

NICARAGUA : WOMEN IN
AGRICULTURAL COOPERATIVES

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INTRODUCTION

In Nicaragua, as well as in the majority of Latin American countries, rural women have been historically marginalised and exploited as peasants and as women, both a product of a capitalist and male dominated society.

The economic model developed in Nicaragua since the past century, which was based in the exportation of raw materials and staples to the capitalist metropolis, responded to the typical domineering scheme, enforced by the developed capitalist countries.

The promotion of such an agro-export model meant the displacement and dispossession of peasants from the best soils for agriculture development towards new bounds so called agricultural frontier.

In this context, women are compelled to enlarge the rural proletariat. But due to their condition of womanhood, their proletarianisation is realised in disadvantageous conditions (the lowest salaries, working conditions, part time jobs, etc).

Their inability to get a fixed paid job is frequent, and this forces them into the informal sector in the best of cases, and into prostitution.

Notwithstanding their full incorporation to different types of work, women can't disrupt the dominant ideology that regards them as reproducers of labor force within the boundaries of domestic life, where male dominance prevails.

Brutal repression against any type of organizational action in the peasant sector, became the key support of the somocista dictatorship's

agro export model. Women suffered, as individuals and within their families, the cruelties of the dictatorship's regime.

The setting up of the agro export model was not achieved without a strong resistance from the peasant sector. As a response to their exploited and oppressed situation, women stood up in the land invasions and armed struggles against the somocist National Guard. They guaranteed the tilling of the recuperated land while their men organized the armed defense. They carried mail, cooperated with the guerilla, etc.

Carried away by a need to protect their children and their own lives, their participation in the national liberation struggle provided them with a new feeling of self-esteem and dignity as women.

The popular armed insurrection, in which women participated identifying themselves with the struggle, ends up with the taking of the political power, in July 1979, generating the necessary preconditions to deep women's response to the ancient mechanisms which have enabled their oppression.

The agrarian reform becomes a central policy of the revolution. This agrarian reform produces profound transformations in the agrarian structure, and a cooperative movement of great dimensions begins to emerge. There were only 22 cooperatives in the country in 1978, and by the end of 1982 there existed approximately 3,000 cooperatives which hold 70,000 small producers, approximately 45 % of the total small producers in the country (National Cooperative Survey).

These cooperatives mainly produce maize, beans, rice, sorghum, sesame, coffee, cotton and vegetables. During the 1981-1982 agricultural period, this sector controlled more than half the cultivated area of maize (58 %) and beans (73 %) and 25 % the area of rice. Within the export products, their participation is highlighted in sesame (45 %) and coffee (25 %). They added 20 % to the National Gross Product (GNP), and are actually controlling 22 % of the total cultivated area.

Of these cooperatives, 44 % have women as members, but women represent only 6 % of the total of associated producers. This shows the slow and gradual incorporation of women to this new modality of organization and production in the nicaraguan agriculture.

We believe that this phenomenon is due to the fact that changes in the economic and social structures do not guarantee by themselves a change in the oppressed situation of women. The transmission of ideolo-

gical values is achieved in the education of children of both sexes, done both at home, in the formal educational structures and in society as a whole. This shows that by changing the economic base of the attitudes, behaviour ideas, etc, the ideological structure is not mechanically changed. This shows also that a specific work is required, oriented to both women and men, in order to transform the situation of women.

Even though the situation of women is conditioned by structural determinants, radical changes in society, related to the feminin oppression, will depend on women's capacity to constitute themselves in a conscious and organised social force, that within a revolutionary force, will be able to definitely disrupt the material and ideological bases of double exploitation.

We would like to illustrate our statements, by presenting the results of a research carried out in 1982-1983, on the participation of peasant women in the agricultural cooperative movement.

Our study tried to understand how the socio-economic transformation have been carried out by the Sandinist Popular Revolution through the Agrarian Reform, how it facilitated the incorporation of rural women to the cooperative development, and the effects and limitations of this integration.

