: Will you tell me a little bit about some of the conditions that women are facing in these free trade zones? What are the issues that women need your help with?**

Ramos: Well, like everywhere, even like in the United States and everywhere, the business owners always try to violate the laws of the men and women who work for them. So here there is no model businessman, there is no model business, there is no model investor. They all come to this country looking to accumulate wealth. That is why they have moved from the countries in the North to the countries in the South looking for cheap labor and a place where they can get away with not obeying labor rights. And that is why our organization is so important, because we know whom we are dealing with, we know that there are people whose mentality is based on wealth accumulation, and not based on accumulating wealth and distributing the benefits. This is to say that it is a capitalist model that strives to accumulate, accumulate, accumulate, accumulate, and not redistribute. Therefore, I think our organizations have a reason for being, because until now the model is not redistributive. The economic model that we have and is used in the free trade zones is a model that tramples on workers' rights, that makes women sick, that does not have the best work conditions, and that still doesn't offer equal pay to women.

**Grabe: Can you explain the condition? Can you give me some examples of what women are facing?**

[34:12]

Ramos: Well, for example, in the first years, I'm talking about—oh—about ten years ago we still struggled a lot in the Zona Franca with the matter of physical violence against women. The Zona Franca is, well, it isn't composed of one single source of capital; there are Taiwanese, Koreans, Americans, now a Mexican, now a Guatemalan, Honduran, we don't work with one single investor. So initially, the first ones we approached to eliminate physical violence in the work place were—because, seventeen years ago, everybody knows and it's been documented, that the Asians would hit—they would hit our women. And we felt there was no place for that. So that was the first thing we were able to prove. Then, also, the low salaries just hadn't changed at all.

So we tackled this, we tackled the fact that the men and women there were not allowed to organize into unions, they weren't allowed time to go for medical appointments, and also the pregnancy tests to which women were subjected to in order to work there. On top of all that, of course, you had to be thin, young and pretty to work in those businesses.

### **Grabe: Why?**

Ramos: Because the Asians have their model, their employee model and since this country had so few employment sources, right, because it just recently ended an internal war, it had recently ended an aggressive war in which the North American government<sup>13</sup> had not been able to—was not able to compensate this country for that [war], although there was a resolution from the International Court of Justice<sup>14</sup> that it should financially compensate the damages to this country, it was just very difficult to get the country's economy going.

When the Sandinista Front loses the elections,<sup>15</sup> well, then the new government, which was a right-wing government, which is to say they see things different, right? The economy, they decide to privatize all the businesses that at the time belonged to the State. So it was just enormous quantities of people who became unemployed. And to this day, that decision—that decision to end with the national industries, it is still the largest nightmare that we women have in this country. Because, you see, when they dismantled the national industries, all that was left here was to bring in foreign investment and the first foreign investment to come to our country was looking for one thing: cheap labor, right? Terrible pay, bad working conditions, and also, you have to remember that the infrastructure had been so obsolete that when these new industries came in and occupied those buildings, the people were crowded together. Today, thanks to the struggle of all the women workers, because it is their struggle that leads to results, today the new companies that come here come with better environmental conditions and the owners of those industrial parks are required to prove good conditions. So yeah, you might work in what seems like a box, but that box should be appropriate, in good condition.

But there are still problems, they haven't ended, they'll never end while we have this model of production focused on accumulating wealth and not redistributing it. We'll still be fighting over the same thing, over the same thing, to have our rights respected. It's a struggle, and well it's proven that since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when capitalism emerged strongly, we've been fighting for the same thing. It's a never-ending struggle. It's not going to end and what we do and try to work on is for the coming generations of women laborers to enter this struggle in better conditions, with more equality, not like today where there are so many young women who are not cognizant of their rights. So we want the new generation to know what their rights are and to demand them, regardless of who is governing the country and that any company that comes to this country, comes respecting those human rights that our government has ratified.

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<sup>13</sup> The United States of America.

<sup>14</sup> The International Court of Justice (ICJ) is the primary judicial organ of the United Nations. Based in The Hague, Netherlands, the ICJ settles legal disputes submitted by UN member states. A judicial body of the United Nations.

<sup>15</sup> In 1990, the FSLN (led by Daniel Ortega) lost the presidential election to a coalition led by the UNO party (National Opposition Union) and Doña Violeta Chamorro became president until 1997.

