

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

SITE: NICARAGUA

**Transcript of Dora María Téllez
Interviewer: Shelly Grabe
Interpreter: Julia Baumgartner**

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

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

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 Dora María Téllez



Childhood, Family, Politics

***Shelly Grabe: I know that a lot of the questions I'll ask you, you've been asked hundreds of times before. [very long pause] So, María, thank you again for agreeing to participate in this global project. As we mentioned earlier, we'll spend about an hour to an hour and a half talking about topics that start with going over your personal history and then leading up to some of the work that you've been doing in recent years.**

** Translator's note: This document contains the interviewer's questions in English and the responses from Téllez translated into English. At times, the interpreter's translations are also included; they are always in italics.*

I know you've become a legend for your role as a *comandante* during the FSLN¹ and you have a very rich political history, but I'd like to ask you to go back to the very beginning and tell me a little bit about what it was like for you when you were a child.

Dora María Téllez: What part of the beginning?

Grabe: What are some of your earliest memories from childhood?

Téllez: First memory from school? From home?

Grabe: What kind of family were you from? Do you remember any memories with your family?

What was your family like?

Téllez: Well, look, my family was a—we lived in Matagalpa, in a city, we'll say, in the northern part of the country and my family, a middle class family. We'll say a relatively comfortable social position. It was a little family, a small family, just my father, my mother, and my older brother and I. My mom worked sewing, for dressmakers, a seamstress I guess. My father worked in business. So, we basically grew up in better conditions than the majority of boys and girls, undoubtedly, because we had stable nourishment, education, health care. I think that my father and my mother were people who had an enormous capacity for teaching their children, forming their values. They were very committed, right, to the development of each of us. Not only development in the educational sense, but development of personality, it was comprehensive.

Then it was, I would say that it a—at least I feel that my childhood was a very peaceful childhood and with an education of two types, right? First the Christian education from my mother, and a more political education from my father. My father was a man with a more liberal way of thinking we'll say, very different from the norm in the city and he was anti-clerical, and anti-Yankee. And he also had an admiration for Sandino.² Yes, he had a little more of a political perspective in life. And both had a, I think, a strong social commitment, community commitment.

So this is what our childhood was like. We studied in private schools, maybe the best schools in the city, and it was an education of the times, they weren't mixed schools, these schools were girls' schools or boys' schools. And they were religious schools. So my brother and I completed school in these religious schools.

¹ The Sandinista Front for National Liberation. In 1979, the FSLN 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 when they lost the election against Violeta Barrios Torres de Chamorro, or Violeta Chamorro, who ran under the National Opposition Union (UNO, Unión Nacional Opositora) party, a coalition of fourteen anti-Sandinista parties.

² August César Sandino fought in Nicaragua starting in 1926 to continue the nationalist, anti-imperialist struggle after US-led peace was accepted by liberal generals. A settlement was reached in 1933, but Anastacio Somoza García betrayed the settlement. (Vanden, Harry E. & Prevost, Gary. *Politics of Latin America: The Power Game*. Oxford University Press. New York. 2006, 2nd edition. p. 68.)

Grabe: Looking back, are there any events that stood out to you that led you to become politically active?

Téllez: Events, no, I don't think specific events, like that, no. I think that the educational process in some way made us committed to what was happening in Nicaragua. But not a specific circumstance, well there wasn't a trigger that, well, one day you found yourself with something and you say "well, I'm going to do that." No, I don't remember. Now we did participate in the mobilizations of secondary students in the seventies. There was huge participation of secondary students in a mobilization about the issue of political prisoners, supporting teachers and healthcare workers, in demands made by going on strike. The secondary school movement was probably the strongest movement there was in Nicaragua. I was directly involved in this—in this mobilization, we'll say, compared to what had happened in other periods when the Student Movement was practically nonexistent. So that when I arrived at the university, I had already been through a certain level of political participation in secondary school.

Grabe: What did you study in university?

Téllez: I started to study medicine. I studied three years at the university in the city of León and then I went underground. I didn't go back to finish my degree in medicine. Then at the University of León there was a lot, we'll say, a lot of political movement at that time. I entered the university the year following the earthquake,³ the year immediately following the earthquake and there was a lot of vibrancy at the university, politically and socially. I joined the university student movement during my first year. Later I came into contact with people from the FSLN and I joined the FSLN. I went underground around the beginning of '76.

