MOBILIZATION WITHOUT EMANCIPATION?
WOMEN'S INTERESTS, THE STATE, AND REVOLUTION IN NICARAGUA

MAXINE MOLYNEUX

The fall of the Nicaraguan dictator, 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 characterized by the incorporation of a wide cross-section of the population into political activity.

Large numbers of women from all social classes joined the youth and the unwaged poor men who 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. Women made up approximately 30 percent of the FSLN's combat forces, and at its peak in 1979, the women's organization of the FSLN, the Association of Women Confronting the National Problem, or AMPRONAC, had over 8,000 members. Many more women who were not involved in organized politics provided vital logistical and backup support to the revolutionary forces, and still others gave their support silently by refusing to denounce their revolutionary neighbors, or by hiding a fleeing combatant.

The extent of women's participation in the struggle against Somoza has been regarded by many authors 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. The specific ways in which women became political subjects has not been subjected to rigorous analysis, partly because it seems obvious and partly because women's extensive revolutionary activism is seen as the effect of the universalizing
character of the opposition to Somoza. In the words of one author, this process dissolved the specificity of political subjects in the generalized struggle against the dictatorship. Put simply, all were united against the dictatorship, and differences of class, age, and gender were transcended. It was this unity that accounted for the strength and ultimate success of the opposition movement.

However, much depends upon what is implied by subjects "losing their specificity" and goals being universalized. For the universalization of the goals of revolutionary subjects does not necessarily entail a loss of their specific identities, and it is certainly doubtful whether this can be said to have happened in the case of women. As far as women were concerned it would be difficult to argue that a loss of their gender identities occurred, except perhaps to a limited extent among the front line guerrilleros where a degree of masculinization and a blurring of gender distinctions took place. Rather, representations of women acquired new connotations, ones that politicized the social roles with which women are conventionally associated, but did not dissolve them.

The participation of women in political activity was certainly part of the wider process of popular mobilization, but it was entered into from a distinctive social position to men, one crucially shaped by the sexual division of labor. 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 the women in the barrios. For many poor women, entry into political life began with the earthquake of 1972, when in the aftermath, the neighborhood committees were organized to care for the victims, feed the dispossessed, and tend the wounded. The anger that followed Somoza's misappropriation of the relief funds intensified as the brutal methods used to contain opposition escalated. 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 crucially as mothers. This transition to "combative motherhood" was assisted by the propaganda efforts of the radical clergy, the Sandinistas, and by AMPRONAC, which linked these traditional identities to more general strategic objectives, and celebrated women's role in the creation of a more just and humanitarian social order. The revolutionary appropriation of the symbol of motherhood has since been institutionalized in the
Molyneux's canonization of the "Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs," a support group which remains an active part of the Sandinistas' political base.7

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 raises an important question which lies at the heart of debates about the relationship between socialist revolution and women's emancipation. For if women surrender their specific interests in the universal struggle for a different society, at what point are these interests rehabilitated, legitimated, and responded to by the revolutionary forces or by the new socialist state? Some feminist writing implies that they are never adequately reestablished and that this is why socialism8 has failed to fulfill its promise to emancipate women. Such critics point out that not only does gender inequality still persist in these states, but also in some ways women could be considered to be worse off than they were before the revolution. Far from having been "emancipated" as the official rhetoric sometimes claims, women's work load has been increased and there has been no substantial redefinition 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 childcare agencies remains inadequate. As one Soviet woman recently summed it up, "If this is emancipation, then I'm against it."9

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 skepticism. A feminist writer recently expressed an emerging 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."10

An even more negative view of the record of socialist states sees them as representing merely another form of patriarchal domination. It suggests that the "revolutionary equality" commonly claimed as the experience of women and men freedom fighters in
battle is replaced in the postrevolutionary 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 gone unrewarded by those whom they helped to bring to power. Women, like the working class in another conception, appear to 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 article focuses on the Nicaraguan revolution and its progress since the seizure of state power by the Sandinistas in July 1979, in order to consider the proposition that women's interests are not served by socialist revolutions. The article examines 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. The first part of the discussion reviews some of the theoretical questions raised by this debate, particularly the matter of "women's interests." The second section describes and interprets the policies that the Sandinista state has adopted in relation to women in order to determine how women's interests are 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 been denied representation or have been deliberately marginalized through the operations of "patriarchy."  

