

The Role of Love in the Reproduction of Gender Asymmetries: A Case from Post-Revolutionary Nicaragua

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Abstract: In this article, the author explores the dynamics through which emotional dependency could reproduce women's subordination. The ethnographies presented feature women who work for an income, provide housing, housework and childcare, as well as emotional and sexual support, for husbands that often have several women or families. Masculinity in this context does not require family maintenance; 'absentee patriarchy' is the term suggested for this gender order. The men who circulate between women that figure as female heads of households manage to construct themselves as a 'Limited Good'. Women stand out as autonomous and strong, yet fail to profit from their agency in the field of love and intimacy; they go to great lengths in order to keep their husband, even when a husband's behaviour is felt harmful to a woman's honour and emotional well-being. The women's motivation is found to be more emotional than economic. *Keywords:* love, emotional dependency, gender asymmetry, absentee patriarchy, Nicaragua.

Women's economic dependency on men is commonly understood to play a major part in the reproduction of gender asymmetries. This may often be true, but in the case of the women who are the protagonists of this article, it appears that their motivation for subordinating themselves to men was more emotional than economic. These women operated a sewing cooperative, Esperanza, in Nicaragua during and after the Sandinista period (1983-1996). They did not depend on husbands economically, and, in fact, most of the time half of them did not have one. Husbands seldom contributed economically to the household even though nine out of ten were employed in stable jobs: four in transportation, three in public service, one in agriculture, and one as a salesman.

Economic and emotional aspects of intimate relationships often blur, but for the protagonists of this article their husbands' practices of spending their income on drink and other women constituted a neat separation of those aspects. A relationship with a husband infrequently gave a positive economic balance, and often the opposite. A man in the house generated expenses for food, water, electricity, laundry and other services. The women, however, went to great lengths in order to establish or maintain a relationship with a husband, even when they experienced emotional or physical violence at his hands. They often accepted unequal exchanges and husbands' infidelity, hoping that this self-subordination would gain them fulfilment of their emotional longings. The main argument of this article is therefore that the reproduction of gender asymmetries also takes place in the sphere of emotions and conjugality, as well as in the economic and social domains.

The women's preoccupation with the issues of love and relationships was brought to my attention in conversations during one of my fieldwork periods of about six months, when the women lent me the cooperative's office to study their archives. Every day one woman after the other would come inside, close the door and take advantage of this rare privacy to talk about whatever interested her at the time. More often than not it would be about 'some trouble with men'. What emerged from our months of daily interchange was that men and love were pivotal

points in their preoccupations: longings for, joy over, sadness at the loss of, or schemes to regain this longed-for sentiment. Often these chats were triggered by the horoscope in the newspaper I brought, which they studied to discern what the near future might bring to their love life. That love turned out to be a central topic of my dissertation was thanks to the women's concern with the issue.

The Esperanza women stood out as strong and autonomous agents in many respects; they worked to maintain themselves and their children, tended to domestic tasks, and learnt to run a cooperative and an export enterprise. They did not present themselves as suffering and passive victims along the lines of *marianismo* (see Stevens 1973, Hagene 2006), and their life stories often reflected a strong sense of agency. However, in the field of love and sexuality their strength and autonomy were far more ambiguous. The gender division of norms mandated chastity for women, whereas womanising and conquests were mandatory for men. Both men and women could engage in extramarital affairs, but only men could display them publicly. They could and did use this as an overt or implicit threat to make their female partners accept behaviour which the women experienced as physically and emotionally painful. Some of the women practiced transgressions to these norms, which might be gratifying in terms of desire, but useless as weapons in the power struggle with husbands. The women negotiated their lives in tension between subordination and autonomy, focussing sometimes on their experience of submission, sometimes on their sensation of agency. Of course, we might argue that women who chose (temporarily) to subordinate themselves were exercising some sort of agency, which I think could be true. However, their facial and bodily expressions conveyed experiences of subordination. The gender order we witnessed here, as well as in other places, entails a social hierarchy where men rank higher than women. Even as women exercise agency, their quest for emotional fulfilment feeds into the reproduction of this power structure and thus their subordination.

Gender studies have generally focused on economic, political, social or to some extent sexual concerns. Montoya (2002, 67) argues that Latin American heterosexual women's 'conjugal relations and sexual practices have been relegated to the margins of feminist analyses'. On my own account I would include explicit studies of love and emotions in this list of marginalized issues. The ways in which emotions influenced the women's exercise of agency stood out as paramount in our daily interchange over the months, and eventually years, and it is to this issue that I turn in this text. By exploring the dynamics of their couple and family formations and dissolutions over several years, we can recognize these phenomena as the site of construction, reproduction and change in the arena of the gendered social order.

In this study it is vital to grasp that we are addressing processes more than just categorizations. Public display and discourse may differ greatly from the actual deeds and experiences, each serving a different purpose. We furthermore need to acknowledge tensions and ambiguities, as well as results.

The protagonists of this paper are the ten heterosexual women – and some of their husbands – who operated the Esperanza sewing cooperative in the small town of San Juan,¹ halfway between Managua and the Pacific Ocean. The cooperative was formed in 1983 during the Sandinista revolution.