In this sense, we shall proceed to evaluate the contradictory impact that has had on the situation of women, an agrarian reform, which pretends to facilitate women's full incorporation to the process of economic and social transformations of the nicaraguan agricultural sector.

1. LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Within the revolutionary project, equality among sexes was put forward as a necessary element for social transformation. Therefore the agrarian policy took into account the indispensable character of the active participation of women in the country's political and economic life.

As an answer to this problem, laws were promulgated in order to stimulate women's participation in farm cooperatives, with the same conditions as for men.

This will is reflected in the Statutes of Rights and Guarantees for Nicaraguans. These Statutes establish full equality between men and women, and makes a State obligation "to remove, through all

the possible means, the obstacles that obstruct the equality among citizens and their participation in the political, economic and social life of the country".

Equality of rights among both sexes has been established not only in what concerns the access to land and to cooperative organization but also in what refers to salaries and work conditions in farms and agrarian work centers.

The law of cooperatives Development, promulgated in september 1981, established that all nicaraguans have the right to participate in the new cooperatives. It also establishes as a general objective of cooperative movement : to stimulate active participation of women by her conscious integration in the cooperatives' economic and social management.

The Nicaraguan Agrarian Reform Law is the first in Latin America to establish the legal preconditions for the incorporation of the peasant woman. The majority of the agrarian reform laws in Latin America have required that the beneficiaries of the law be heads of households with children. The nicaraguan agrarian reform law is new in the sense that neither sex nor family position are limitations to being beneficiary.

It is worth mentioning that the existence of these laws is considered an important step, but not a guarantee, toward achieving the integration of women under the same conditions as for men.

2. THE INTEGRATION OF WOMEN IN COOPERATIVES AND THE PROBLEMS CONFRONTED FOR THEIR INTEGRATION

The incorporation of women in agricultural cooperatives has been stimulated by several factors. Peasant women without land who have had to assure paid agricultural work as a consequence of the dispossession of their land during the Somoza dictatorship, have shown more interest in their integration through collective forms of production on the basis of experience with paid agricultural work with lack of means of production, they have found through the cooperative the possibility of obtaining a source of stable income.

In the case of the women that are owners of small pieces of land, the problems that they have to overcome is to till efficiently their land. Unless they have access to male labor within the family, they

join cooperatives as a mean to resolve the lack of labor force problem, to obtain a better technical level and to have access to credit and state facilities and services.

In the same manner, when women have family relationships with other members of the cooperatives - male or female - they feel more confidence and security, and this contributes to the cooperative cohesion. The family position of the female members has been another factor that has stimulated their participation ; within the membership there is a vast majority of heads of households or the principal economic support of the household, therefore the needs to support their family and to increase their living standards are a powerful stimulant.

We also found women and unmarried daughters who are members of the cooperatives, who before had helped without remuneration their families, and were now not only indirect but direct beneficiaries of the Agrarian Reform, responding to a family strategy of maximization of their family income, in contrast with other agrarian reforms where the only beneficiaries have been widows and single mothers.

We also found elements, generated by the revolutionary process that have stimulated the incorporation of women as members, even though in many cases this integration was a product of internal struggles and the resolution of ideological contradictions which respects the role of women in the new society.

The prominent elements have been : the participation of women before the revolutionary victory in the struggle for land ; the political and organizational work of the Sandinist Liberation Front (FSLN) and the peasant organisations within the rural sector ; the positive influence of agrarian reform technicians, and the ideological and political development of the members of the cooperative.

It has also influenced the fact that the state has provided the cooperative movement with land, credit, technical assistance, inputs, as well as the labor force that the cooperatives require. It has been notorious that in those cases where women participated together with their men in the struggle for land before the revolutionary victory, they achieved a continuation of their participation, becoming members of the cooperatives that were formed. In the same way, in the cooperatives where some members had been old sandinist collaborators, and therefore exists a high level of political conscienceness, we found that the equality of men and women is part of the new conceptions developing in

its interior. This result is even more positive when the activist of the National Union of Agricultural and Cattle Farmers (UNAG) agree to the participation of women in the cooperative. The effect of the ideology of the technicians and the extensionists of the agrarian reform has been important, even more when this work is in charge of women. Nevertheless, women's struggle to participate has in many cases been a difficult battle, and it also has been necessary that they have a will to change the ideological values of their society and the role they have been assigned socially.

