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I. Introduction

The fall of Anastasio Somoza in July 1979 could not have been achieved without the mass urban insurrections which brought the capital, Managua, and other key cities under the increasing control of the revolutionary forces. This was the culmination of a process of growing popular opposition which was characterised by the incorporation of new sectors of the population into political activity. One important component of these new sectors was women.

Along with youth and the unwaged poor, large numbers of women from all social classes entered the realm of politics in the 1970s, many for the first time. Women's participation in the Nicaraguan revolution was probably greater than in any other recent revolution with the exception of Vietnam to which it is frequently likened. They made up some 30% of the FSLN's combat forces, and at its peak in 1979, the women's organisation of the FSLN (AMPRONAC) had over 8000 members. Many more women who were not involved in organised politics provided vital logistical and back-up support to the revolutionary forces, while still others gave their support silently by refusing to denounce their revolutionary neighbours, or hiding a fleeing combatant.

The extent of women's participation in the struggle against Somoza has been regarded as an obvious enough response to the widespread repression and brutality of the regime on the one hand, and the appeal of the FSLN's vision and strategy on the other. In this conception women's participation is assumed to be no different than that of other groups and classes which were similarly mobilised in the revolutionary upheaval. Indeed the universalising character of the opposition to Somoza is frequently seen as the key to its success, and Coraggio has suggested elsewhere in this

volume that political subjects lost their own specificity in the generalised struggle against the regime.

This important observation should not, however, obscure the fact that the universalisation of the goals of revolutionary subjects does not necessarily entail a loss of specific identities, and it is certainly doubtful whether this can be said to have happened in the case of women. For as far as women were concerned no loss of their gender identities occurred, except perhaps where they entered the front line of the *guerrilla* forces. Rather, representations of women acquired new connotations, ones which politicised the social roles which women were conventionally associated with, but which did not dissolve them.

The participation of women in political activity was certainly part of the wider process of popular mobilisation, but it was entered into from a distinctive social position to men, one crucially shaped by the sexual division of labour. Moreover, for different classes and groups of women, the meaning of political participation also differed, whether in the case of students, young middle class women, or women in the *barrios*. For many poor women, entry into political life began with the earthquake of 1972, when in the aftermath, the neighbourhood committees were organised to care for the victims, feed the dispossessed and tend the wounded. The anger which followed Somoza's misappropriation of the relief funds intensified with the escalation of opposition and of the brutal methods used to contain it. Many of these women experienced their transition from relief workers to participants in the struggle as a natural extension, albeit in combative form, of their protective role in the family as providers and as mothers. This transition to 'combative motherhood' was assisted by the propaganda efforts of the Sandinistas and by AMPRONAC which linked these more traditional identities to more general strategic objectives, and celebrated the role of women in the creation of a more just and humanitarian social order. The revolutionary appropriation of the symbol of motherhood has been institutionalised in the FSLN's canonisation of the 'Mothers of Martyrs', who remain an active part of the Sandinista political base.

However, if the revolution did not demand the dissolution of women's identities, it did require the subordination of their specific interests to the broader goals of overthrowing Somoza and establishing a new social order. This is the crux of the matter and it lies at the heart of the debate about the relationship between socialist revolution and women's participation. For if women surrender their specific interests in the universal struggle for a different society, then at what points are these interests re-habilitated, legitimised and responded to by the revolutionary forces or the new state? Some feminists argue that they are never adequately re-established and that ² socialism has failed to fulfil its promise to emancipate women. Such critics point out that not only does gender inequality still persist in these states but that in some ways women could be considered to be worse off than they were before, under capitalism. Far from having been 'emancipated' as the rhetoric sometimes claims, women's workload has been increased and there has been no substantial re-definition of the relations between the sexes. To the traditional roles of housewife and mother, have been added those of full time wage worker and political activist, while the provision of child care agencies remains inadequate.³

The negative image of socialist states in this regard is reinforced by their failure to establish anything near sexual parity in the organs of political power and by the absence of real popular democracy. The conventional explanations of these shortcomings, at least in the poorer states, in terms of resource scarcity, international pressure, underdevelopment, or the 'weight of tradition' are greeted with increasing scepticism; a feminist writer recently expressed the current consensus when she wrote '... if a country can eliminate the tsetse fly, it can get an equal number of men and women on its politburo'.⁴

This view of the record of socialist states had generated what might be called a feminist version of the 'revolution betrayed' thesis. It argues that the 'revolutionary equality' experienced by men and women freedom fighters is replaced in the post-revolutionary period by the status quo ante with men in the positions

of power. As the all-male leadership grows increasingly unconcerned about advancing women's interests, it appears that women's sacrifices in the struggle for a better society have been unrewarded by those whom they helped to bring to power. Women, like the working class, have been 'sold out', only in this case, not by a 'new bureaucratic bourgeoisie', but by a more pervasive and at the same time analytically elusive entity, 'the patriarchy'.

This paper examines the proposition that women's interests are not served by socialist revolutions. It does so by examining how women are affected by government policies in the aftermath of a successful revolutionary seizure of power in which they participated on a mass scale. It considers a situation in which, in an extreme version of the argument, it could be said that women's interests are ignored or are even 'betrayed' by a socialist government - in this case that of the FSLN in Nicaragua.

The first part of the paper considers some of the theoretical questions which are raised by this debate; in the second, the policies which the Sandinista state has adopted in relation to women are described and interpreted in order to see whether it is the case that women's interests are not represented within the Sandinista state.