The norms of masculinity upheld by women and men in this study did not require the men to maintain their families, which in general they did not, even if they had employment and an income. In the vegetable-growing collective in Rivas in

Montoya's (2003) study, a different form of patriarchy seemed to be operating; in Rivas the husbands apparently maintained their families, approximating more the model of classic patriarchy (see Kandiyoti 1988, Stern 1995), while this was not common among the Esperanza women in San Juan. In Rivas the husbands resented and resisted their wives' participation in the collective. However, when the Esperanza cooperative closed operations in 1996, this process had little to do with the husbands' resistance.

The Sandinista Revolution unleashed a massive movement in the field of personal politics (Kampwirth 1998), endeavouring to replace classic patriarchal legislation with one built on less asymmetric relationships between the genders. Laws on more egalitarian authority in the family, child support and divorce were passed.² This did not, however, inspire the husbands in my study to contribute more of their income to their household.

In the period of 1992-2000 I conducted research in contemporary history with the Esperanza women (Hagene 1994, 2002), spending a total of one year with them. I have drawn on these materials, which include a series of life stories, individual and group interviews with ten women and five husbands, as well as ethnographic field notes based on participant observation.³ Emotional and conjugal practices became a central issue in my research because the women themselves underscored the importance of these issues by constantly bringing them up in our conversations. The group which constitutes the protagonists of this paper is small; I do not suggest that it is representative of the entire Nicaraguan population; Montoya's study (2003), to which I already referred, illustrates this point.

The social environment, in which the Esperanza women lived featured a significant proportion of female-headed households; many authors suggest that these households in Nicaragua comprise close to fifty per cent.⁴ This family form has been common for centuries in Latin America (Dore 1997b, Potthast 1998), which means that large numbers of women have not depended economically on husbands. According to Dore, many historians have presupposed that female subordination is reproduced primarily in the family; thus, female headship has been seen as a source of autonomy for Latin American women.⁵ Ferguson (1991b, 43), on the other hand, argues that these 'absent fathers' continue exploiting the women who mother their children. Do female headship and relative economic independence contribute towards a destabilization of male domination? Rather than deducing this from statistics or logics, I propose to explore this contention by accessing the lived experiences of some women and men who constitute these societies: their lives and longings, their passions and disenchantments, their perceived preferences and choices of action.

The interaction between love, sexuality, and economic and gender orders has until recently received relatively little attention from researchers in the field of gender studies. This nexus is, however, beginning to become explicated in studies from several parts of the world, and from various entry points. Neither of them, however, forwards the argument which is central in my study. Rebhun (1999) explores the interconnectedness between economic systems and notions of love in Brazil, which is an aspect also prevalent in Ahearn's (2003) study of literacy, love letters and individuation in Nepal. Love can thus be understood to play a vital part in processes of social change. Hirsch (2007, 101), on the other hand, argues that cultural affective individualism in Mexico, without the parallel economic change, merely promotes a modernization of gender inequality. Brennan (2004), Cohen

(1996) and Wilson (2004) focus on a different aspect of interaction between sexuality and economy; among sex-workers in the Dominican Republic and Thailand 'performing love' is understood to be one avenue onto economic support from overseas customers. Egan (2006) testifies to a similar dynamic of female dancers in the U.S. opting to 'perform love' in order to obtain economic support from their customers. A different connection between sex, economy and love is provided in a study from favelas in Recife. The women, experiencing that men do not provide for them, reject the whole idea of marriage and monogamy, opting to cherish their own independence (Gregg 2006, 164) and to resist the gender norms which propagate virginity and chastity for women (2006, 168).

In this context the separation of emotional and economic aspects of gender relations is problematized; could this separation be, above all, a Western ideal? Both in this literature and in my own material there are cases of blurring between these aspects, while the main tendency in my material is for the men not to contribute economically, producing a separation of emotional and economic motivation in a very concrete manner. For these aspects to blur, the women have to receive support (to some degree) from their partners, as seems to be the case in many other studies. For instance Ehlers (1991) forwards the exact opposite view of mine, arguing that the highland Guatemala women in her study take no emotional interest in their husbands, but concentrate on the money and children they can provide. Obviously these husbands must have maintained their families.

The relative weight of economic and emotional concerns, and their possible blurring, are further explored in Constable's (2003) study of U.S. men and Asian women who engage in correspondence relationships, often termed 'mail-order marriages'. The author demonstrates that these relationships are no more about desperate women selling their bodies to obtain economic security than are other marriages; rather, she found that emotional aspects dominated in most of the cases she studied.

There is a vast literature on women's lives and gender relations in Nicaragua, including quite a few studies in which sexuality and/or conjugality play important parts.⁶ The literature is not so comprehensive when we look for studies which include love and affection in their approach, but there are a few. Ådahl (2000) highlights the importance allotted to affection among sex workers' clients in Managua, whereas Montenegro (2000), in her study of sexual culture in Nicaragua, touches on the role of love and emotions in break-up situations. Montoya's study (2002), however, is dedicated primarily to the workings of love and desire in the exercise of women's agency in Rivas. She has emphasized the ways in which many women were able to transgress norms of female sexual propriety and still over time establish themselves as 'good women'. She reports that desire is their motivation, but that it is inseparably coupled with status concerns to become a 'woman of the house' (2002, 79).