**Grabe: You've mentioned the factories are better now, but what are the current issues that women face?**

Ramos: Well, I've already said that the struggles are the same, they are the same struggles—they are the same struggles that I've talked about but now in another context. For example, now the Sandinista government, today there are more unions within the maquilas<sup>16</sup> because the businessmen—well, the Sandinista government has worked so that those workers be allowed to unionize, so many business men now accept the Sandinista unions. Because—I insist that everything that happens in this country is the responsibility of the State, is the responsibility of the big investors, and is the responsibility of the big brands; there are three entities that are responsible for what happens here. Therefore, if we have a government that is more protective of investors than of its own citizens, it will allow for their rights to be violated. But if we have a State that is more of a benefactor of its workers—more benefactor, I didn't say that it is a benefactor, but rather more of a benefactor, a little more benefactor, and is able to combine rights and investment, well that helps to reduce the problems. So we still have the same problems, but it's no longer in that dimension, it's that wherever I go, you would hear about problems of workers' rights being violated. So we still have that today, but there are more possibilities to report them and specific ways to demand that those rights be respected.

### *Work & Research, Feminism*

**Grabe: You know, the question, the big question that folks from outside, from the North<sup>17</sup> ask, is are these factories, these free trade zones, are they exploitation or are they empowerment for women?**

[41:44]

Ramos: To me they are exploitation, there's no way around it. Everything else is just a lie; everyone wants to say that since there are no jobs in Nicaragua, well the Zona Franca helps resolve that and therefore it's empowering. Sorry, I don't know who is making that analysis, but whoever it is needs to go back and learn about sociology, about anthropology, about psychology, about economy and do a more integral analysis. I don't think it is empowerment when women are left crippled with lung problems, I don't think it is empowerment when the working conditions of that repetitive work leave long-term muscular-skeletal effects in the women and that nobody will give that diagnosis in this country. No, I don't think it is empowerment to have a production model that won't even allow the workers to continue their studies, when young women form the largest group of women laborers. So, that cannot be empowerment. What the maquilas are for this country is a band-aid, a band-aid for the huge unemployment in our country. I cannot see that they have any other role, and I won't give it to them. It would be empowerment—they would be empowering women if they abided by the Codes of Conduct, if they fully obeyed the law, if they created decent working conditions for Nicaraguan women. That's to say, if they were redistributive. How can they empower me—how can I say that they are empowering if they do not reciprocate? If an economy is not redistributive, it's only about taking, work for me, work for me and here's your three pesos, work for me, work for me and here's your three pesos. That is not empowerment. That is a band-aid.

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<sup>16</sup> Textile manufacturers, often considered sweatshops.

<sup>17</sup> The United States.

**Grabe: You've already touched on this, but I'd like to ask you in your opinion to say more about the impact of globalization or neoliberal policies for women in particular.**

Ramos: But that's been studied so much, it's been studied in detail and it's been diagnosed in detail that what neoliberal policies have done is to put more weight on the shoulders of women. It's the neoliberal policies that have sunk this country into huge poverty, and we still haven't been able to get out of it. So I don't know what else I can tell you. For me the neoliberal policies have gotten the whole of humanity into the chaos we are in.

**Grabe: I'd like to shift gears a little bit and ask you about the role that feminism may have played in your work if at all, how do you understand or define feminism?**

Ramos: Well, when I worked in the unions, before beginning my work with women, I thought the working class was all one, that it was a sole working class. I was a woman, but in my mind, the working class was the working class. When I became involved with the feminist movement in this country, and we began the debates, the analyses—because this is a process, nobody is born a feminist and nobody is born knowing about gender; this is learned as we go, right? So, in this learning process, when they name me to lead the Women's Office of the Sandinista Workers' Central, I said to myself, what's this? What am I going to do here? Right, what's this? What am I going to do? Well, the first thing I did was to go talk to the feminists in this country, so they would teach me, AMNLAE taught me one part, another part I learned on my own and the ties with the women, well I started to see the everyday problems that we women have, to the point that I became deeply aware of it and took it to heart; and the feminist movement in this country has contributed so much, the feminist movement in this country has contributed greatly to Nicaraguan women.