Politics, Activism

Grabe: Can you talk a little bit about your experience being underground?

[10:30]

Téllez: Well, there are two kinds of experiences, in the mountains it's more like a collective, it's with an armed group, it doesn't matter if it's small or big but it's a group that moves throughout the mountains. And there the principal challenge is with respect to the environment. A tough life, you must—we had to carry a lot, the backpack was heavy, it was almost fifty pounds, plus ten more pounds counting the rifle. I weighed 100 pounds, right. It's heavy, you must walk a lot. We walked eight, ten, twelve hours a day like that. We walked two, three days to go to combat and we returned another two, three days to make our central camp. And it was basically a life reduced to survival.

Grabe: Were there many other women doing what you were doing then?

Were there other women?

³ A magnitude 6.2 earthquake shook Nicaragua on December 23, 1972. Three-quarters of Managua was destroyed. The death toll is estimated between 3,000 and 7,000, and 15,000 people were injured.

Téllez: Yes, there were other women, there were like three or four more women, three more women.

Grabe: And how many were in your group total?

Téllez: In that column, those three women. What happened is that at the end, I was the only one who stayed in combat in that group because one of them got pregnant, another got sick, there was a *campesina*⁴ who was very good and she was very young and she had to go down to Honduras, so then I stayed in the group too.

Grabe: And how old were you at this time?

[12:59]

Téllez: 22, 21, 21 years old. Yes, and the mountain is a very difficult one. I mean, a hard life but there's another part to it, the fact that you're in a group, right.

Grabe: And how many men were in this group?

Téllez: At different times, right, at one time there were almost forty men, or thirty-some, at others we were twenty total, at others we were about fifteen, that's to say it changed. Often this—well the mountain was very hard, it's probably a very difficult experience. The city has fewer physical demands but the stress is much higher, right, because you have to be much more disguised. We only went out at night for part of the time, in another period we were going out during the day but it was very dangerous. You're always harassed by the enemy. Somoza's Guard had a lot of posts and at the time had a lot of control over the streets, over the highways. And the more we moved, the more possibilities that they would locate us. So then that was a time of very elevated stress. So then you had a very short life expectancy living in the city. I don't know, there were people who lasted four months, five months but nobody lasted years in the city.

Grabe: And what position did you hold at this time?

Téllez: In the city?

Grabe: Mm hmm.

Téllez: Well different ones, I was in an ideology formation commission, I was in a group to organize women's and student organizations. Later I was at the Granada Front. Later I was at the León Front. I stayed there in León for the final insurrection as political military chief of the Western Front.

Grabe: You were one of few female commanders. How did you rise to such a high post?

[15:49]

⁴ Rural, peasant, agricultural worker.

You were one of the few female commanders, how did you arrive to such a high post at such a young age?

Téllez: Well, I don't really know because I think that it had to do with me living through different circumstances, I had experience in the mountains, I had experience in the city, I had been trained several months in Cuba and this allowed me to also have a more or less good performance in the city as well as in the mountains. I had the capacity to organize, and some leadership skills, so I think that helped, right.

Grabe: You've been described elsewhere as an extraordinary female fighter, yet you weren't promoted to the National Directorate,⁵ will you permit me to ask why?

[16:59]

Téllez: Well, the National Directorate during the time of the Revolution was made up of nine people, naturally as a result of an agreement between the three factions⁶ of the FSLN. Each faction had contributed three people to the Directorate and it was a group of nine. The tendency was that this group remain the same, that it didn't get bigger with men nor with women for a long time because any enlargement changed the correlations of the initial forces within this collective.

Later, when the Directorate was open to expansion, there were various problems. One issue I think evidently had to do with machismo. And on the other side, I hadn't been an easy person. I had shown, we'll say, very defiant political behavior and I think that contributed to a group within the Directorate that kept me from entering the Directorate; and also a group outside of the Directorate. That's the reason. But, well, the FSLN was a structure that also was under an important machismo influence. I think that the revolution allowed all of the topics that had to do with women, with gender equality, to take off, but the FSLN remained a vertical organization, not a democratic organization. So this simply changed the possibilities of mobility.