Since both Montoya and I direct our interests toward the conjugal practices of our protagonists, I find it useful to explicate some main points of similarities and differences between our studies. Hers was situated in a peasant community with traits from classic patriarchy of male family maintenance and patrilocal residence, whereas mine evolved in a semi-urban environment with matrilocal living quarters and men who contribute little towards the family's upkeep. The community Montoya studied featured a proportion of single mothers of only 10 per cent, whereas the women in my material reflect a percentage more similar to the Nicara-

guan average of about 50 per cent. Even if we both address conjugal practices, her focus is more on the sexual aspect, what she sometimes terms desire/love, while my material has revealed less about the women's sexual experiences and preoccupations, and more about the emotional aspects of their conjugal lives. Montoya's interest centres on the women's ability to transgress gender norms, and still be accepted as 'good women', while I focus on the ways in which such transgressions by the women had to be carried out secretly, thus preventing them from using these transgressions strategically in the same way that their husbands did. However, in both cases the norms of gender-differentiated sexual propriety were reproduced.

Montoya also comments (2002, 75) on men's widespread practice of romancing several women at a time. Of course, only one of these women could successfully establish herself as the 'woman of *his* house'. The perspective she adopts in her study is that of the woman who wins this contest, focusing on her agency. In Montoya's material there are also women whose 'gamble on their lovers had not paid off' (2002, 79), but her article is not about them. In contrast, men's practice of parallel relationships is a central issue in my study, taking the perspective of the women who already are 'of the house' (often their own), but whose husbands continue circulating among other women. I explore how this reflects on the ways in which they perceive their love life. This perspective adds visibility to the emotional strains this system represented for the women. Since it was the women's preoccupation with their emotional situation which brought me to study this problem, I endeavour to crack open the emotional aspect of their gender relationships.

My specific contribution to the literature on women's lives and gender relations in Nicaragua is to highlight the role of love and emotional dependency in the reproduction of gender asymmetry, or women's subordination (Hagene 2002, 2008a, 2008b), so far lacking in the studies I have found.

Absentee patriarchy and poly-monogamy

To the extent that the women in this study theorised and conceptualized male domination, the term they used was *machismo*. Lancaster (1992, 92-3) defines *machismo* as a 'system of manliness', which comprises womanising, gambling, drinking and acts of independence and risk in all arenas. It is to these norms that men are socially expected to adhere. Failure to comply with these norms entails a threat of devaluated manliness. The women explained that *machismo* means that husbands require wives to serve them and, often, to ask permission to go out, whereas the men could do whatever they liked, often womanising and drinking. Somehow the women remitted their partners' practices of infidelity to the realm of 'male nature': strong sexual urges, and *machismo*. The women practiced chastity (or they at least put on the chastity performance for the public eye), which was enforced through the social control of rumour and gossip, and their own concern with fulfilling this norm, constitutive of the 'good woman'.

The notion of *machismo* has much in common with the descriptive concept of patriarchy, as it is explored by Stern (1995, 21). In classic patriarchy, however, males obtain services and status in their relationships with women in reciprocation for maintenance and protection. In my study the exchange between men and women appears to be highly unequal. Women are left to provide for the family and tend to domestic responsibilities, while men have no particular material responsibility. Kandiyoti (1988) suggested a term for a similar system, 'Afro-Caribbean

patriarchy', which granted more independence and freedom of movement for women, who in return maintained themselves and their children (see also Safa 1995). Although the practices have much in common, this geographic term does not seem to fit the Pacific Nicaraguan site of my study. I therefore opt to use the term 'absentee patriarchy', referring to the central male practice of absenting themselves – or threatening to do so – for prolonged periods of time, implying a relationship with another woman.⁷ Disappearing acts thus constituted a particular male way of wielding power. The 'missing man' in my study is not a social science construct along the lines of Blackwood's critique (2005) of the heteronormativity of the anthropological concept of marriage; he is an existing man, who is missing in his wife's house, but may be present in that of the other woman. In this way the absent patriarch may succeed in transforming his affairs into an instrument to his own advantage.

Another element which differentiated the practices of the Esperanza women from classic patriarchy was the overwhelming matrilocality. None of them were living in patrilocal quarters, and even when living in neolocal quarters, in no case was the husband the owner of the house (see Table 1, p. 45). This housing pattern permitted a large degree of autonomy and independence for the women, whereas the men depended on women or kin for a place to live. The Esperanza women generally practiced monogamy, while their husbands often did not. On average the women had lived in two s, one after the other (see Table 2, p. 45). Many husbands had had two partners at a time, even engendering children with other women while still living with one of the Esperanza women (see Table 1). Two of the women professed at one time or another to have had parallel relationships, though these were deployed with the utmost discretion. One woman had a partner who fathered her children, but they did not live together, an arrangement called 'visiting union' (Safa 1986). Another woman did not live with a partner, but her ex-partners would visit her at long intervals, spending the night and suggesting they get back together. Emotional bonds were thus maintained, and she often wondered whether a relationship had terminated. Some husbands were living in two families at the same time, some alternated after months or years back and forth, while some had left, and not returned. Given that the women stayed on in the house, it would be impossible for them to live with several partners at the same time. It seems we could maintain that generally men had several women at the same time (polygyny), whereas women tended to have one husband after another (serial monogamy), adding up to the term poly-monogamy. Formal marriage did not prevent husbands from having several partners. But there seems to be a correspondence between formal marriage and union stability (see Table 2). Safa (1995) offers the same observation in her book covering several Caribbean countries.