Possibly the only criticism I may have, but that also depends on how one takes on feminism and what one wants feminism to be. That's one because for me, what we are doing is providing workshops for women workers, for the female leaders in the barrios, for the female leaders in the workplace, so that they learn about feminism and that feminism is not a single feminism, that there are multiple feminisms; and that once you tell them, these here are the multiple feminisms, the various theories, pick the one you like the most. But, why? To avoid that reaction, "Oh, there comes the monkey" which is what men do. They say, don't get involved with the feminists because they will divert you. That is what those women will do to you. So, I'm just so tired of hearing that. So, yes, I'm tired of it and I recognize in feminist theory, I recognize that it has the potential to transform women's lives. And it's a way of seeing the economy differently, seeing life differently. So I have to transfer that to my women, because, why should I want to know this and die and take this knowledge with me to the grave? No, no, no, no. So, we believe, and I personally believe, along with all the women I work with, we believe we have to transfer what we know about feminism to the new generation of women. Why? Because when we brandish the feminist philosophy, oh, we were discredited, they'd say here come the lesbians, the divisors, the ones who don't like men, the ones who—the ones who are going to ruin and taint what it means to be a woman. It was all so horrible and so many women wouldn't come near us. We suffered discrimination, but we told ourselves, well, we're not going to die because of this discrimination; but we have to teach the women, we have to teach them to understand that men are not inherently right, and that's what we are doing now.

We have a leadership academy and we are preparing young female leaders from other organizations. We have joined with other organizations to form new leaders who know the ABCs of their human rights, but also have knowledge of what feminism is, because in the mixed sectors, they say, to keep us divided and so women don't demand more respect, they tell us that if we take on feminism, then we are deviating the organization towards something it should not be deviated to. That's why they are so defensive, and I live feminism, I live it as a part of my life. That's to say that everything that I do, I know it has to do with feminism, it's not just a theory up in the air. Rather it is a way of living life, a way of living life, of thinking and of working for other women to know and appropriate themselves and make changes in their life. As I see it, that is feminism, there is no other. I don't need to declare myself a feminist, because that is what they used to say, if you don't declare yourself a feminist, you're not one. So I say, on the one side the men discriminate us, and this other one here says that if I don't write a testament saying I'm a feminist, or put on a sign, they won't see me as a feminist? But that's what I do, what I do is part of feminism. So yes, I think that the feminist movement has progressed in this country in the way we see ourselves, in the way we see ourselves, of seeing ourselves as equals. I think the contributions of the feminist movement to this country are undisputable, indisputable and I'm not talking of just the Nicaraguan feminists, but of the global feminist movement that has contributed so much to us and well, we have also taken that feminist philosophy as a way of making change in this patriarchal structure that oppresses us and keeps us sunken in this poverty. This is not just the result of neoliberalism, for both neoliberalism and the patriarchal system are responsible, both of them, together, for continuing to oppress women, to oppress more than the fifty-plus-one percent of the world's population.

[51:48]

### *Work & Research, Activism*

**Grabe: We talked about this a little bit when we first arrived, but can you tell me about, in your opinion, the relationship between scholarship or academic work and activist work that you're doing?**

Ramos: Well, look, we—we work closely with academia. Currently we have a program with the Universidad Centroamericana,<sup>18</sup> with the UCA, with the UCA's Gender Studies program, so that when our leaders graduate from our [leadership] academy, we send them to an advanced program at the university. So we work along with the universities, and so the ones who teach our leaders [in the academy] are women from academia. So, for us, a synergy is necessary between academia and empirical knowledge and these two must join forces to improve the work that we do. So for me it is valid, the academic study, because we conduct studies here and we contact the people in academia to do them. So that's why, I think that's why all the academic studies that

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<sup>18</sup> The *Universidad Centroamericana* (UCA), in English: Central American University, was founded in 1960 as a private, not-for-profit, autonomous institute for higher education focused on public service and guided by Christian principles. Jesuit university founded in 1960. It is a member of the Association of Jesuit Universities in Latin America (AUSJAL, *Asociación de Universidades Confiadas a la Compañía de Jesús en América Latina*). The Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) in Managua should not be confused with the *Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas* in El Salvador, which was founded in 1965, independently of UCA in Nicaragua, although it is also a Jesuit institution and member of AUSJAL, and also referred to as UCA within El Salvador. For more information visit: <http://www.ausjal.org/universidades.html>.