Grabe: Yet you played a very important role in some very historic battles, like the fall of the National Palace. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

[20:11]

Téllez: Well, I participated in the Palace assault basically through being in charge of the political negotiations. A group—the group in command included the chief of the operation, someone in charge of the military area and I was responsible for the negotiations. I was 22 years old. An operation like this one, of the Palace, is a difficult one but I think the design

⁵ Nine leaders of the FSLN.

⁶ After a major defeat in 1967, the FSLN adopted the theory of Prolonged Popular War (Guerra Prolongada Popular, GPP) as their guiding strategy. The GPP was based on a grassroots peasant support base in the rural areas and university recruits in the urban areas. In 1975 a group began to question the viability of the GPP; led by Marxist intellectuals who saw Nicaragua as a nation of workers, this faction came to be known as the Proletarian Tendency. Another faction arose shortly after of a group trying to find a "Third Way" to win the war; led by Daniel Ortega, who sought temporary alliances with unlikely groups such as the right-wing opposition and non-communists.

had been successful. And later, the process of staying in the palace was difficult. But it was a spectacular action, done with few resources, I was the only woman in this operation, I had that peculiarity, right, of seeing to very complex situation. And this attack on the Palace allowed the struggle for Sandinismo to launch to a global level. So this was basically a successful operation as well. It placed those who led the take-over of the Palace in a very highly-publicized position. But, well, this kind of difficult operation gives you the feeling that you can be successful or you can die, there isn't a middle option. So this was the principal difficulty of it. There isn't—there isn't a third outcome. That's to say, you come out of it well or you simply don't come out of it. This isn't an easy experience either. But well, like I told you, I had a certain training, the majority of the command were very young men who also had much less training. And basically what was required was a lot of will.

[23:20]

Personal Narrative

Grabe: And after such an intense and difficult period, what was your transition like to civil society after the war?

Téllez: Look, it has two sides, right. There is a part that makes me happy because you can return to your family, right, you can have—go back to life in some ways. But then you realize that there are also other things. Normal life has changed—normal, we'll say "daily life," has changed. The years that have passed have created distance between you and your friends. In many cases, there were people that I didn't even know where they ended up, where they were. I hadn't followed-up on them.

And on the other side, there is a part that is difficult, right, because in the end, you're a survivor. Every survivor carries the weight of the dead, carries the weight of their own memories, of their own life, of their own survival. And it's a very difficult aspect that is studied more now. Now it even has a name, right, it would be post-traumatic stress disorder. But at that time, it didn't have a name so then you got depressed, you dream, you have nightmares and you miss your comrades who died. You believe you don't deserve life. Or you believe that you don't deserve to be alive and many people do—aren't able to come out of that. Many people become alcoholics, many people enter into a process of self-destruction. It's a very difficult time.

Grabe: And for you? What was it like for you?

[26:04]

Téllez: Very difficult, it was a very, very difficult process. Yes, very difficult. We'll say, I had to confront this, those topics, and manage to overcome it little by little. I never was able to get over it completely but you learn to get by, right. The complexity of the life that you have, that you have had. So then this allowed me to get ahead without a self-destructive process, right. But it isn't easy, it isn't easy.

And on the hand, there is the happy part, right. That's to say, to be able to get things back. For example, I got the ocean back. I had forgotten that I liked to go to the ocean, or certain

foods or certain habits. But there are things that I think stay kind of lost, right. And there is the emotional part that hasn't matured because there is like a valley separating where other people matured in their emotional relationships and you didn't mature because you were seeing to other things.

Work, Education

Grabe: And what were you doing for work after the war?

[27:51]

Téllez: Well, I stayed in the army. I stayed as the chief of the Chinandega and León military region. This wasn't hard for me because it had to do with the previous part but later I was transferred to Managua to the organization of political and social work. So, that was something not so new but of a different magnitude. But it was a period that I really enjoyed because I was in the factories, I had lunch with the workers, I talked a lot with the people. It had to do with community organizing, social organizing. It's a very nice period, yes, very nice. At least for me it was a very nice period. Later, this will also give you, will continue planting other challenges, right, I had to organize unions, organize community committees, manage women, guilds, a very broad assignment but a very nice assignment.