WOMEN'S INTERESTS  
The concept of women's interests is central to feminist evaluations of socialist societies and indeed social policies in general. Most feminist critiques of socialist regimes rest on an implicit or explicit assumption that there is a given entity, women's interests, that is ignored or overridden by policymakers. However, the question of these interests is far more complex than is frequently assumed. As the problems of deploying any theory of interest in the analysis of postrevolutionary situations are considerable, the following discussion must be considered an attempt to open up debate rather than to attain closure.

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. 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 are likely to turn against it, we are making a number of assumptions: that gender interests are the equivalent of women's interests, that gender is the principal determinant of women's interests, and that women's subjectivity, real or potential, is 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 transclass unity among women is to some degree given by this commonality of interests.

Although 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 interests 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 recognized as being multicausal in origin and mediated through a variety of different structures, mechanisms, and levels which may vary considerably across space and time. There is therefore continuing 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 interpersonal power relations—or all of them simultaneously. Because 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, it is difficult to see how it would over-
come the two most salient and intractable features of women's oppression—its multicausal 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 common to it. A theory of interests that has an application to the debate about women's capacity to struggle for and benefit from social change must begin by recognizing difference rather than by 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 implicitly or explicitly, upon different theories of the causes of gender inequality. For the purpose of clarifying the issues discussed here, three conceptions of women's interests, which are frequently conflated, will be delineated. These are women's interests, strategic gender interests, and practical gender interests.

Women's interests. Although present in much political and theoretical discourse, the concept of women's interests is, for the reasons given earlier, a highly contentious one. Because women are positioned within their societies through a variety of different means—among them, class, ethnicity, and gender—the interests they have as a group are similarly shaped in complex and sometimes conflicting ways. It is therefore difficult, if not impossible, to generalize 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 may have certain general interests in common. These can be called gender interests to differentiate them from the false homogeneity imposed by the notion of women's interests.

Strategic gender interests. 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 in the first instance deductively, that is, 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 assist in
the formulation of strategic objectives to overcome women's sub-ordination, such as the abolition of the sexual division of labor, the alleviation of the burden of domestic labor and childcare, the removal of institutionalized forms of discrimination, the attainment of political equality, the establishment of 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 they are the ones most frequently considered by feminists to be women's "real" interests. The demands that are formulated on this basis are usually termed "feminist" as is the level of consciousness required to struggle effectively for them.\(^1\)

**Practical gender interests.** Practical gender interests are given inductively and arise from the concrete conditions of women's positioning within the gender division of labor. In contrast to strategic gender interests, these are formulated by the women who are themselves 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 labor as those primarily responsible for their household's daily welfare, women have a special interest in domestic provision and public welfare.\(^1\)

When governments fail to provide these basic needs, women withdraw their support; when the livelihood of their families—especially their children—is threatened, 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 closely intertwined; it is, for obvious reasons, usually poor women who are so readily mobilized by economic necessity. Practical interests, therefore, cannot be assumed to be innocent of class effects. Moreover, these practical interests do not in themselves challenge the prevailing forms of gender subordination, even though they arise directly out of them. An understanding of this is vital in understanding the capacity or failure of states or organizations to win the loyalty and support of women.