Practices of love

Gender as a concept is social, addressing social constructions related to sexual differences (Dore ed. 1997a), while love and related emotions are more elusive and less accessible for research. Love in this study is taken to be an emotion, understood as a complex interaction between physiological excitation, perceptual mechanisms and interpretive processes. Love can thus be seen as a convergence of sensations and narratives, images, metaphors, material goods, and popular theories with which people make sense of their experiences, using collective symbols.

The Esperanza women used the expression *amor compartido* (divided love) or *traición* (treason) about their husbands' habit of living simultaneously with other women or moving back and forth between women. Their facial expressions and bodily postures (see Merleau-Ponty 1994) conveyed that this 'sharing' was experienced as painful and took place against their will. As we shall see, many of the women lived their lives in tension between subordinating themselves to this painful experience, and liberating themselves from it, which, however, implied losing the man. Somehow the very dynamics of this sharing against their will seems to encapsulate the main point of this article: the field of love was the arena *par excellence* where the Esperanza women often chose to subordinate themselves to men, hoping to gain emotional fulfilment.

None of the women voiced indifference to this practice of treason or infidelity; on the contrary, over the years these kinds of experiences constituted the prime subject of their self-initiated conversations with me. However, they did seem to allot a different degree of importance to it, depending on their notions of love. As we shall see, discreet ways of practicing infidelity were compatible with companionate notions of love, but not with notions of romantic love, while public unfaithfulness in front of neighbours was experienced by the women as hurtful regardless of their concepts of love.

Women living with 'amor compartido'

Let us look at the case of Noelia; she had had a disheartening first marriage and told me she had decided not to marry again. Then she met Antonio in an adult education class during the early years of the Sandinista Revolution:

But then that *muchacho* [guy] appeared who was very modest, very good, very amiable, very loving, maybe for that reason he conquered me [...] because he was so loving and tender, so that's when we got married in a civil service and in the church.

She told me that in those years, she and her husband used to go everywhere together. But by 1997, when she told me her story, things were different:

Yes, because now he doesn't go with me anywhere, and I miss it. [Here she looked very downcast]. One gets accustomed to going together, don't you think? [...] One gets accustomed, I used to go everywhere with him. Now he doesn't take me anywhere.

Here she gave a sad laugh. She had discovered that he was going with another woman. When she first told me about her husband's affair, she commented sadly that Antonio hardly brought any money into the household, despite the fact that he was working all the time. She did not, however, complain about his failure to maintain his family. Her worry was that he might be giving money to the other woman who had born him a child. She had told him that she had never disrespected him, so he had no reason to treat her like that, and that 'such treason was painful, because when you love someone, you don't betray her'. She went on to quote a constructed dialogue with him:

You cannot be like that to me because I have never left you alone. I have always fought so that we don't suffer, that we should not have difficulties in our

life, even if we are poor but we haven't gone without food. You have to compensate me in the way that you don't betray me, that you don't go out with women while I have to solve the problems here in the house.

She argued for a more equal exchange between them, in the sense that her maintenance of the house ought to be compensated by his fidelity, but she kept living with him despite his continued affair with the other woman. Sometimes she expressed hope that he would *componerse* (improve), which had not happened by 2008 when I last saw her.

Azucena also had a terrible first marriage; she characterized it as 'a life in hell' with jealousy and maltreatment. She left him, but soon met a driver who romanced her with his mental and verbal agility and loving manner although he 'even was ugly'. And 'before she knew it', he had taken her from Granada to live in San Juan. According to Azucena men are all the same in that they go with other women. As far as sexual unfaithfulness was concerned, however, she suggested it was not so serious as long as the men were discreet. Her husband

[...] used to go with women, many women, but it does not matter as long as he would do it in other places, in Jinotepe, Diriamba, and places like that, where I would not see it, nor would other people. So there was no talking, so I didn't get to know about it, and it was not harmful.

It might even be preferable, she mused, because 'they don't let you sleep at night'. For Azucena, then, unfaithfulness could be acceptable if conducted in the proper way.

Also Tatiana seemed to adapt to her husband's infidelity, even though it hurt her. She had started living with her husband when she was 18 years old. They soon had children, and she worked double shift in a shop to maintain them all while he was studying agronomy. 'To me it was happiness to be with my children and my husband', she remembered. 'My husband was not a saint, but if he was with me for a while, I was happy. Then he would go with other women, and I suffered, but when he came back, I was happy again'.

These stories suggest a perception of love as more companionate,⁸ mandating respect between the spouses, which would entail conducting men's extra-marital affairs discreetly (women were not supposed to have any), lest it constitute an attack on the wife's honour. Romantic love, on the other hand, requires trust, exclusivity and bodily and verbal intimacy. Following the view maintained by Illouz (1997) and Rebhun (1999) infidelity takes on a different significance under the influence of romantic love; it militates not only against honour, but against love itself. What seemed to be more problematic was the way in which many of the husbands escalated from mere womanising to actually establishing parallel relationships.