And later they appointed me to the Ministry of Health. So then there I had another kind of challenge because, well this is something else. It's a little more intricate. The Ministry of Health is a difficult, it's a complex job, you must manage a lot of resources, work a lot with people, and part of the time—better say the whole time that I was with the Ministry of Health, there was a war situation that was worse and worse in Nicaragua so this made it really difficult to—but it was also a period that I really enjoyed. I was still very young, right, I was—I don't know—thirty years old. I was extremely young. But at least I didn't make a ton of mistakes, I'd say, I think.

Grabe: And how did you decide to leave that post at the Ministry of Health?

[30:47]

Téllez: Well, I left when we lost the elections in '90.⁷ And I went to the National Assembly, right, as a deputy between '90 and '96.

Grabe: What issues did you work on when you were part of the Assembly?

And when you were part of the Assembly, what kind of work did you do?

Téllez: Well, different things. For a time I was the second leader of our party⁸ and later I was the leader of the party. I had to direct our Parliamentary group. And later, for me in particular, I really liked the work of reforming the Constitution.⁹

⁷ 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.

⁸ *Segunda Jefe de Bancada*: Jefe de Bancada would most closely be translated to party whip, the *Jefe de Bancada* is the leader of the representatives of a political party. The *Segunda Jefe de Bancada* would be the second leader.

Grabe: And is that an elected position?

Téllez: Yes, it's an elected position. It's Parliament, right.

Grabe: And how long did you stay in that position?

Téllez: Six years, seven years. Seven years.

Grabe: And then your term ended?

Téllez: The term ended in '96. Yes, the term ended in '96.

Grabe: And then what did you do after that?

Téllez: Well, after I started, I began to study history. I completed a history degree. And I began to work as a consultant, also in history, right, like giving classes, historical research, basically that's what I have done in that period. It's a very nice job because I have worked a lot as a public policy consultant in civil society, not in the government. So then it's a different experience but it's a very nice experience too.

Grabe: At this time, did you return to get another degree from the university?

Téllez: Well, I finished history, a Master's in History. Yeah, I never finished medicine.

[33:28]

Politics, Activism

Grabe: Were you also working on social issues at the time?

Téllez: Yes, more accurately political, right. Political in the Sandinista Renovation Movement¹⁰ that was something that was—we founded in '95.

Grabe: What was your role in that?

Téllez: Well my first role was cofounder of the party, vice president of the party and later president of the party for ten years. And I stopped being president of the party in 2007.

Grabe: What was the focus of the Sandinista Renovation Movement? Why was that movement necessary?

What was the focus of this movement?

Téllez: The focus of the SRM was basically a democratic Sandinista party with a democratic commitment born out of a division within the Sandinista Front because the FSLN was, we'll say, one could already see the axis and the strict rule of Daniel Ortega coming. We'll say

⁹ Téllez refers to the Constitutional reform of 1995, where some aspects of the Sandinista constitution of 1987 were changed, especially in areas related to the checks and balances of Nicaragua's government. The reform also strengthened individual rights, one of the main demands of groups that opposed the Sandinista revolution.

¹⁰ Nicaraguan political party founded in 1995 following a rupture in the FLSN.

that there were three big problems in the FSLN at that time. First, a definition of the platforms for the time that we were living, that we began to live in the nineties, right. Second, the democratization of the party. And third, the fighting strategies. And there was a big debate for all three of those topics. A group of us had an idea about each one of the three aspects and another sector, led by Daniel Ortega, had another different idea. And a time came when the differences became irreconcilable so then we left the FSLN and founded the SRM. This was the point and we have continued, we'll say, developing the party all of these sixteen years, right.

Grabe: And in 2005 when you left your official position there, did you stay politically active?

[36:46]

Téllez: Yes, yes.

Grabe: And what kind of issues were you addressing?

Téllez: Well, I am still a member of the directorate and of the party's executive board. So then I am politically active even though I don't have space, I don't have a seat in parliament but I am politically active in the party, right.