take place in the country have our support because we have very close ties. So to make that link between what is formal academia and our women. I think that academia has learned a lot too, has learned a lot, and so have we. I think it's been both ways and that's important, theory and practice should go hand in hand. I think at one point in our history, academia was here and practice was over there, right? So we would criticize the poor academics and they would criticize us, oh, those women are all activism, activism and they don't think. But then, when we began to work together, the two pillars, we saw that if the two pillars come together, we can do better things for women. And following on that thought, the daily routine of women needs to be written down, because while we are heavily involved in activism, we are actively struggling day in and day out for women's rights, it's important for someone to write it down and compile this history. It's the women who will engage in the struggle for women; no one else will do it. The men are not interested, I still haven't seen any male author, oh Paulo Coelho, or I don't know who, saying how pretty, how beautiful feminist women are. So, okay, they make some tiny reference, but to really rescue the story of women's lives has always been the work of women in academia or in film who are always there behind us, trying to make visible this effort which I believe is very—very—very important for the future generations. Because just like those other feminists in other times did what they did and fought for our right to vote, for our right to citizenship, for a name, a last name. So then, all these processes have to be taught to the women, I agree with this, and to the women who will come next and continue the struggle. That's why we are so thankful of what you are doing, now that you explained the project and its objectives, it seems like it is—like it's a pertinent project and we thank you for doing it.

[55:50]

**Grabe: You've described the reality that there's often a difference between the law and then what women actually experience. Can you give me examples of when women's organizations have been necessary to make advances in women's health?**

Ramos: Well, as you probably know already, we used to have the right to therapeutic abortions,<sup>19</sup> and that right, unfortunately and due to a certain political class in this country, because it was not the work of one single party, but of a political class that joined forces with the ecclesiastical authorities to take away a right that had been ours for 100 years. I sometimes start thinking, 100 years ago society was more conservative and I think of all the work that the feminists back then did in order for us to have the right to therapeutic abortions, in those difficult conditions and nonetheless, all the power of the ecclesiastical authorities and all the power of the political parties turned against us. However, we are not just sitting with our arms crossed in the women's organizations. There are women's organizations that are intimately linked to the defense of women's health, of our sexual and reproductive rights and they continue to struggle every day to rescue the right to therapeutic abortions. Also, to assist our women with any problems they might have as a result of that prohibition. For example, the National Assembly is discussing what is known as the Law—the Law on Health and Security, I'm sorry, on Sexual and Reproductive Health. Sexual and reproductive health, it says nothing about rights, it says sexual and reproductive health. But we are there, we feminist women, we're there trying to get that tiny little concept in, trying to find room for that little concept because we know that we are up against a huge economic power, because the church is not only an ideological power, but it is

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<sup>19</sup> From 1893 to 2007, the Penal Code of Nicaragua included a clause stating that therapeutic abortion was permitted, and defined the term as an abortion that is scientifically determined to be necessary in order to save the mother's life.

also an economic power. So much so that, in order to take away that right we had, it has at its service—had, it had at its service all of the owners of the media, so that the publicity that was shown was extremely cruel to women. Cruel, cruel, cruel, cruel, and we didn't have—didn't have enough funds to create a counter-campaign, we couldn't. It was such a monster, the church with all its economic, patriarchal, ideological power, along with the political parties, and on the other side the women's groups, it was like David against Goliath.<sup>20</sup> So today, we are still working on all and any process of reporting, condemning and suing for the restitution of the right to therapeutic abortions. Our organizations continue to work to promote a life free of violence. This is another front on which the feminist movement has fought, to make visible that pandemic, that tragedy that we women continue to live because we still do not have a State that is—to this day, we do not have a State that is a protector of women and that strives to save the lives of women and allows us to live a life free of violence.

Today we are also working on a law against violence towards women, including all the feminicides, and that law was introduced by 21 women's organizations, including the María Elena Cuadra Women's Movement, and it is now being decided on. We know that the law in and of itself will not resolve everything, but before we didn't even have a judicial framework that would recognize femicide or feminicide. Today we can now talk of femicide and feminicide as punishable crimes. I think that it is a great contribution of my country's feminist movement and of the women's movement, that we now can count on a law—sorry, that we will be able to count on a law that will save women's lives. Although the struggle later will be to implement the law, due to all the influences we will have to address, to avoid inequality, because there is inequality and there is also—there's also tolerance. Tolerance towards these acts of violence, but this law also addresses sanctions to government employees who do not aggressively act against the wave of violence against women.