Break-up situations because of 'the other woman'

Many of the Esperanza women had retained their husbands parallel to or after their involvement with *la otra* (the other woman). They chose discrete acceptance of their partners' infidelity, even when it spilt over into (a version of) polygyny. Montenegro (2000, 95) found that unfaithfulness was the most common reason for breaking up relationships. The stories of several of the Esperanza women certainly supported this finding. Seven of them experienced their husbands establishing stable parallel relationships with other women; five of them had husbands who had

fathered the children of other women parallel to their own union. Most of the women who were living without husbands had thrown them out after violent quarrels over 'the other woman'. Tatiana accepted her husband's womanising until he went too far. Her story highlights how this was a highly ambiguous experience. She felt liberated, but at the same time she experienced a sensation of loss. First she told me: 'To leave him meant to liberate myself. To continue the same routine, yes, but I felt free'. But then she went on:

We began to have problems [...] because of that woman. Then one day his behaviour was outrageous, and I threw him out. [...] Dead drunk, he began to kick everything around him. I don't like scandals. He kicked the walls, destroyed a barrel, terrible things, the whole day. He got drunk in her house and came to make the scandal in mine. [He was] screaming so that the whole *barrio* [neighbourhood] heard, I don't like that. So I said that I was sorry, but he had to go. He got on his motorbike and went to that woman, that is, I was losing him.

What constituted 'liberation' at the same time implied a 'loss', because she had not wanted him to go, but she could not take the 'sharing' any more.

Azucena had also accepted the womanising of her husband. But by the time she told me her story, she was living alone because her husband had openly started a parallel life with another woman in the same town; everybody knew and talked among themselves and to her about it. His anger at her complaints caused the relationship to deteriorate, and the violence escalated. She claimed to have fought back violently, piercing his hand with a fork, cutting his buttock with a machete, and sleeping with a knife under her pillow. She had not wanted him to go, and he had not wanted to leave her and their three children, but he also wanted to continue his other relationship, so she threw his clothes out into the street. When she told me the story, she reflected she ought to have done what he did – get herself a lover. However, she was in favour of accepting things as they are. 'If the man leaves, he leaves, and that's it!' she told me. Although she had wanted her husband to stay, now that he was gone she pointed out some advantages of living alone, for instance, not having to serve anyone.

Once we organized a seminar with the Esperanza women, and one topic was the experience of a husband moving to the other woman. Despite the fact that many of them had thrown their husbands out, their narratives reflected sorrow and loss: 'I felt as if my mother had died'; 'I say it is something horrible; we should not have to share the husband with anyone'; 'I felt loneliness, I was depressed, and did not want to go on living'. Patricia simply said, 'I don't want to remember anything; it is horrible'. Her union had come to an end after a fight when she discovered that her husband had been conducting an affair with one of her colleagues in their own home.

The expressions they used when talking about these experiences indicated that they hurt badly, yet they tried to turn a blind eye for quite a while, avoiding what Camila termed the 'worst possible experience': to be left. However, as Camila's own story demonstrated, it is difficult to determine whether or not a relationship has ended. She once told me about her ex-husband with a blend of joy, emotional arousal, laughter, hopes, and scepticism. 'Last night David came to my house; he spent the night with me and told me he wanted to come back to me, that *con su mujer no tenía nada* [he had nothing going with his wife], the mother of his three children. Do you think he'll come back?' Every time I was in San Juan she would have new episodes in this saga of circulating men. She had been living with him

over a period of twelve years, interrupted several times by a year or two that he had gone to live with the mother of his children. I suppose he was checking to see if she was still available; at any rate it was plain to observe that emotionally he was maintaining his domination over her.

Men's transgressions

The husbands may have been emotionally involved with their lovers, but the focus of their narratives on *amor compartido* was the sexual aspect and their manly seduction skills. For instance Jorge, one of Camila's ex-husbands, had this to say, 'I found girlfriends easily; I was sleeping with her [*vivía con ella*], but she in her house, and I in mine [...] I was not going to confine myself to a convent, now was I, or a monastery?' So, as long as he did not submit to some religious discipline, *amor compartido* was seen as unavoidable.¹⁰ Also Antonio's narrative implied this position; he was Noelia's husband:

Well, to be honest and sincere with you, at times one cannot be a saint, right? [...] But this does not happen every day. [...] Yes, I had a woman, after I married her [Noelia], and I was with her for quite some time and I had a child with her [...] but this does not mean that I'm going to stay with her.

He declared that he loved his wife very much, and that he was afraid she might die of a heart-attack due to her exaggerated jealousy. At this point his eyes filled with tears, but the solution he suggested was that she should stop being so jealous, and not that he quit his affair.

Jorge and Antonio had grown up with their grandmothers, as had also Oscar. He was about twenty years younger than the other two, and all of them had been abandoned first by their fathers, then by their mothers when they took up with other men. Oscar conveyed traumatic memories from this childhood abandonment when he was sent to his grandmother in a neighbouring town and put to work for a living at the age of five. Whereas the other two tended to repeat their fathers' practices, Oscar had reflected on this experience and had decided to break the chain of repetition. He insisted emphatically that:

I'll have one, just one *compañera* [partner], and I'll stay with her forever, because I'm not going to leave anyone with a child. I'll never leave a child *botado* [thrown away], outside, nothing like that. And the wife, the woman that I choose for myself, she will be the one to have my children.

Angelica, his wife, is one of the three women who reported that their husband seemed to be faithful. However, when I visited in 2008, she sadly related that he now had two children with another woman, but she still kept him.