Grabe: After the electoral defeat, a lot of people switched their focus from what were traditionally Sandinista missions and stopped being politically active but you didn't. Why do you think you stayed involved?

Téllez: I don't know. I don't know why not. Maybe I should have but I don't know. [Laughter]. I don't know. Well in the first place, I think that because I felt like we had to be able to organize a Sandinismo, a Sandinista party that had a clear democratic platform of social justice. That's to say that we had to present another Sandinista option to the country. And well this—it was essential for Sandinismo and for Nicaragua. I think that this kept me engaged this whole time. But well now the party has a relief system, it has new leaders, it has young people, we'll say some very good young leaders, women and men, right. And it has a much broader base, an important base and I think an important role in the country. So I think that this whole time that I stayed in politics for this, the party's politics. I don't think I'll stop being political because I think that we have to form opinions, what I'm not sure of is if I'll continue in partisan politics or if I'll do it through another medium—this is the uncertainty, more accurately, right?

Grabe: You are known for being very well spoken and passionate about the issues that interest you and I wonder if you can recall in recent years some of the direct actions you've taken that others might consider more radical.

Many people know you as a person who is very passionate about the things that interest you. She wants to know if you can comment about some of the actions that you have taken that some people might call radical.

You're known for being very outspoken about issues that you're passionate about but I wonder if you can also recall some of the actions you've taken in recent years that others might consider more radical.

That you have been a person who is like very vocal about certain topics but you also have done things that other people would call radical.

For example, some people have been outspoken against Ortega.

Some people have been very vocal about their thoughts about Ortega.

But you've taken some example that have gone a bit further, maybe more creative.

But you have taken a few examples that go farther.

Téllez: For example?

Grabe: I've read that in 2008 you went on a hunger strike.

Téllez: Yes.

Grabe: Can you tell me a little bit about why you decided to do that?

Téllez: Well because we didn't have another way to protest. They were taking the legal personality away from the party, and we didn't have another way besides this to protest. So then that was how I decided on the hunger strike. A way to call attention, well, about what was happening in the country, about what was starting to seriously happen, in the country. But well, it's true that I can be radical, that's good. More accurately, sometimes I worry about not being radical enough.

Well, I believe the following, I mean, in my way of being, one has to call things like they are. It doesn't matter how harsh it is. Now obviously in a society like that of Nicaragua, speaking against the government has a price. It has a price. A journalist, his opposition to the government in the current situation pays a price or the newspaper or media outlet or any person that has a dangerous role against the government pays a price. And I pay this price, right.

Grabe: What are some of the consequences you've experienced for being outspoken?

Téllez: It's difficult to—for example, I haven't been able to get some consulting work because people don't always take such risk. And the non-governmental organizations do take it but other kinds of places don't, so then sources of work are evidently reduced. I can't work on anything that has to do with the government, right, I can't even go to give a lecture at the University in León because they ordered me stoned¹¹ and closed the university. I mean there are a lot of things, right.

Grabe: What about universities in the United States?

¹¹ On June 2008 Dora Maria Téllez was attacked with stones, and dirty water by a group of Sandinista students at the Autonomous National University in León. "Agreden a Dora Maria". *La Prensa*, June 6, 2008.

Téllez: Well, until recently I didn't have a visa to enter the United States.

Grabe: Why?

Téllez: Because the Bush administration classified me as a terrorist, they took away my visa and I just received another visa just a month ago; because I had been conceptualized as a terrorist according to the PATRIOT Act,¹² article 212, subsection AB, etcetera. So then well I haven't been to the United States in a long time. I had been offered, they had granted me a teaching position, the Robert Kennedy position at Harvard¹³ and I couldn't go because of this.

Grabe: Can you tell me a little bit about the issues you're working on now? What are you most passionate about now?

Téllez: Well, now, for me one of the most important topics is that there be transparent elections in Nicaragua this year. There is a high risk for electoral fraud, if there is electoral fraud the political situation in the country is going to deteriorate a lot more. And I think that this government has restricted political rights and that it also hasn't taken the country in a direction to substantially reduce poverty. But I'm in a stage of transition in which I have to decide how I want to do what I always want to do, right. I always want to do politics but now it's how I want to do politics, let's say, in my transition, also how I want to use my time.