The pertinence of these ways of conceptualizing interests for an
understanding of women's consciousness is a complex matter, but three initial points can be made. First, the relationship between what we have called strategic gender interests and women's recognition of them and desire to realize them cannot be assumed. Even the lowest common denominator of interests which might seem uncontentious and of universal applicability (such as 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 realized in a piecemeal fashion could threaten the short-term practical interests of some women, or entail a cost in the loss of forms of protection which are not then compensated for in some way. 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 politicization of these practical interests and their transformation into strategic interests that women can identify with and support which constitutes a central aspect of feminist political practice.

Second, the way in which interests are formulated—whether by women or political organizations—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 considering the problem of internationalism and the limits and possibilities of cross-cultural solidarity. Finally, because 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. Although they can form the basis of unity around a common program, such unity has to be constructed—it is never given. Moreover, even when unity exists it is always conditional, and the historical record suggests that it tends to 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.\textsuperscript{18}

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, 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 toward 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 polarization, they disappear. Rather, they become more specifically attached to and defined by social class. An awareness of the complex 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, that is, whether all or any of these interests are represented within the state. Before any analysis can be attempted it is necessary to specify in what sense the term "interest" is being deployed. 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, I shall turn now to the Nicaraguan revolution, and consider how the Sandinistas have formulated women's interests, and how women have fared under their rule.

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, counterrevolution, and external intervention. It could therefore be seen as an exceptional case, and its usefulness as an example consequently limited. Yet although the Sandinistas face a particularly severe constellation of negative circumstances, most socialist revolutions have encountered difficulties of a similar kind and even degree. One has only to think of the encirclement and internal disruption by enemy forces which the Bolsheviks faced after 1917; the conditions of dire scarcity prevailing in postrevolutionary Mozambique, China, or South Yemen; the blockade of poor nations such as Cuba; or the devasta-
tion through war wreaked on Vietnam to realize that such conditions are more common than not in the attempts to build socialist societies.

Yet the fact that Nicaragua shares certain circumstances with the states referred to above 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 anticapitalist 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 North Atlantic Treaty Organization 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, nonalignment, and political pluralism. An opposition was allowed to operate within certain clearly defined limits, and more than 60 percent of the economy remained in private hands, despite the nationalization of Somocista assets. "Sandinismo" promised to produce a different kind of socialism, one that consolidated the revolutionary overthrow of the old regime through the creation of a new army and its control of other organs of state power, 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 around the world as well. It was this perhaps, rather than its "communism," that accounted for the ferocity and determination of the Reagan administration's efforts to bring the process to an end.19

The Nicaraguan revolution also gave hope to those who supported women's liberation, for here too, the Sandinistas were 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 mobilizing around feminist demands in countries like Mexico, Peru, and Brazil. The Sandinistas' awareness of the limitations of orthodox Marxism encouraged some to believe that a space would be allowed for the development of new social movements such as feminism. Some members
of the leadership seemed aware of the importance of women's liberation and of the need for it in Nicaragua. The early issues of Somos AMNLAEN, one of two newspapers of the women's organization, contained articles about feminist issues and addressed some of the ongoing debates within Western feminism. Unlike many of its counterparts elsewhere, the FSLN, the revolutionary party, did not denounce feminism as a "counterrevolutionary 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 mobilizing many thousands of women in support of its struggle. It had done this partly through AMPRONAC, the women's organization that combined a commitment to overthrow the Somoza regime with that of struggling for women's equality. At its peak in 1979, two years after it was founded, AMPRONAC had attracted over 8,000 members. Feminist observers noted the high level of participation of women in the ranks of the combat forces, epitomized in Dora Maria Tellez's role as Commander Two in the seizure of the Presidential Palace by the guerillas in 1978, and they debated how the Sandinista commitment to women's equality would be realized if they triumphed.

Once they were in power, these hopes were not disappointed. Only weeks after the triumph, article 30 of decree number 43 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 coordinators of the party. In September, AMPRONAC was transformed into the Luisa Amanda Espinosa Association of Nicaraguan Women (AMNLAEN) to advance the cause of women's emancipation and carry through the program of revolutionary transformation. Public meetings were adorned with the slogan "No revolution without women's emancipation: no emancipation without revolution." The scene seemed to be set for an imaginative and distinctive strategy for women's emancipation in Nicaragua.