This dominant ideology, that women must subordinate to men, and that men is made for work, and women for the house, continues to be the principal obstacles that limit the integration of peasant women to the cooperative movement. Due to this ideology which is present in men as in women as well, the productive contribution of the latter is underestimated, and they are denied the right to participate in the agriculture cooperatives. This position is sometimes shared or reinforced by state workers who have to work with the cooperatives.

In some cases, to justify the non-integration of women, economic reasons such as the lack of land, the lack of work for them, that women 'are not efficient', that they do not have experience in agrarian labors, etc, are used. It is also said that the integration of men should be a priority, since he is the head of the family. In this way, it sometimes occurs that women are accepted as members only if they own land. Or sometimes they won't permit the members' wives to become themselves members of the cooperative as well. It often happens that women are not invited to the first meetings where the cooperative is being formed assuming that they are not interested, and there are even cases where they have been denied their integration demand.

This shows how, in the reality, the cooperative law which expresses that the production cooperatives will promote the full integration of women is not made effective.

Even more, there are also other kind of limitations, of no less importance, which stop women's participation. The first is the domestic work and the care of children. The second has to do with the fear some women feel of competing with men's experience in this kind of work. The third reason is that many peasant women have other economic alternatives in the informal sector which are more profitable and gives them a better status, for example small business etc.

3. WOMENS PARTICIPATION IN PRODUCTIVE LABOR AND IN THE COOPERATIVE'S MANAGEMENT

The integration of women as members is an important step, but they have to continue struggling within the cooperative to be able to achieve real and not only formal equality in relation to men. Their daily work helps to overthrow men's resistance to consider them as producers.

In the production and the credit and services cooperatives, they participate in the agricultural work both as female members as female relatives of members. The latter are paid only in some cases.

In the production cooperatives we studied, women are completely integrated to work during the whole production process of different products (corn, beans, rice, cotton, sorghum, etc) with the exception of some specific labors like the cleaning and preparation of the land, manuring and the installment of parcels.

They have the same rights and duties as the male members in the work and day wages. The organization of work varies ; there are mainly three kinds : groups formed by men and women, groups of men and women separately, and lastly women who are into an activity of less importance in the cooperative which is done only by women.

About this last case : it is worth mentioning that although it seems discriminatory for women, their incorporation to secondary activities is their first step in their participation in a collective work versus the individual character of their domestic work.

In the case of credit and service cooperatives, women members do the management and participate directly in the production with their sons. Their principal problem is the difficulty to find male workers for some tasks. For that reason sometimes they look for the help of men relatives or contracted workers.

In the production cooperatives, as well as in the credit and service cooperatives, there are women working who are not members. In general, these female workers are relatives of members of the cooperatives. In the production cooperatives, they work as waged workers in the period where there is more need for work force, which is in the harvest seasons. They receive the same daily pay as the members, but they don't participate in the decision making. On the other hand, in credit and service cooperatives, it is common to find women working who are not earning anything at all. Even more, the members underestimate their

wives' productive work, since even though these women work in the fields several hours a day, men assure that they don't work at all. In some cases even women themselves underestimate their own work, assuring that they don't work at all.

The participation of women members in the management of the cooperatives is very poor in comparison to the male members ! We found that there are women in the Board of Directors of the cooperative only when the majority of the members are women themselves. In general, men and women as well, consider that the latter are not capable of assuming such a responsibility. Besides, the fact that women have difficulties to assume it is due to their double day.

Even as members, women have a little participation on the decision making, the social underestimation of their real contribution to production being obvious.

In the study we had empirical evidence that the presence of women in the boards of directors guarantee a better attention to the women specific problems, it helps to incorporate more women to the cooperatives and promotes their full participation.

4. BENEFITS AND PROBLEMS OF WOMEN MEMBERS

Women associated in cooperatives are confronted with new situations that allow them to better their living standards, as well as to guarantee a stable job during most of the year and to cultivate basic goods for their family consumption.