Work & Research

Grabe: I know that your current position right now is as a professor here at the university, do you see a link between scholarship and activism?

I know that your role or your job that you have now is in this university, I want to know if you see a connection between academia and activism?

Téllez: But in reality I don't teach at the university, I don't work as a professor, right, but I work on a project between the Institute of History and FLACSO, the Latin American School of Social Sciences. It works with two web sites, one is called the Central American Academic Network. And the other is called Central American Memory.¹⁴ Both—that's to say, the Network has to do with creating a space for the development of social sciences in Central America. And Central American Memory has to do with creating an internet space that

¹² A law passed on October 26, 2001 immediately following the terrorist attacks of September 11 of the same year. The Patriot Act, Section 411, excludes foreigners "who endorse or espouse acts of terror". The enforcement of this act is often criticized for limiting freedoms of many Americans and criminalizing innocent people. In 2005 Dora Téllez declined a visiting professorship at Harvard School of Divinity after having been denied a visa earlier that year to study English at the University of San Diego.

¹³ The Robert F. Kennedy Visiting Professorship in Latin American Studies was created at Harvard University in 1986 through a generous gift from Edmond Safra and the Republic of New York Corporation. The endowment enables Harvard to regularly invite eminent Latin Americans from any field, a composer one year, an historian the next, an architect, physiologist, legal scholar, banker, novelist, poet, economist, sociologist, anthropologist, to teach at the University for one semester.

¹⁴ Memoria Centroamericana.

allows people to access digitalized Central American cultural and historical heritage. It's a very nice job. I really like it.

Grabe: You teach about these issues too?

[48:48]

Téllez: Every once in a long while, let's see, not so once in a while—I teach specific classes and the majority of them are to young leaders, leaders of political parties, leaders of social or religious organizations. This week, I have one Friday, Friday and Saturday I have a group. Yes, it's a very good experience.

Grabe: Mm hmm, do you have academic freedom? Can you speak freely when you're working with the students?

Téllez: Yes, yes, I mean those that don't want to hear me speak don't contract me.

Grabe: Well outside of the work here, do you see an overlap or a role for scholarship in activist work?

Téllez: Here it's difficult to say. It would have to be research, well, in any case and yes, at times I have done research but it has to do with the political area, but it's not as easy because like I told you, political activism in Nicaragua has a price. The country is a very politically polarized country so a lot of the work, the activities, it's very tough. A very good place to work is an institute, a history institute, history in itself is, explains a political position, a general position for life, for society. I mean, this is a good space but there aren't many outlets, right.

Grabe: Do you have relationships with other activists in your country that you work with?

Téllez: In what sense?

Grabe: That you support or maybe they support you?

Téllez: Yes, yes, yes, yes but there is—we'll say the first group is undoubtedly a collective of the party, let's say, and then there is the group of social leaders that works more or less on similar topics, right, democracy, public policy, transparency, fighting against corruption within the media or outside of it, in social organizations.

Grabe: Well, what about activists from other countries? Do you experience any solidarity?

Téllez: We have contact with outside groups, some Nicaraguan and other foreign groups, basically around certain topics and on occasion around issues of the party, right, those are the party's own international relations. But well there is a very strong link with the women's movement in Nicaragua, with women's movements in other places and political sectors and social movements in Europe that have a relationship with us and not necessarily with the FSLN, and in Latin America too.

Grabe: Speaking about international issues, I'm interested in your opinion about neoliberal policies in this context of globalization and if you think it has a unique impact on issues in Nicaragua?

Téllez: What part?

Grabe: I wonder if you have an opinion about the way economic policies that would fit under neoliberalism are affecting any social issues here.

Téllez: Yes, from 1990 to now, economic policy has been within the realm of the International Monetary Fund¹⁵ and the World Bank's¹⁶ policy, right. There was a wave of privatizations and economic policies that privilege economic stability and monetary stability. And obviously the whole social part was affected, right. In terms of social policy, there was a lot of outside cooperation for many years, and this cooperation made it so that the shock wasn't as strong for social policy. This government has the same economic policy and in place of social policy what it has is a clientele policy. A certain social populism, we'll say it that way. The big problem with populism is that it doesn't get to the root of the problem, right, but it groups and limits the distribution of things. The distribution of metal sheets¹⁷ or the distribution of hens, or the distribution of chickens.