Love and violence

Amor compartido also appears to have a bearing on the issue of violence apparent in many of the women's stories. Men's violence against female partners is a major social problem in Nicaragua, as in many other countries; see, for instance, the report published in 1986 by the Nicaraguan Women's Legal Office (OLM 1986). Studies on the prevalence of violence in Nicaragua carried out in the 1990s show that fifty to seventy per cent of women who have ever lived in union with a man

have been exposed to violence.¹¹ Jealous husbands account for nearly half the cases in one study (Ellsberg et. al. 1998). Among the ten Esperanza women, seven had experiences which could be categorised as maltreatment, although four of them did not use the term. Their stories, however, testify to a different link between violence and jealousy: five of them reported that fights and beatings ensued when they complained about *la otra* (the other woman). Only one case was that of a jealous husband, and one was about a husband with a *mal carácter* (bad temper) who beat his wife for no apparent reason over a period of twenty years. Four of the women who had experienced beatings added, however, that ‘yo no me dejo [I don’t let myself be dominated]’, and they had rather blood-soaked stories about the fights which ensued between the two of them, involving quite violent behaviour on the part of the women as well. In several cases the women used weapons like scissors, machetes, high-heeled shoes and tins to defend themselves from the men, who eventually left them to go and live with the other woman.

Camila reflected on the experience of being beaten, compared to that of being left: ‘The blows hurt your skin, but you can defend yourself. It is worse when they leave you; it touches your heart, and you are left alone’. To be left stands out as the worst possible experience, but she refers explicitly to ‘the heart’ and to loneliness, not to social stigma or economy. I suggest in this article that women are discursively ushered into roles of emotionality, while they are warned against acting as sexual subjects, which is understood to be incompatible with the ‘good woman.’ However, there does not seem to be any cultural prohibition against women’s violence. As Lancaster (1992, 93) so eloquently puts it, working class Nicaraguan women are not expected to be shrinking violets.

There is a strong sense of agency in the stories of how the women defended themselves from the physical and emotional blows that a man could give them, including seeking help from divine patrons, as the Virgin or *El Santísimo*¹² (Hagene 2002, 184; 2006). One case of violence stood out as different from the others, but it accentuates the ways in which the quest for emotional fulfilment could motivate women to subordinate themselves. Rosalba, whose husband started beating her right after their wedding, said:

I did not want my parents to know that he beat me. Even if I was married and had two children, my father would have paid for my studies. [...] My father would have killed him *a machetazos* [with a machete], and I loved him so much, I didn’t want to lose him.

As we shall see further down, he stopped beating her when she took a lover.

Now, if he started beating me again, I would denounce him to Yolanda in the Women’s House; earlier we were not so *conscientes* [conscious], and besides, as I said, I loved him and did not want him harmed.

Her decision to continue living with him appeared to be more grounded in emotional than economic or practical dependency; she declared love to have been her motivation.

Women’s desire and transgressions

Rosalba stayed married to her husband in spite of his maltreatment, which continued during many years until she took a lover. She no longer had sexual or love

relations with him. He was the only husband who contributed on a regular basis towards the household, which consisted of 17 persons. Her lover, who was also married, was living in another town, but worked in San Juan. They used to meet in the house of his mother, and Rosalba expressed satisfaction with the arrangement; a divorce would be disruptive for a lot of people, including the two of them, and she wondered what they really would gain. She told me that if they had been living together, with all the constraints of their families and everyday worries, the thrill might very well disappear. As things were, they had amorous encounters at least every week. She actively defended her honour when a male relative of her husband accused her of being a prostitute and *quitahombre* (man stealer). She threatened to sue him for libel and calumnies; not only did she break with the norms, but she also defended her behaviour as legitimate.

Marcela also confessed to having had an affair, though explaining that this transpired when her husband went to live with another woman; thus, both women provided some justification for their transgressions. Men's affairs were played out in public, presumably because an affair somehow reflected positively on their manliness.¹³ Their affairs thus enabled them to construct themselves as a 'Limited Good' (expression borrowed from Foster 1965), over which women competed. The women's affairs, on the other hand, had to be conducted discretely. The ways in which men and women spoke about their affairs also differed. Rosalba referred to emotions, while the men alluded to sexuality; I never heard any of these men speak of falling in love as a motivation for their affairs. In the discourse of these men on affairs, they emphasized sexual prowess ('a man cannot be a saint', 'I wasn't going to join a monastery'), whereas the women downplayed the sexual aspect in their narratives. The women's emphasis on the emotional aspect somehow reflects social gender ideals. The dominant gender ideology seems to script the discourse of women and men on their love life, thus reproducing the inherent norms in this ideology, which predicates a gendered division of norms on sexuality and emotionality. Here I wish to convey the discursive and public aspect; I do not imply that women did not have sexual motivations, or that men did not have emotional ones. These were, however, downplayed or silenced. Women's transgressions might therefore serve to satisfy their desires, but they could not be used to counterbalance men's construction of themselves as the 'Limited Good'.

Sexuality was generally downplayed in the women's discourse on love. In our group-conversations on relationships nobody mentioned the sexual aspect, either as something enjoyable or insufferable.¹⁴ Sexuality at the same time permeates everyday discourses in Nicaragua (Hagene 1994). It was something I could often observe among the Esperanza women, but it was more as a subterranean undercurrent, relegated to the realm of joking, *indirectas* (indirect allusions) and double-meanings. This would be common for areas of life too important to be ignored, yet not seen as permissible to talk about directly. In private, however, Tatiana was the only woman who highlighted the sexual aspect of conjugality. She had serious criticisms of conjugal life with a man: he limits your movements; he does not listen to what you say; he undermines you and demands that you serve him food and wash his clothes. I then asked whatever he might be good for. She whispered in my ear, '*para la cama* [for the bed]', and she added that at least her husband had been good in that respect.