But after the first few years in power, the FSLN's image abroad began to lose some of its distinctive appeal. The combined pressures of economic scarcity, counterrevolution, 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 U.S.-backed counter-
revolutionaries in 1982, a further casualty of these difficulties appeared to be the Sandinista commitment to the emancipation of women. AMNLAE, the women's union, reduced its public identification with "feminism" and spoke increasingly of the need to promote women's interests in the context of the wider struggle. Already, at its constitutive assembly at the end of 1981, it had defined its role as enabling women to integrate themselves as a decisive force in the revolution. AMNLAE's first priority was given as "defense of the revolution." But it was only in 1982, as the crisis deepened and the country went onto a war footing that the priority really did become [as it had to] the revolution's survival, with all efforts directed to military defense. AMNLAE became actively involved in recruiting women to the army and militia. Under such circumstances it is hardly surprising that the efforts to promote women's emancipation were scaled down or redefined. Emancipation was to come about as a by-product of making and defending the revolution. Yet, even before the crisis deepened, little had been achieved to tangibly improve the position of women, and FSLN cadres considered that progress in this area was necessarily limited. In the first major speech on women's status since the overthrow, the minister of defense, Tomás Borge, acknowledged that although certain important advances had been made, "all of us have to honestly admit that we haven't confronted the struggle for women's liberation with the same courage and decisiveness [as shown in the liberation struggle]. . . . From the point of view of daily exertion, women remain fundamentally in the same conditions as in the past."20 Was it the case then that women's specific interests had not been adequately represented in Sandinista policies?

SANDINISTA POLICY WITH REGARD TO WOMEN

As a socialist organization, the FSLN recognized women's oppression as something that had to be eliminated in the creation of a new society. The FSLN gave support to the principle of gender equality as part of its endorsement of the socialist ideal of social equality for all. The 1969 program of the FSLN 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 Estatuo Fundamental, the embryonic constitution that 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 achieving it." This provided the juridical context for future legislative and policy measures aimed at securing some of the conditions enabling this equality to be achieved.

Most contemporary 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 that combine a concern to promote equality with a desire to remove some of the obstacles to achieving it. Some of the strategic interests of women are therefore recognized and, in theory, are 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 that espouse Marxist theory. They share an approach that links gender oppression to class oppression and believe women's emancipation can only be achieved with the creation of a new, socialist 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 "humanizing life and improving the quality and content of human relations."21

According to official views and party documents, this involves implementing 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.22 Some of these guidelines have been incorporated into AMNLAE's official program which lists its main goals as (1) defending the revolution; (2) promoting women's political and ideological awareness and advancing their social, political, and economic participation in the revolution; (3) combatting legal and other institutional inequalities; (4) encouraging women's cultural and technical advancement and entry into areas of employment traditionally reserved for men, combined with opposing discrimination in employment; (5) fostering respect for domestic labor and organizing childcare services for
working women; and (6) creating and sustaining links of international solidarity. The 1969 program of the FSLN also made special mention of eliminating prostitution and other "social vices," helping the abandoned working mother, and protecting the illegitimate child. Each of these issues has been addressed in subsequent legislation and social policy. There is also official concern for allowing greater freedom of choice to women in the matter of childbearing, by making contraceptives more widely available and by not prosecuting those who carry out abortions, except in a few cases.23