Women in Nicaragua have certainly not achieved full equality let alone emancipation. But the argument set forth here takes issue with the view that women's interests have simply been sold out or that they are denied in the interests of 'patriarchy'.⁵ Male power, whether institutionalised or inter-personal, and the essentialist or naturalist argument which legitimise it, do play a part in the explanation of women's continuing subordination after revolutionary upheavals; but the importance of these factors should not be exaggerated. Nor should the achievements of these revolutions be underestimated, or the real material constraints that they have faced be left out of account. To recognise the importance of such influences is not to provide an apologia for their failings but to establish more realistic parameters for comprehending the underlying and persistent causes of gender inequality.

The central concern of this discussion, which much of this debate ultimately depends upon, is that of 'women's interests'. Most feminist critiques of socialist regimes rest on an implicit or explicit assumption that there is a given entity, 'women's interests' which can be betrayed. However, this assumption must be problematised rather than simply taken for granted, for the question of these interests is far more complex than is frequently assumed. The problems of deploying any theory of interest in post-revolutionary situations are well known, so the following discussion must be considered as exploratory rather than conclusive, as opening up debate rather than attempting closure. This is all the more so since the Nicaraguan case affords no simple conclusions both because of the severe pressure it is under and because of the resulting unevenness of its record, especially in relation to women.

Most women have benefitted in some way from the substantial advances made by the Sandinistas in the area of social policy and welfare. All women have seen some improvement in their legal rights through the enforcement of the equal pay and labour laws and through reforms designed to tackle discrimination in the family.⁶ Nonetheless despite these undeniable advances, it remains true that relatively little has been done to dismantle other mechanisms through which women's subordination per se is reproduced in the economy and in society in general, and men's privileges over women remain virtually unchallenged. Does this mean then, that women's interests have not, after all, been adequately represented within the Sandinista state ?

II. 'Women's Interests'

The political pertinence of the issue of whether states, revolutionary or otherwise, are successful in securing the interests of social groups and classes is generally considered to be twofold. First, it is supposed to enable prediction or at least political calculation about a given government's capacity to maintain the support of the groups it claims to represent. Second, it is assumed that the nature of the state can be deduced from

the interests it is seen to be advancing.⁷ Thus the proposition that a state is a 'worker's state', a capitalist state, or even a 'patriarchal state' is commonly tested by investigating how a particular class or group has fared under the government in question.

However, when we try to deploy similar criteria in the case of women a number of problems arise. If, for example, we conclude that because the Sandinistas seem to have done relatively little to remove the means by which gender subordination is reproduced, that women's interests have not been represented in the state and hence women will eventually turn against it, we are making a number of assumptions; that gender interests are the equivalent of women's interests', that gender should be privileged as the principal determinant of women's interests, and that women's subjectivity, real or potential, is also structured uniquely through gender effects. It is, by extension also supposed that women have certain common interests by virtue of their gender, and that these interests are primary for women. It follows then that trans-class unity among women is to some degree given by this communality of interests.⁸

Yet while it is true that at a certain level of abstraction women can be said to have some interests in common, there is no consensus over what these are or how they are to be formulated. This is in part because there is no theoretically adequate and universally applicable causal explanation of women's subordination from which a general account of women's interests can be derived. Women's oppression is recognised as being multi-causal in origin and mediated through a variety of different structures, mechanisms and levels, which may vary considerably across space and time. There is therefore considerable debate over the appropriate site of feminist struggle and over whether it is more important to focus attempts at change on objective or subjective elements, 'men' or 'structures', laws, institutions or inter-personal power relations - or all of them simultaneously. Since a general conception of interests (one which has political validity) must be derived from a theory of how the subordination

of a determinate social category is secured, and supposes some notion of structural determinacy, it is difficult to see how it would overcome the two most salient and intractable features of women's oppression - its multi-causal nature, and the extreme variability of its forms of existence across class and nation. These factors vitiate attempts to speak without qualification of a unitary category 'women' with a set of already constituted interests which are common to it. A theory of interests which has an application to the debate about women's capacity to struggle for, and benefit from, social change, must begin by recognising differences rather than assuming homogeneity.

It is clear from the extensive feminist literature on women's oppression that a number of different conceptions prevail of what women's interests are, and that these in turn rest upon different theories of the causes of gender inequality. For the purpose of clarifying the issues discussed here, we propose to separate out three conceptions of women's interests which are frequently conflated. These are 'women's interests', strategic gender interests and practical gender interests.

1. Women's interests. Although present in much political and theoretical discourse, the concept of 'women's interests' is, for the reasons given above, a highly contentious one. Since women are positioned within their societies through a variety of different means - among them class, ethnicity and gender - the interests which they have as a group are similarly shaped in complex and sometimes conflicting ways. It is therefore difficult, if not impossible to generalise about the interests of women. Instead we need to specify how the various categories of women might be affected differently, and act differently on account of the particularities of their social positioning and their chosen identities. However this is not to deny that women generally have certain interests in common. These can be called gender interests to differentiate them from the false homogeneity imposed by the notion of 'women's interests'.