Tatiana longed for a new relationship but was afraid to accept invitations, partly because she felt shame: 'In a situation when *alguien me enamore* [someone is ro-

mancing me], imagine, at my age they court me! [...] I answer and I talk, but I would prefer that that person were not talking to me like that because I feel shame'. In addition there was the issue of where to go: 'Yes, I need a man, to have someone to talk to, *ternura* [tenderness], everything, but I don't have the courage. And where would we go? A hotel? I would feel ashamed; I don't like to go there and stay *por hora* [by the hour]'.¹⁵ In addition, she was afraid that if she took up with a man, he might do what her husband had done: *enamorar a otra* (romance another woman). 'I get involved with my body and my head, but not with my heart'. Incidentally, this is what public discourse recommends for men, as we shall see below.

Concluding remarks

The contention of this article is that despite low levels of economic dependency, the Esperanza women accepted unequal exchanges mainly driven by emotional motives. They granted their husband status and services in exchange for very little, often experiencing infidelity and violence. The women negotiated their life practices in tension between agency and subordination in various domains, from income-generating work, domestic and child-responsibilities to conjugal practices. Since the women did not generally depend on their husbands for material survival, they could – and some of them did – break with their husbands, throwing them out of the house. The problem, however, was that they really wanted to keep them; therefore this solution was experienced as loss as well as liberation. Several women kept their husbands even when those had parallel relationships; in two cases this was combined with the women having lovers. As long as these manoeuvres took place within the norms of public sexual propriety, however, even their transgressions could be understood to reproduce the asymmetric gender norms. The prescribed performances of manliness which counteracted overt emotional reciprocity at the same time made the women's emotional dependency stand out as unilateral. The Esperanza women, in their relations with husbands and other men, were often willing to 'turn a blind eye' and to subordinate themselves in order to maintain their relationships. This self-subordination was voluntary, in an attempt to avoid the 'worst possible experience'. The role that emotions played in the reproduction of gender asymmetries constitutes my main contribution to the literature on gender in Nicaragua, one which might fruitfully be researched also in other economic, socio-cultural and geographical settings.

Allow me to indicate the limitations of my findings. My argument rests on a context characterized by: 1) high incidence of female-headed households; 2) husbands who rarely contribute economically to their household; 3) living quarters that are mainly matrilocal or neolocal; 4) women who wish to live with one husband, especially if he would not cheat (openly) on her; 5) gender norms that mandate emotions and chastity for women, whereas men should emphasize conquest and sexuality; 6) public discourse which reflects this gendered 'division of norms'.

The first three points contrast sharply with the living arrangements described in Montoya's study (2002), to which I referred above. Furthermore, Montoya focuses on the agency of the women who successfully pursue their desires, whereas my study reflects the tension between agency and subordination which the Esperanza women experienced in their emotional lives. With Mulinari (1995, 139) I am puzzled at the paradox of the many Nicaraguan women who are impressively strong, autonomous and capable, yet often become battered and abandoned wives. The

Esperanza women embody this ambiguity in their self-perception, displaying sometimes their sense of agency and autonomy, sometimes that of subordination.

The women experienced *amor compartido*, male polygyny, which could be seen as the performance of prevalent ideals of masculinity: strong sexual needs and abilities, and independence relative to women. Men's experiences of emotional dependency thus would have to be downplayed. The narratives of the men quoted in this text serve to demonstrate such performances. This type of male behaviour could be interpreted as counteractions to fend off the experiences and expressions of dependency, as suggested by Rebhun (1999, 176).

The lack of trust was blatant in the women's narratives. Distrust was also at the heart of men's discourse on relationships, but their focus on the sexual conquest rather than the emotional relationship played down their own vulnerability. As one man said, 'You don't put all the eggs in one basket', to explain why he had several girlfriends; it represented a distribution of risk. Ironically, their very womanising exposed them to the risk of being thrown out of the wife's house, which again underlined the need to have another woman (or kin) to house them. A similar risk management for women seemed precluded by the norm of mandatory chastity; luckily they did not stand to lose their house if the man left, unless it was rented. The lyrics of Latin American *boleros*, *tangos* and *rancheras*¹⁶ give us a clue as to the dangers involved in emotionality for men. Suffering here is presented as a male experience, after having risked loving a woman: '*de qué sirve entregarse con locura, si de pago se recibe una traición, amar es un dolor, una apertura, amar es destruir el corazón*' (what's the use of giving yourself away like crazy, if what you receive in return is betrayal; to love is pain and openness; to love is to destroy the heart).¹⁷ So men are warned against the trap of love, which is equated with vulnerability. As we saw earlier, Tatiana had come to a similar conclusion in her life, that is, to avoid involving her heart. However, with the constraints of mandatory chastity, she experienced her choice as very lonely. The experiences of the Esperanza women go a long way to illuminate the contention in Shumway's study (2003); gender inequalities constitute a major barrier against successful heterosexual relationships. Wardlow's study from Papua New Guinea (2008) further illuminates the ways in which men struggle to maintain their conjugal domination. These men find that emotional closeness and sexual pleasure undermine male power; thus they reserve these practices for relationships with women who are not their wives.