Although these goals, if realized, would be insufficient to achieve the complete emancipation of women, based as they are on a somewhat narrow definition of gender interests, they do embody some strategic concerns, in that they are directed toward eliminating some of the fundamental inequalities between the sexes. However, progress in Nicaragua has so far been uneven. There is official support for the implementation of the full program, but only some of the guidelines have been translated into policy and then only with limited effect. 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.24 The socialization of childcare and domestic labor has affected only a minority of women: by mid-1984, forty-three childcare centers were able to absorb around 4,000 children, and further expansion was not envisaged because of mounting financial difficulties, caused by the contra war.25 The embryonic Family Law, the Ley de Alimentos, passed by the Council of State at the end of 1982, aimed to establish a more democratic, egalitarian, and mutually responsible family, but it was not ratified by the Junta, and public discussion of the issues it raised all but ceased in 1983. The greatest benefits that women received were from the welfare programs and from certain areas of legal reform. Women also felt the impact of change in the realm of political mobilization in which they played an increasingly active part. Despite these advances it was evident that the gap between intention and realization was considerable.

Beyond the obvious problem of lack of time, there are three other considerations to be examined. The first concerns the practical limitations, which restricted the state's capacity for social
transformation, the second involves factors of a general political kind, and the third concerns the nature of the policies themselves and the way in which the Sandinistas' commitment to women's emancipation was formulated. All these issues have to be taken into account when assessing the position of women in postrevolutionary 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.

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 effect of the contras and U.S. pressure, and the size of the external debt. 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 destabilization efforts of internal and external forces limited the available resources, which had to satisfy the military requirements of the state, but also were crucial for investment in long-term economic programs, meeting short-term consumer needs and fulfilling the popular expectation to expand social services. It is not difficult to see how these factors reduced the scope of planning objectives, channeling scarce resources of both a financial and technical kind, as well as human potential away from social programs into national defense and economic development. By 1984 more than one-third of the national budget was being channeled into defense.

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, and they go some way toward explaining why the emancipation of women, except within a rather narrow interpretation, was not considered a priority.

Even where the resource base existed, the government still faced problems of implementation in the form of political opposition to some of the proposed reforms. The Nicaraguan revolution 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 counterrevolution and of the diversity of sites within the state and civil society through which it can be organized. 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 United States 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 five years since the fall of Somoza, the revolutionary government has also succeeded in consolidating its power base through the establishment of the "mass organizations," the popular defense committees, the militia, and the FSLN itself. Moreover, the opposition—both civilian and military—was unable to offer a credible alternative, in part because of its links to the United States and to the Somocistas.

Despite the strategic and political advantages which accrued to the Sandinistas as a result of these transformations of the state and of its institutions, they did not include the elimination of the opposition. The constitutional commitment to the principles of economic and political pluralism allowed a space, albeit a restricted one, from which oppositional forces could operate. The FSLN attempted to maintain, as far as the situation permitted, a broad multic peace base of support. It tried to win over a sector of the capitalist class, and on the whole it also sought to maintain a conciliatory attitude toward its opponents, sometimes in the face of considerable provocation. The opposition therefore had the right to make its views heard and could organize to protect its interests, providing these did not jeopardize the government's overall survival or place the interests of the majority at risk. When these were considered threatened, the Sandinistas intervened. The State of Emergency, declared in 1982, allowed the state to curb some of the opposition's activities and imposed censorship on the main opposition paper, La Prensa. By international standards, these moves were moderate ones, especially given the conditions of war which have increasingly prevailed since 1983. Moreover, the govern-
ment lifted the State of Emergency to allow for the preparations of the late-1984 elections, and the opposition was encouraged to contest them.

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 socialization of the economy and have failed to implement the other side of the equation—the democratization of political power. In this, the Sandinistas at least tried harder than most. However, as with most attempts at compromise, there was a price; the commitment to "pluralism" and to maintaining the support or at least neutrality of the capitalist class had as one of its necessary effects the imposition of certain limits on the transformative capacity of the state in some areas of policy. This was especially clear with regard to the government's program to improve the position of women.