2. Gender interests are those that women (or men for that matter) may develop by virtue of their social positioning through gender attributes. Gender interests can be either strategic or practical, each being derived in a different way and each involving differing implications for women's subjectivity. Strategic interests are derived from the analysis of women's subordination and from the formulation of an alternative, more satisfactory set of arrangements to those which exist. These ethical and theoretical criteria provided the basis for the formulation of strategic objectives to overcome women's subordination, such as the abolition of the sexual division of labour, the alleviation of the burden of domestic labour and childcare, the removal of institutionalised forms of discrimination, the establishment of political equality, freedom of choice over childbearing, and the adoption of adequate measures against male violence and control over women. These constitute what might be called strategic gender interests, and are the ones most frequently considered by feminists as women's 'real interests'. The demands which are formulated on this basis are usually termed 'feminist' as is the level of consciousness required to struggle effectively for them.⁹

3. Practical gender interests arise from the concrete conditions of women's positioning by virtue of their gender within the division of labour. In contrast to strategic gender interests these are formulated by the women themselves who are within these positions rather than through external interventions. Practical interests are usually a response to an immediate perceived need and they do not generally entail a strategic goal such as women's emancipation or gender equality. Analyses of female collective action frequently deploy this conception of interests to explain the dynamic and goals of women's participation in social action.

For example it has been argued that by virtue of their place within the sexual division of labour as those primarily responsible for their household's daily welfare, women have a special interest in domestic provision and public welfare.¹⁰ When governments fail to provide these basic needs women withdraw their support; when the livelihood of their families is threatened (especially

that to their children) it is women who form the phalanxes of bread rioters, demonstrators and petitioners. It is clear, however, from this example that gender and class are here closely intertwined; it is, for obvious reasons, usually poor women who are so readily mobilised by economic necessity. Practical interests, therefore, cannot be assumed to be innocent of class effects. These practical interests do not in themselves challenge the prevailing forms of gender subordination, but they arise directly out of them. They are vital in understanding the capacity or failure of states or organisations to win the loyalty and support of women.

This raises the question of the pertinence of these three forms of interest for an understanding of women's consciousness. This is a complex matter which cannot be entered into in detail here, but three initial points can be made. First, the relationship between strategic gender interests and women's recognition of them and desire to realise them, cannot be assumed. Even the 'lowest common denominator' of interests which might seem uncontentious and of universal applicability (eg. complete equality with men, control over reproduction and greater personal autonomy and independence from men) - are not readily accepted by all women. This is not just because of 'false consciousness' as is frequently supposed, although this can be a factor, but because such changes realised in a piecemeal fashion could threaten the short term practical interests of some women, or entail a cost in the form of a loss of means of protection which is not then compensated for. Thus the formulation of strategic interests can only be effective as a form of intervention when full account is taken of these practical interests. Indeed it is the politicisation of these practical interests and their transformation into strategic interests which contributes a central aspect of feminist political practice.

Secondly, and following on from this, the way in which interests are formulated will vary considerably across space and time and may be shaped in different ways by prevailing political and discursive influences. This is important to bear in mind when con-

sidering the problem of internationalism and cross cultural solidarity. And finally, since 'women's interests' are significantly broader than gender interests, and are shaped to a considerable degree by class factors, women's unity and cohesion on gender issues cannot be assumed. While they can form the basis of unity around a common programme, such unity has to be constructed - it is never given. Moreover, it is always conditional, and will almost invariably collapse under the pressure of acute class conflict. It is also threatened by differences of race, ethnicity and nationality. It is therefore difficult to argue, as some feminists have done, that gender issues are primary for women, at all times.

This general problem of the conditionality of women's unity and the fact that gender issues are not necessarily primary is nowhere more clearly illustrated than by the example of revolutionary upheaval. In such situations, gender issues are frequently displaced by class conflict, and this is principally because although women may suffer discrimination on the basis of gender and may be aware that they do, they nonetheless suffer differentially according to their social class. These differences crucially affect attitudes towards revolutionary change, especially if this is in the direction of socialism.

This does not mean that because gender interests are an insufficient basis for unity among women in the context of class polarisation, that they disappear. Rather, they become more specifically attached to, and defined by, social class.

These, then, are the different ways in which the question of 'women's interests' can be addressed. An awareness of the different issues involved serves to guard against any simple treatment of the question of whether a state is, or is not, acting in the interests of women, ie. whether all or any of these interests are represented within the state. Before any conclusions can be drawn it is first necessary to specify in what sense the term interest is being deployed. As suggested earlier, a state may gain the support of women by satisfying either their immediate practical demands or certain class interests - or both. It may do this

without advancing their strategic objective interests at all. However, the claims of such a state to be supporting women's emancipation could not be substantiated merely on the evidence that it maintained women's support on the basis of representing some of their more practical or class interests. With these distinctions in mind, we will turn now to the Nicaraguan revolution, and consider how the Sandinistas have formulated women's interests, and how women have fared under their rule.

III. The Nicaraguan Revolution

The Nicaraguan revolution represents an extreme case of the problems of constructing a socialist society in the face of poverty and underdevelopment, counter-revolution and external intervention. It could therefore be seen as an exceptional case, and its usefulness as an example consequently limited. Yet while the Sandinistas face a particularly severe constellation of negative circumstances, most socialist revolutions have encountered difficulties of a similar kind and even of degree. One has only to think of encirclement and internal disruption by enemy forces which the Bolsheviks faced after 1917, or the conditions of dire scarcity prevailing in post revolutionary Mozambique, China or South Yemen; or the blockade of poor nations such as Cuba, or the devastation through war wreaked on Vietnam, to realise that such conditions are more common than not in the attempts to build socialist societies.