Women members have reinforced themselves due to their active participation where they learn new things. The technical and organizational training that they have received is an important asset. They value positively the knowledge acquired which allows them to improve their work output and to assume the technical knowledge that traditionally has only been directed to the male. This situation allows for the conditions for them to assume administrative functions in the cooperatives.

No less important has been the collective experience of the process that has led to an increase in their political consciousness and as allowed them to gain confidence in themselves and in their capacity to take decisions with regard to matter relating to production.

The benefit which can be gained through the incorporation in cooperatives, have not been sufficient to motivate a greater level of integration of women.

The members see clearly the limitations to which they are confronted. In that the incorporation to agricultural work alongside the lack of an infrastructure that would reduce the household work and the care of the children (both works that have been socially assigned as the sole responsibility of women) implies a voluntary acceptance of an average of a 15 hours work day. They continue to be in a disadvantageous position with regard to technical and administrative training in relation to men who have as their main and sole responsibility the work in the field and to be trained for the better functioning of the same.

The only women who have participated in the training courses have been those young women who have no children and who have less responsibility in the labour force reproductive activities within the home.

The majority of women maintain that their chief obstacle to their integration to the cooperatives on the same footing as the men, is the domestic work and the care of children, both of which cannot be evaded and which does not stimulate them to make progress in their participation both in the productive field and in the administration and management of the cooperative.

CONCLUSIONS

In the light of this evaluation, we can conclude that even though the legal framework is indispensable, it is not sufficient to guarantee that rural women can become beneficiaries of the Agrarian Reform in the same conditions as men.

Moreover, its effect is partial as much as it does not take into account the specific limitations of women which derive from their gender subordination, nor does it take measures to solve them.

Transformations in the social economic structure do not imply a change in the situation of women's oppression ; it becomes necessary to develop a specific work towards man and woman in order to transform the situation of woman. In the case we are dealing with, we find that there has been a lack of work by institutions and unions, oriented to overcome the material and ideological obstacles that forbid the real execution of the legal framework of the agrarian reform.

There still exists a contradiction between the political will, expressed in the laws, and reality, in which the male dominated ideology prevails in the behaviour of the different structures and mechanisms of support to the development of the cooperative movement.

As a consequence of this reality, the incorporation of women as members of cooperatives has contradictory effects... Even though this membership provides many benefits, they become part of a social structure where as in the rest of society, exists women subordination, to the male members (even more if they are relatives).

This situation makes it necessary that within the cooperatives women struggle to overcome subordination which is expressed in different ways, as previously discussed (discrimination from the board of directors and the administration of the cooperatives, underesteem of their productive work, impossibility to attend training courses, overall responsibility of the family, etc.) ; therefore their incorporation in the board of directors from where they can assure the banishing of women's discrimination becomes strictly necessary.

Therefore, the organization of women has before them the task of being beligerant in order to guarantee the carrying out of institutional work (at the organizational, political and ideological level) that will allow to change radically women's material bases of oppression and facilitate their incorporation.

It also has the task to support the female members in their struggle to overcome the day to day obstacles in the cooperatives.

ABSTRACT

The author recalls the history of cooperatives set up in Nicaragua since the revolution and describes the situation of peasant women within the new production organization. It appears that neither the transformations in social and economic structures, nor the legislation laying down equality of men and women, are able to guarantee equal rights for women. Women must still, endlessly, fight against men's discriminatory attitudes in order to become involved in the cooperatives.

RÉSUMÉ

L'auteur fait un historique des coopératives créées au Nicaragua depuis la Révolution, et décrit la situation des femmes paysannes au sein de la nouvelle organisation de la production. Il apparaît que ni les transformations des structures socio-économiques, ni la législation instaurant l'égalité entre les sexes, ne suffisent à garantir aux femmes les mêmes droits qu'aux hommes. Elles doivent encore et continuellement lutter contre la discrimination que montrent les hommes à leur égard et pour leur intégration dans les coopératives.