The circulation of men amongst houses with women and children was not just a question of individual cases, but a widespread social practice. Seen at the level of society, my study seems to indicate reproduction of this system. Women's economic independence, however difficult to achieve, stands out as more attainable than their emotional independence. However, both men and women are social agents, not passive victims of social norms. When we shift our focus to the level of the subjects, we are able to see some variations, discontinuities and ruptures, which embody possibilities of change.

Three men were reported to break with the mandatory womanising, though one of them was the man who beat his wife for 20 years, and another had given up this stance after some years of marriage. But one was still faithful by 2008! Some women negotiated the dominant gender norms, as for instance the two married women who took lovers, although with due discretion and justification. Transgressing certain gender norms, however, does not necessarily produce much change in the short run, as the memoirs of the famous Nicaraguan poet and revolutionary

Giaconda Belli (2001) remind us; it gained her the position of being her lover's private secretary. But in the long run the ways in which the subjects make their choices may add up to transformations of the social structures that they inhabit, structures which at the time of this study represented a considerable challenge for the Esperanza women.

* * *

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Notes

1. These names are fictitious, as are all proper names, in order to protect the identity of the protagonists of this study.
2. A new Nurturing Law was passed in 1982, but it was never ratified. There was, however, the Law of Relations between mothers, fathers and children of 1982. Unilateral divorce was introduced in 1988, and a new Nurturing Law came in 1992, after the Sandinista period.
3. The narratives quoted in this paper were mostly collected as tape-recorded interviews carried out in the office of the cooperative, or as informal conversations with one or several women, noted down later on the same day. Some interviews, however, were conducted at the man's workplace. The names of the persons quoted in this paper are all pseudonyms.
4. See for instance Agurto and Renzi 1996, Bayard de Volo 2001, Close 1988, de Montis, Meassik and Olivera 1992, Flynn et al. 1980, Gariazzo 1991, Guido 1989, Morgan 1990. Babb (2003a, 342) suggests 65 percent (urban) and 82 (rural), referring to Fernández Poncela (1996, 49-66).
5. For a comprehensive discussion of the literature on female headed households, see Chant with Craske (2003).
6. See for instance Babb 1995, 1996a, 1996b, 2001a, 2001b, 2003b, Badstue 2000, Bayard de Volo 2001, de Montis 1992, 1996, Ferguson 1991a, González 1997, 1999, 2001a, 2001b, Hagene 2002, Johansson 1999, Kampwirth 1996, 1998, 2002, Montenegro 2000, Montoya 2002, 2003, Morgan 1990, Mulinari 1995, Novello et.al. 1989, Randall 1992, 1993, 1999, Thayer 1997, Ådahl 2000.
7. Momsen (2002) coined a similar term (patriarchy in absentia) in her study of Caribbean societies, referring to the legacy of slavery, male out-migration, female landowners and matrilocal residence

- patterns. Ferguson (1991b, 75) uses the expression 'single mother patriarchy' in her argument that even absent fathers exploit women economically.
8. I use this term referring to love understood as action and friendship, close to the usage of Rebhun (1999, 171) and Giddens (1992, 43). For a somewhat different categorization of concepts of love, and usage of the concept 'companionate', see Hirsch (2003).
 9. The women told me that they used the terms *marido y mujer* (husband and wife) regardless of whether or not they were married; thus I translate these terms as 'husband and wife'.
 10. The various evangelical congregations ban womanizing and drinking, and exert social control in their relatively small groups.
 11. Different studies on maltreatment report varying percentages of prevalence of violence, from fifty per cent (Ellsberg et al. 1998) to seventy per cent (IDB-FIDEG 1997), while the official Demographic and Health Survey (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos 1998) reports twenty-nine percent.
 12. El Santísimo is a host kept in the centre of a sun-formed metal object, displayed in Nicaraguan churches on Thursdays, often understood to be a saint.
 13. This different view of extra-marital affairs of men and women respectively had been codified in law; the Civil Code of 1904 considered this adultery if committed by a woman, and it constituted grounds for divorce. If conducted by a man, however, it was called *amancebamiento* (concubinage), and was only a reason for divorce if conducted scandalously. However, in 1988, unilateral divorce was allowed, thus rendering the term adultery meaningless for divorce purposes.
 14. See Novello et al (1989) about documentation of insufferable experiences.
 15. Tatiana owned her house, but several daughters with spouses and children also lived there.
 16. Bolero: romantic piece composed and played all over Latin America, tango: Argentinian melancholic piece, ranchera: Mexican piece.
 17. Bolero by Julio Jaramillo, immensely popular in Nicaragua in 1997, then recently released with Charlie Zaa.

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Tables

I here present data concerning the husband each woman had in the year 2000; if they were living without a partner at this time, I refer to their previous husband. One of the husbands was mostly unemployed, while all the others were working, most of them in stable jobs: four in transportation, three in public service, one in agriculture, and one as a salesman.

Table 1. Living quarters

Age groups	Women in each group	Neolocal quarters	Matrilocal quarters	Polygynous husband			Wife owns house	
				Yes	?	No	Yes	No*)
30	2	2	-	-		2	1	1
40	4	1	3	3	1	-	1	3
50	4	3	1	3		1	3	1
Total	10	6	4	6	1	3	5	5

*) In no case is the husband the owner of the house; two houses belong to the woman’s mother, one is borrowed, one is rented, one is shared 50/50 between spouses.

Table 2. Union stability

Type of union	Total	Enduring	Broken
Consensual union	13	1	12
Marriage	7	4	3
Visiting union	1	1	-
Total	21	6	15