Yet the problems which Nicaragua shares with the states referred to above, in matters of circumstance, does not imply that it belongs to the category of revolutions that these countries represent. They were, or became, for the most part avowedly communist in their political ideology, and anti-capitalist in their economic practice, moving rapidly to place their main resources under state control. Most too aligned themselves directly with the Soviet Union or at least maintained a distance from the NATO block of countries in their foreign affairs. All of them are one-party states in which dissent is allowed little, if any, free expression.

By contrast, the forces which overthrew Anastasio Somoza in July of 1979 distinguished themselves by their commitment to a socialism based on the principles of mixed economy, non-alignment and political pluralism. An opposition was allowed to operate within certain clearly defined limits, and over 60% of the economy remained in private hands, despite the nationalisation of Somocista assets. 'Sandinismo' promised to produce a different kind of socialism, one that consolidated the revolutionary overthrow of the old regime but was more democratic, independent, and 'moderate' than many other third world socialisms had been. Through its triumph and its commitment to socialist pluralism, Nicaragua became a symbol of hope to socialists, not only in Latin America, but across the world. It was this, rather than its 'communism' which accounts for the ferocity and determination of the United State's efforts to bring the process to an end.

The Nicaraguan revolution also gave hope to those who supported women's liberation, for here too the Sandinistas seemed full of promise. The revolution occurred in the period after the upsurge of the 'new feminism' of the late sixties, at a time when Latin American women were mobilising around feminist demands in countries like Mexico, Peru and Brazil. The Sandinistas' awareness of the limitations of vulgar Marxism encouraged some to believe that a space would be allowed for the development of new social movements such as feminism. Members of the leadership seemed aware of the importance of women's liberation and of the need for it in Nicaragua. Unlike many of its counterparts elsewhere, the revolutionary organisation, the FSLN did not denounce feminism as a 'counter-revolutionary diversion', and some women officials had even gone on record expressing enthusiasm for its ideals.

In practical terms too, there was promise; the FSLN had shown itself capable of mobilising many thousands of women in support of its struggle. It had done this partly through AMPRONAC, and partly through the participation of women in ranks of the combat forces, epitomised in Dora Maria Tellez' role as 'Commander Two' in the seizure of the Presidential Palace by the guerrillas in 1978.

Once they were in power, these hopes were not disappointed. Only weeks after the triumph, article 30 of decree Number 48 banned the media's exploitation of women as sex objects, and women FSLN cadres found themselves in senior positions in the newly established state as Ministers, Vice-Ministers and regional co-ordinators of the Party. The scene seemed to be set fair for an imaginative and distinctive strategy for women's emancipation in Nicaragua.

But after the first few years in power the FSLN's image had lost some of its distinctive appeal. The combined pressures of economic scarcity, counter-revolution and military threat were taking their toll on the Sandinista experiment in economic and political pluralism, placing at risk the ideals it sought to defend. In the face of mounting pressure from US-backed counter-revolutionaries in 1982 a further casualty of these difficulties appeared to be the Sandinista commitment to the emancipation of women. As the crisis deepened in the following year and the country went onto a war footing the priority had to be the revolution's survival, with all efforts directed to military defence. Under such circumstances it is hardly surprising that the efforts to promote women's emancipation seem to have been scaled down. Yet, critics point out that even before the crises deepened little enough had been achieved to tangibly improve the position of women, and FSLN cadres themselves admit that progress in this area was limited. Can we therefore conclude that the revolution that Nicaraguan women fought and died for has sold them out? And if this is so, will women now enter the ranks of the opposition and seek the overthrow of the revolutionary regime as their sisters did in Chile, in France in 1795 or in Spain towards the end of the Civil War?¹¹

IV. Sandinista Policy with Regard to Women

As a socialist organisation, the FSLN, both in and out of power has recognised women's oppression as something which must be overcome in the creation of a new society. It has given support to the principle of gender equality as part of its endorsement of the

socialist ideal of social equality for all. The 1969 programme of the Front promised that 'the Sandinista people's revolution will abolish the odious discrimination that women have been subjected to compared with men' (and) 'will establish economic, political and cultural equality between women and men'. This commitment was enshrined a decade later within the '*Estatuto Fundamental*', the embryonic Constitution which proclaimed 'the unconditional equality of all Nicaraguans without distinction of race, nationality, creed, or sex'. It went further in pledging the state to 'remove by all means available ... the obstacles to achieve it'.. thus providing the juridical context for future legislative and policy measures aimed at securing some of the conditions enabling this equality to be achieved.

Most states have enshrined within their constitutions or equivalents, some phrase which opposes discrimination on the grounds of race, sex or creed. What distinguishes socialist states such as Nicaragua is their recognition of the specificity of women's oppression and their support for measures which combine a concern to promote equality with a desire to remove some of the obstacles to achieve it. Some of the strategic interests of women are therefore recognised and, in theory, are to be advanced as part of the process of socialist transformation. In its essentials, the FSLN's theoretical and practical approach to women's emancipation bears some resemblance to that found in those state socialist countries which espouse Marxist theory.¹² According to Sandinista officials, women's emancipation can only be achieved with the creation of a new society and with the further development of the productive capacity of the economy. In the meantime, however, measures can be taken to alleviate the considerable inequalities between the sexes and begin the task of 'humanising life and improving the quality and content of human relations'.¹³

Official views and party documents appear to be in line with the principles of the classic socialist guidelines for the emancipation of women as formulated by the Bolsheviks and broadly adhered to ever since by socialist states.¹⁴ These stressed six main goals: to encourage the entry of women into wage labour, socialise

domestic labour and childcare, provide juridical equality, greater protection for mothers and the family, and the mobilisation of women into political activity and public administration. In addition, the 1969 programme of the FSLN makes special mention of eliminating prostitution and other 'social vices', helping the abandoned working mother, and protecting the illegitimate child. There is also concern to allow greater freedom of choice to women in the matter of childbearing.