Evidently, the whole period from the nineties to now, the biggest impact has been the dismantling of social policy in the country. Nicaragua continues to have the same education rate from ten, fifteen years ago, right. I mean, there isn't a consistent improvement in this—in this situation. Yes, and education continues to have serious weaknesses in the country, a country needs to count on education and right now education is weak. It hasn't changed much in the last twenty-some years, right.

Feminism

Grabe: I'd like to switch gears a bit and ask you to reflect a bit about feminism and to ask a few questions if it's had any relevance to your work if at all. But first I'd like to ask how you understand or define feminism.

[58:09]

Téllez: Look, I think feminism is a way to confront life, that tries to privilege approaches that contribute to achieving gender equality. This is my perception of feminism. Now, there are platforms and platforms of feminist demand and there are even guidelines for different behaviors. So then I feel like a feminist, I haven't been active in the feminist movement because I have more accurately been political, it's something I've done formally, but I think that, well, it's the least that women can do, right.

¹⁵ A group of 187 countries that provides loans and financial assistance to countries throughout the world.

¹⁶ An international organization that makes loans to developing countries as a way to encourage economic growth. These loans often come with strings attached, requiring governments to implement certain policies, such as privatization of industry or other often neoliberal policies.

¹⁷ Refers to corrugated sheet metal used for roofs.

Grabe: What has your experience been like as a woman involved in politics? Have you ever been treated differently?

Téllez: Yes.

Grabe: Have you experienced discrimination?

Téllez: Very subtly, in my case it's very subtle but well let's say there is always a certain model of underestimating, we'll say, a certain attitude of discrimination in general for the participation of women in political life. It may have less now, but obviously if you review the National Assembly, you'll realize that only 12% are women, right, and that the percentage of women in Parliament was proportionally higher in '80 than what it is now, but you can also notice that it has improved much more in Latin America than it has in Nicaragua. That's to say that the path of political life for women isn't easy in party politics in general in Nicaragua. In the SRM¹⁸ there are a lot of women, I think, participating in politics. Now there are a lot of young women participating in politics but it's not as common in many of the departmental offices. I feel that there is a generation of very strong young leaders but that the space is opening up. In fact, within the SRM there is now a network of women in the party to promote female candidates but even the network recognizes that they must make a special effort, but in the reality of Nicaragua, political participation for women continues being difficult.

Grabe: You've had a very steady, undying commitment to social justice over the years, what are you most proud of?

Téllez: Like what?

Like, you've had like a fight, you've always fought for social justice, but of your whole life, what are you most proud of?

Téllez: In life? [pause] I don't know. Maybe...I really don't know. [pause] Let's see...I'm going to say what brings me...peace of mind, I'll say it that way, okay. [pause] Eh, not censoring myself. I try to say what I think about what I think happens in the country even though I pay for it. That's to say, I can pay for this. So then this—sometimes if one spoke less one would have fewer problems, but I really appreciate my freedom to say what I believe. I fight for this space.

But I don't know what to be proud of. Well, I feel proud of my parents, for example, I think that he was an extraordinary – both of them, extraordinary people, sensible people, hard workers, intelligent, we'll say good parents. This, I really feel very proud of. And I think my brother and I had great luck. Other people don't have such luck. But I wouldn't know what else to feel proud of. It really has never occurred to me to think about this.

Grabe: It's really my honor to talk to you and I know I could ask you questions for hours but I want to be respectful of your time.

Téllez: Thank you very much.

¹⁸ Sandinista Renovation Movement.

Grabe: Are there any other topics you'd like to talk about before we complete?

Téllez: I don't know, I can't think of anything.

Grabe: Well, I want to thank you very much for your time today and for participating in this project.

Téllez: No, thank you both.

Grabe: Thanks a lot.

Téllez: Thanks to you both, I hope this interview has helped you.

Grabe: Yes. You're an extraordinary woman and I only hope I can be as extraordinary as you.

Téllez: Well, every person is extraordinary at what they do.

Grabe: Well, you are also very humble.

[End.]