The maintenance of a sizable private sector (78 percent of industry, 60 percent of commerce, 76 percent of agriculture) and the granting of a measure of autonomy to it allowed some employers, especially in the smaller nonunionized 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 offered the most sustained resistance to Sandinista reforms was the conservative wing of the Catholic church. Its extensive institutional presence, forms of organization, access to the media (it had its own radio station), and base within a substantial section of the population made it a formidable opponent. Its impact on slowing reform in the areas directly concerned with women, was considerable. Conservative clergy actively opposed educational and family reforms, enforced bans on weekend work (which made it difficult for voluntary labor schemes to achieve much), opposed the conscription of women, and were strong advocates of traditional family life and the division of labor which characterizes it. The conservative church also opposed divorce reform and urged adherence to the papal encyclical stating that it is sinful to employ "unnatural" methods of birth control. It has also opposed the legalization of abortion, forcing thousands of women to remain in the hands of back street practitioners.
What was therefore a positive feature of the Sandinista revolution—its democratic commitment—did have the effect of diluting policy measures and weakening the government's capacity for implementation. It is therefore erroneous to imagine that just because a state might have a coherent set of policies and a unifying ideology that is has the capacity to be fully effective in social policy terms. It should be clear that the most favored solution historically is a problematic one to say the least: the subjugation of the opposition and the strengthening of the state.

A second political factor of a very different kind, but equally crucial to the success or failure of government policies is that of the population's degree of support for or resistance to the policies. As far as changes in the position of women are concerned, the Sandinistas were limited in what they could do both by the conservative influence of the Catholic church and by the relatively small social base of support for feminism. There was no history of a popular and militant feminism in Nicaragua (as there was for a time in Argentina, for example), with the result that the Sandinistas had to contend with deeply entrenched machista attitudes and considerable hostility among much of the population to the idea of women's emancipation.

Nevertheless, the revolutionary war provided the initial context for the weakening of the traditional stereotypes and conventions, and it was on this basis that the Sandinistas began to build popular support for AMNLAE's campaigns. These tended to be successful when sufficient time and energy was devoted to explaining the objectives and learning from the women's responses—that is, creating and reproducing an organic link between the organization and the people it was representing, a process which amounted to synthesizing the practical and strategic aspects of women's interests. Yet, as we shall see shortly, the campaigns suffered from a number of limitations, including the fact that they were directed mostly at women and did not seek to make radical changes in men's attitudes and behavior. As the pressure of the war mounted, AMNLAE abandoned the more feminist themes in the belief that they would alienate popular support. How far this was a risk, however, could not be established in the absence of extensive research into both attitudes and concrete conditions to establish the likely effects of the proposed reforms.

Only in this context is it relevant to discuss the third factor
that 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 was able to implement only those parts of the program for women's emancipation that coincided with its general goals, enjoyed popular support, and were realizable without arousing strong opposition. The policies from which women derived some benefit were pursued principally because they fulfilled some wider goal or goals, whether these were social welfare, development, social equality, or political mobilization in defense of the revolution. This is, in effect, what the Sandinistas meant by the need to locate women's emancipation within the overall struggle for social reform and survival against intensifying external pressure.

This kind of qualified support for women's emancipation is found in most of the states that have pursued socialist development policies. Indeed, the guidelines that form the basis of their program 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 realization of the wider goals, but it is pursued insofar as it contributes to the realization of those goals. There is therefore a unity of purpose between the goals of women's emancipation and the developmental and social goals of revolutionary states.29

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 labor force, and to help harness the family more securely to the process of social reproduction. The first aim, of expanding or maintaining the power base of the state, is pursued by attempting to draw women into the new political organizations such as the women's, youth, and labor unions; the party; and neighborhood associations. There is a frequently expressed fear that unless women are politicized they may not cooperate 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 labor, that is, as primarily located
outside the sphere of production. More positively, women are also regarded as crucial agents of revolutionary change whose radicalization challenges ancient customs and privileges within the family, and has important effects on the next generation, through the impact on their children. The political mobilization of women supposes some attempt to persuade them that their interests as well as more universal concerns (national, humanitarian, and so forth) are represented by the state.¹⁰