Although these goals are insufficient on their own to realise the complete emancipation of women, based as they are on a somewhat narrow definition of gender interests, they do nonetheless, embody some strategic interests. However, progress in achieving them in Nicaragua has been uneven. There is official support for the implementation of the full programme, but only some of the guidelines have been translated into policy and then only with limited effect. Some advances have been registered but it remains true that the socialist programme for women's emancipation remains largely unfulfilled. Employment opportunities in the formal sector have been slightly expanded but remain restricted both in number and scope; most Nicaraguan women continue to eke out a living as petty commodity producers, small traders or house servants, remaining at the bottom of the income structure. The socialisation of childcare and domestic labour has affected only a minority of women

The embryonic Family Law, the *Ley de Alimentos* passed at the end of 1982, which aimed to establish a more democratic, egalitarian and mutually responsible family, has not been widely implemented, and public discussion of the issues it raises all but ceased in 1983. So far, the greatest benefits that women have received are from the welfare programmes, and from certain areas of legal reform. They have also felt the impact of change in the realm of political mobilisation in which they play an active part. Despite these advances it is evident that the gap between intention and realisation is considerable. The question is why ?

There are three kinds of explanation which must be given their due weight in any assessment of this record. The first concerns

the practical limitations, which have restricted the state's capacity for social transformation; the second is to do with factors of a general political kind, and the third concerns the nature of the policies themselves and the way in which the Sandinista's commitment to women's emancipation is formulated. All of these have to be taken into account when assessing the position of women in post revolutionary Nicaragua, for they help to explain why the social policy initiatives of the Sandinistas to improve the position of women have been diluted, and why the government has on occasion adopted different priorities, sometimes ones which are at variance with the goal of emancipating women.

1. The problems of material scarcity in an underdeveloped economy, or the tolls of military threat do not require extensive discussion here. Details can be found elsewhere of the parlous state of the Nicaraguan economy, the ravages of war and natural disasters, the effects of the *contras* and US pressure, and the size of the external debt.¹⁵ What is most striking in all of this was the government's success in shielding the population from the effects of these difficulties throughout 1982 and much of 1983. However, the combined effects of material scarcity and the destabilisation efforts of internal and external forces have limited the available resources which have to satisfy the military requirements of the state, as well as invest in long-term economic programmes, meet short-term consumer needs and the popular expectation to expand social services. It is not difficult to see how these factors reduce the scope of planning objectives, channelling scarce resources of both a financial and technical kind, as well as human potential, away from social programmes into national defence and economic development.

If these two factors, scarcity and threat, explain the restrictions placed on the funding available for such projects as building and staffing nurseries, and expanding female employment, they also go some way towards explaining why the emancipation of women, except within a rather narrow interpretation of the term is not considered a priority in Nicaragua today.

2. Even where the resource base exists, the government still faces problems of implementation in the form of political opposition to some of the proposed reforms. Contemporary Nicaragua is a clear illustration of the truism that the acquisition of state power does not confer on governments absolute power either in formulation or implementation of policies even when they might have widespread popular support. The overthrow of Salvador Allende in 1973 was a dramatic demonstration of the ever-present threat of counter-revolution and of the diversity of sites within the state and civil society through which it can be organised.

The Sandinistas were in a stronger position internally than the government of Popular Unity in Chile even if they faced a more determined threat from the USA and its allies in the region. They dismantled Somoza's repressive apparatus replacing it with their own military and police forces, and established control over a number of state and government institutions. In the four years since the fall of Somoza, the revolutionary government has also succeeded in consolidating its power base through the establishment of the 'mass organisations', the popular defence committees, the militia and the revolutionary party, the FSLN. Moreover, the opposition, both civilian and military has been unable to offer a credible alternative, in part because of its links to the United States and with the Somocistas.

Despite the strategic and political advantages which accrue to the Sandinistas as a result of these transformations of the state and of its institutions they have not entailed the elimination of the opposition and nor have they sought to achieve this. The Constitutional commitment to the principles of economic and political pluralism have allowed a space, albeit a restricted one, from which oppositional forces can operate.

The FSLN has attempted to maintain, as far as the situation permits, a broad multi-class base of support. It has tried to win over a sector of the capitalist class, and on the whole it has sought to maintain a conciliatory attitude towards its opponents, sometimes in the face of considerable provocation. The opposition therefore has the right to make its views heard and can organise

to protect its interests, providing these do not jeopardise the government's overall survival or place the interests of the majority at risk.

The commitment to allow dissent, and opposition parties and press, represents an important principle of socialist democracy. Too many socialist countries have interpreted socialism as merely the socialisation of the economy and have failed to implement the other side of the equation - the democratisation of political power. But in this, the Sandinistas have at least tried harder than most. However, as with most attempts at compromise, there is a price; the commitment to 'pluralism' and to maintaining the support or at least neutrality of the capitalist class has as one of its necessary effects the imposition of certain limits on the transformative capacity of the state in some areas of policy. This is especially clear with regard to the government's programme to improve the position of women.