[01:01:59]

**Grabe: You also mentioned that you—the María Elena Cuadra Movement has addressed some health issues in the free trade zones. Can you tell us about what health issues you've worked on there?**

Ramos: Well, in the first place we have worked so much and we have pressured the Department of Labor to issue a Ministerial Resolution prohibiting pregnancy tests in order to apply to jobs. Yeah, we have also worked with the unions and the private sector on what is known as the Law on Labor Health in the maquilas. There is a special law to demand better health conditions for workers, men and women, in the maquilas. We have looked into the provisional medical clinics to ensure they are treating women well. Regarding issues of sexual and reproductive health, we have a team of health promoters who are continuously educating women on their sexual and reproductive rights, on sexually transmitted diseases and the use of birth control, because they are very young women, very young women and they need to protect themselves, their health and their lives. To think about things like if they are struggling with one child, well it will be even harder with three—besides, the salaries in the Zona Franca do not really allow you to live a decent life. So we also need our young women to learn to plan. We also have a program to educate male and female workers on the consequences of HIV/AIDS, how to protect yourself. But we also have a resolution that forbids the companies from requiring an HIV test in order to

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<sup>20</sup> A Biblical reference to David, a young boy, defeating the giant Goliath.

apply for a job. I think we have advanced little by little, although we still have large challenges, as are the long-term effects on the health of the workers that are caused by the repetitive movement, which is still something we have to work on. But we have also worked on matters regarding pregnant women and their need for time off [for prenatal care]. It used to be that when the women started to show, they were immediately fired. It's not that they don't still get fired, but it happens in a less abusive way. Also, there is a little more protection for the state of a pregnant woman, a little more protection, not the best, but a little more.

[01:05:42]

**Grabe: Sandra, it's really been an honor to hear about your own personal history and what brought you to these issues and the work that you're doing now, it's very important. And I know you're a very busy woman so we really appreciate the time you gave us today to participate in the project. Before we leave, the last thing that we need to do is, Anjali's going to take a portrait photo of you.**

**I also wanted to ask you, when you said that there were a number of factories here from I think Korea and los Estados Unidos and Honduras y Guatemala también.**

**And you mentioned—**

Ramos: Yes, there are four businesses from Honduras and Guatemala, there is one Canadian, which is Gilden, and there's one that is Filipino.

**Grabe: Where are most of the factories from?**

Ramos: Currently the majority of factories are Korean, Korean and American, that's now, because the Taiwanese left looking for even cheaper labor. Because here, like it or not, even though salaries are not the best, each year we pressured them to increase the salaries. Of course we were not able to talk about the norms of production and the price of operations, which is the key, it's the key to exploitation in our country.

**Grabe: It sounds like you've been doing some cooperative work and you have a good reputation in some of these factories.**

Ramos: We have good relations with the investors in this country, as long as they abide by the law and respect the rights of the workers. When there is a violation and a worker comes to us, for example, telling me that they fired her today and don't want to pay her, or they fired her in this and that manner, we call the factory and ask, hey what's happened with her case? So they have two options, they can either negotiate quickly and directly with the worker, or if they decide not to do that, and we take them to court. We take them to court, there's no middle ground. One way or another, they fulfill their responsibilities.

**Grabe: I wonder if it's possible that—if you could organize a tour for us in one of the factories.**

Ramos: I can't guarantee it right now; you'd have to talk to, what's his name, with Emilio Noguera, with Dr. Emilio Noguera.<sup>21</sup> He's the only one who can get you into those businesses.

**Grabe: And who is he?**

Ramos: He is the legal advisor for the Zona Franca.

**Grabe: Would it be strange if we called him or would it be better if you called him for us?**

Ramos: No, no, no, no he sees everybody. Yes, he sees everybody.

**Grabe: Do you have his contact information?**

Ramos: Yes, I will give it to you. Write it down: Dr.—Dr. Emilio Noguera, he's a good person. He helps the workers resolve conflicts. Yes, yes, yes, yes, we work very closely with him. When there's conflict we call him: help, help, and go visit this businessman! And runs over there. Sometimes it doesn't depend on what he says, you know, it depends on the investor, oh well.

[End.]

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<sup>21</sup> Labor Inspector for the Corporation of Free Trade Zones.