The maintenance of a sizeable private sector (78% of industry, 60% of commerce, 76% of agriculture) and the granting of a measure of autonomy to it, allows some employers, especially in the smaller non-unionised enterprises, to evade legislation designed to protect and improve the working conditions of women, as well as to pursue discriminatory employment policies. There are many other examples of this kind. But the most powerful ideological force and that which offers the most sustained resistance to Sandinista reforms is the conservative Catholic church. Its extensive institutional presence, forms of organisation, access to the media (it has its own radio station), and base within a substantial section of the population, make it a formidable opponent. Its impact on slowing reform in the areas directly concerned with women, has already been considerable. Conservative clergy have actively opposed educational reforms, enforced bans on weekend work (which made it difficult for voluntary labour schemes to achieve much) opposed the conscription of women and are strong advocates of traditional family life and the division of labour which characterises it. The conservative church has also urged adherence to the papal encyclical which states that it is sinful

to employ 'unnatural' methods of birth control, and has opposed the legalisation of abortion, forcing thousands of women into the hands of back street practitioners.¹⁶

What is therefore a positive feature of the Sandinista revolution, its democratic commitment, does have the effect of diluting policy measures and weakening the government's capacity for implementation. It is therefore erroneous to imagine that just because the state has a coherent set of policies and a unifying ideology, that it has the capacity to be fully effective in social policy terms. It should be clear that the most obvious solution is a problematic one: the subjugation of the opposition, and the strengthening of the state.

3. This is where it becomes relevant to discuss the third factor which accounts for the limited achievements of the Sandinista record on women- that of their conception of the place of women's emancipation within the overall context of their priorities. It is clear that the FSLN have been able to implement only those parts of the programme for women's emancipation that coincide with their general goals, enjoy popular support, and are realisable without arousing strong opposition. The policies from which women have derived some benefit have been pursued principally because they have fulfilled some wider goal or goals, whether these are social welfare, development, social equality, or political mobilisation in defence of the revolution. This is, in effect, what the Sandinistas mean by the need to locate women's emancipation within the overall struggle for social reform, and latterly of survival against intensifying external pressure.

This kind of qualified support for women's emancipation is found in most of the states which pursue socialist development policies. Indeed the guidelines which form the basis of their programme for women's emancipation (discussed earlier) all have universalistic as well as particularistic goals, in which the former is the justification for the latter. Thus, women's emancipation is not just dependent on the realisation of the wider goals but is pursued insofar as it contributes to the realisation of those goals. There is therefore a unity of purpose between the goals of women's eman-

icipation and the developmental and social goals of revolutionary states.

Revolutionary governments tend to see the importance of reforming the position of women in the first period of social and economic transformation in terms of helping to accomplish at least three goals: to extend the base of the government's political support; to increase the size or quality of the active labour force; and to help harness the family more securely to the process of social reproduction. The first aim, to expand or maintain the power base of the state is pursued by attempting to draw women into the new political organisations such as the women's youth and labour unions, the party, and neighbourhood associations. There is a frequently expressed fear that unless women are politicised they may not co-operate with the process of social transformation. Women are seen as potentially and actually more conservative than men by virtue of their place within the social division of labour. More positively they are also regarded as crucial agents of revolutionary change whose radicalisation challenges ancient customs and privileges within the family, and has important effects on the next generation, through the impact on their children. The political mobilisation of women supposes some attempt to persuade them that their interests as well as more universal concerns (national, humanitarian, etc.) are represented by the state.¹⁷

The second way in which the mobilisation of women is regarded as a necessary part of the overall strategy is more directly relevant to the economy. The education of women and their entry into employment increases and improves the available labour supply, which is a necessary concomitant of any successful development programme. In most underdeveloped countries women form only a small percentage of the economically active population (usually less than 20%) and while the figures tend to conceal the real extent of women's involvement by registering mainly formal rather than informal activities, the work they do is frequently unpaid and under-productive, confined to family concerns in workshops or in the fields, and subject to the authority of male kin. Government policies have therefore emphasised the need for both education and a re-struct-

turing of employment to make better use of the work capacities of the female population.

The third aim is to bring the family more into line with planning objectives and to place it at the centre of initiatives aimed at social reconstruction. Post-revolutionary governments regard women as key levers in harnessing the family more securely to state goals - whether these be of an economic or an ideological kind. The pre-revolutionary family has to be restructured to make it more compatible with the developmental goals of revolutionary governments. Once this has been accomplished, the reformed family is expected to function as an important agent of socialisation inculcating the new revolutionary values into the next generation. Women are seen as crucial in both of these processes.

Although these considerations are shared by most socialist states, the peculiar circumstances of Nicaragua's transition have determined the relative emphasis placed on these policy objectives, and have shaped the state's capacity to implement them for the reasons described earlier. For example, in Nicaragua there is no absolute shortage of labour, so there is as yet no urgent requirement for women to enter employment. Initially women were called upon to supply a considerable amount of voluntary labour as health workers and teachers in the popular campaigns (health in 1981, literacy in 1982). But there is no strong incentive to provide widespread nursery care while the economy does not depend upon a mass influx of female labour, and since most women work in the informal sector, it is assumed that a substantial percentage of these jobs are compatible with their domestic responsibilities. This situation might be expected to change if there is a significant escalation of military activities necessitating the influx of women into jobs vacated by men serving in the armed forces.

As noted earlier, the emphasis of the government has been on two other strategies, that of political mobilisation and legal reform. These are the areas in which the greatest advances have been registered in relation to achieving policy objectives which concern women as such. Yet more women have benefitted, in overall terms,

from the implementation of measures designed to secure general objectives. Chief among these is welfare.

A detailed analysis of the impact of Sandinista social policies is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, we will briefly summarise some of the main conclusions in relation to the issues raised earlier by considering the effects of the reforms in terms of the three categories of interest referred to earlier.

1. If we disaggregate 'women's interests' and consider how different categories of women have fared since 1979, it is clear that the majority of women in Nicaragua have been positively affected by the government's redistribution policies. This is even so though fundamental structures of gender inequality have not been dismantled. In keeping with the socialist character of the government, policies are targetted in favour of the poorest sections of the population and have focussed on basic needs provision in the areas of health, housing, education and food subsidies. These policies have been of vital importance in gaining the support of poor women. According to government statistics women form over 60% of the poorest Nicaraguans; in the poorest category in Managua, (incomes less than 600 cordobas per month) there are 354 women for each 100 men. Similarly rural women in the deprived groups have benefitted from the land reform programme.¹⁸ It is these women, by virtue of their class position who have been the direct beneficiaries of Sandinista redistributive efforts, as have their male counterparts. But by the same token, it is obvious that not all women are to benefit from these programmes; women whose economic interests lay in areas adversely affected by Sandinista economic policies (imports, luxury goods etc.) will have suffered some financial loss, as have most women from the privileged classes in terms of higher taxation.

2. In terms of practical gender interests, (category three on the previous listing) these redistributive policies have also had gender as well as class effects. By virtue of their place within the sexual division of labour, women are disproportionately responsible for childcare and family health, and they are particularly concerned with housing and food provision. The policy measures

directed at alleviating the situation in these areas has, not surprisingly, elicited a positive response from the women affected by them as borne out by the available research into the popularity of the government. Many of the campaigns mounted by the women's union, AMNLAE, have been directed at resolving some of the practical problems women face, as is exemplified by their mother and child healthcare programme, or by their campaign aimed at encouraging women to conserve domestic resources to make the family income stretch further and thus avoid pressure building up over wage demands or shortages.¹⁹ A feature of this kind of campaign is its recognition of women's practical interests, but in accepting the division of labour and women's subordination within it, it may entail a denial of their strategic interests.

3. With respect to strategic interests, the acid test, so to speak of whether women's emancipation is on the political agenda or not, significant if modest, progress has been made. The land reform has encouraged women's participation and leadership of co-operatives, and has given women wages for their work as well as their own titles to land. Legal reform, especially in the area of the family, has confronted the issue of relations between the sexes and of male privilege, by attempting to end a situation in which most men are able to evade responsibility for the welfare of their families, and become liable for a contribution paid in cash, in kind or in the form of services. This has also enabled the issue of domestic labour to be politicised in the discussions of the need to share this work equally amongst all members of the family. There has also been an effort to establish childcare agencies such as nurseries, pre-school services and the like. Some attempts have been made to challenge female stereotypes not just through outlawing the exploitation of women in the media, but also by promoting some women to positions of responsibility and emphasising the importance of women in the militia and reserve battalions. And finally there has been a sustained effort to mobilise women around their own interests through the women's union, and there has been discussion of some of the questions of strategic interest, although this has been sporadic and controversial.

To sum up, we can see that it is difficult to discuss socialist revolutions in terms of an undifferentiated conception of women's interests and even more difficult to conclude that these interests have been 'sold out' in order to maintain women in a subordinate position to men. The Sandinista record on women is certainly uneven, and it is as yet too early to make any final assessment of it, especially while it confronts increasing political, economic and military pressures. Nonetheless, it is clear that the Sandinistas have gone further than most Latin American governments in recognising both the strategic and practical interests of women and have brought about substantial improvements in the lives of many of the most deprived. When AMNLAE states that its priority is defence of the revolution because the latter provides the necessary condition for realising a programme for women's emancipation - it is, with certain qualifications, correct.

Yet these qualifications are important nonetheless, and have a wider significance than the Sandinista revolution as they go to the heart of the relationship between socialism and feminism. Three of these can be listed here in summary form:

The first is that strategic gender interests, although recognised in the official theory and programme of women's emancipation, are only narrowly defined, based as they are on the privileging of economic criteria. Feminist theories of sexual oppression, or the critique of the family or of male power have had little impact on official thinking, and indeed are sometimes suppressed as being too radical and too threatening to popular solidarity. There is a need for greater discussion and debate around these questions both among the people and within the organs of political power, so that the issue remains alive and open, rather than entombed within official doctrine.

The second issue concerns the relationship which is established by planners between the goal of women's emancipation and other goals such as economic development which have priority. It is not the linkage itself which constitutes the problem - principles like social equality and women's emancipation can only be realised within determinate conditions of existence. So linking the pro-

gramme for women's emancipation to these wider goals need not necessarily be a cause for concern since these wider goals may constitute the pre-conditions for realising the principles. The question is rather, the nature of the link; are gender interests merely articulated into a wider strategy of economic development (for example) or are they irretrievably subordinated to it ? In the first case we would expect gender interests to be recognised as being specific and irreducible, and requiring something more for their realisation than is generally provided for in the pursuit of the wider goals. Thus when it is not possible to pursue a full programme for women's emancipation, this is explained and debated. The goal is left on the agenda, and every effort is made to pursue it within the existing constraints. In the latter case, the specificity of gender interests is likely to be denied or its overall importance minimised. The issues are trivialised or buried, the programme for women's emancipation remains one conceived in terms of how functional it is for achieving the wider goals of the state. It is difficult to say how these issues will be resolved in Nicaragua in the longer run. For the moment, and under intense pressure there is always a danger that the pattern which has emerged elsewhere in the socialist bloc of countries could be reproduced there, ie. subordination rather than linkage or articulation has occurred.

And this raises the third general problem, which is that of political guarantees. For if gender interests are to be realised only within the context of wider considerations, it is essential that the political institutions charged with representing these interests have the means to prevent their being submerged altogether, and action on them being indefinitely postponed. In other words the issue of gender interests and their means of representation cannot be resolved in the absence of a discussion of the form of state appropriate to the transition to socialism; it is a question therefore not just of what interests are represented in the state, but how they are represented.

NOTES

1. This paper is a condensed version of a more extensive study of Sandinista policies. It is based on research carried out in Nicaragua with the help of the Nuffield Foundation. It is part of an on-going project on state policy, women and the family in post-revolutionary societies and complements research already carried out in South Yemen, Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Cuba and the USSR.
2. The term 'socialist' is used here for the sake of brevity. In relation to most of these states, some qualification is required along the lines suggested by Rudolf Bahro ('actually existing socialism'), for the reasons he advanced in his book *The Alternative in Eastern Europe*. Others have not reached the level of economic socialisation that qualifies them for inclusion in this category.
3. See for example the attitudes of women to this in C. Hansson and K. Liden's book of interviews, *Moscow Women*, Pantheon, 1983.
4. Quoted in C. MacKinnon, 'Feminism, Marxism, Method and the State: An agenda for theory', *Signs*, Spring 1982.
5. There are differing definitions of patriarchy but most of them agree that it describes a power relation existing between the sexes, exercised by men over women and institutionalised within various social relations and practices among which can be instanced the law, the family, and education.
6. There are still inequalities in both the theory and practice of the law, for example, in divorce, where it is easier for women to be divorced for adultery than men.
7. There is a third usage of the term 'interest' found in Marxism which explains collective action in terms of some intrinsic property of the actors and/or the relations within which they are inscribed. Thus class struggle is ultimately explained as an effect of the relations of production. This conception has been shown to rest on essentialist assumptions and provides an inadequate account of social action. For a critique of this notion see E. Benton, 'Realism, Power, and Objective Interests' in K. Graham (ed.) *New Perspectives in Political Philosophy*, Cambridge 1982; and B. Hindess, 'Power, Interest and the Outcome of Struggles', *Sociology*, Vol 16 (4), 1982.
8. The current work of Zillah Eisenstein, editor of *Capitalist Patriarchy*, is a good example: she has recently produced a sophisticated version of the argument that women constitute a 'sexual class' and that for women, gender issues are primary.
9. It is precisely around these issues, which also have an ethical significance, that the theoretical and political debate must focus. The list of strategic gender interests noted here is not exhaustive but is merely exemplary. This question is discussed further and more fully in a forthcoming paper.

10. See for example Temma Kaplan, 'Female Consciousness and Collective Action: The case of Barcelona 1910-1918', *Signs*, Spring 1982; and Olwen Hufton, 'Women in Revolution 1789-1796', *Past and Present*, no. 53, 1971.
11. The issues around which women mobilise and their role in social change and revolutions is an underdeveloped area of research. Hufton's work (op.cit.) is one of the few examples which documents women's initial support for and participation in the French revolution and explains why they turned against it.
12. For a fuller discussion of socialist policies with regard to women and the family see my 'Women's Emancipation Under Socialism: A model for the third world?', in *World Development*, Vol 9, Nos 9/10, 1981. Also published in *Monthly Review*, July 1982, and in M. Leon, (ed.) *Sociedad, Subordinación y Feminismo*, ACEP, Colombia, 1982.
13. Speech by Thomas Borge on the occasion of the fifth anniversary of AMNLAE in September 1982.
14. These guidelines were passed as resolutions at the Second Congress of the Comintern in 1921. For more details see B. Woolf Jancar, *Women Under Communism*, John Hopkins, Baltimore, 1978.
15. See, for example, J. Petras, 'Nicaragua: The Transition to a new Society', *Latin American Perspectives*, No. 29, Spring 1981, Vol. 8, No. 2.
16. In 1981 one Managua hospital was admitting an average of twelve women a day as a result of illegal abortions. The main maternity hospital there records four to five admissions weekly of women following abortions. In press reports in 1982 the number of abortions was said to be rising. Quoted in Deighton et al, *Sweet Ramparts*, 1983.
17. This has to be compared and contrasted with many nationalist movements which call for the sacrifice of women's interests (and those of other oppressed groups) in the interests of the nation.
18. Data from the Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos, December 1981.
19. AMNLAE argues that the implications of women conserving resources under a socialist government are radically different to those under capitalism because the beneficiaries are the people in the first case and private interests in the second.