The second way in which the mobilization 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 labor supply, which is a necessary concomitant of any successful development program. In most underdeveloped countries, women form only a small percentage of the economically active population (usually less than 20 percent), and although 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 underproductive, confined to family concerns in workshops or in the fields, and subject to the authority of male kin. Government policies have therefore emphasized the need for both education and a restructuring 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 center of initiatives aimed at social reconstruction. Postrevolutionary 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 prerevolutionary 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 socialization, 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 example, in Nicaragua there is no absolute shortage of labor, nor is production being greatly expanded. There is as yet therefore no
urgent requirement for women to enter employment despite some expansion in state sector demand. Initially, women were called upon to supply a considerable amount of voluntary labor as health workers and teachers in the popular campaigns (health in 1981, literacy in 1982). But there was no strong material incentive to provide widespread nursery care while the economy did not depend upon a mass influx of female labor. Moreover, because most women worked in the informal sector it was assumed that a substantial percentage of these jobs were compatible with their domestic responsibilities. This situation might be expected to change if there is a significant escalation of military activities, necessitating the entry of women into jobs vacated by men serving in the armed forces.11

As noted earlier, the emphasis of the government was on two other strategies, that of political mobilization and legal reform. The new laws regarding the family were designed to strengthen the institution, promote greater family cohesion, and remove the gender inequalities that prevailed. The high rate of male desertion, migrancy, and serial polygamy left large numbers of women as the sole providers for their children: 34 percent of Nicaraguan households were female headed—in Managua, it was 60 percent—a factor which contributed directly to the high incidence of female poverty.12 The new Provision Law made all adult members of the family, on a three-generation basis, legally liable for maintaining the family unit which included taking a share in the household tasks. In addition to these changes, the health and safety provisions of women workers were improved, and new legislation gave rural women workers an entitlement to their own wages to redress a situation in which a family wage was usually paid to the male head of the household.13

As far as the political mobilization of women was concerned, by 1984 there were more women mobilized than at any time since the months leading up to the overthrow. AMNLAE claimed a card-carrying membership of 85,000, and women made up 22 percent of FSLN's membership and more than one-third, or 37 percent, of the leadership.14 Women's participation in the other mass organizations and in the organs of popular defense also expanded with the deepening of the crisis. Approximately one-half of the members of the Sandinista defense committees, a type of neighborhood association, were women, and women made up a similar proportion of the militia.
These then, were the areas in which the greatest advances were registered in relation to achieving policy objectives which concerned women as such. Yet more women benefited, and have benefited more, from the implementation of measures designed to secure general objectives. Chief among these was welfare.

A detailed analysis of the impact of Sandinista social policies is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I will briefly summarize some of the relevant conclusions by considering the effects of the reforms in terms of the three categories of interest referred to earlier.

If we disaggregate women's interests and consider how different categories of women fared since 1979, it is clear that the majority of women in Nicaragua were positively affected by the government's redistribution policies. This is so even though fundamental structures of gender inequality were not dismantled. In keeping with the socialist character of the government, policies were targeted in favor of the poorest sections of the population and focused on basic needs provision in the areas of health, housing, education, and food subsidies. In the short span of only five years, the Sandinistas reduced the illiteracy rate from over 50 percent to 13 percent; doubled the number of educational establishments, increased school enrollment, eradicated a number of mortal diseases, provided the population with basic healthcare services, and achieved more in their housing program than Somoza had in his entire period of rule. In addition, the land reform canceled peasants' debts and gave thousands of rural workers their own parcels of land or secured them stable jobs on the state farms and cooperatives.

These policies have been of vital importance in gaining the support of poor women. According to government statistics, women form more than 60 percent of the poorest Nicaraguans; in the poorest category in Managua (incomes of less than 600 cordobas per month), there are 354 women for each 100 men. 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. Of course not all women were to benefit from these programs; women whose economic interests lay in areas adversely affected by Sandinista economic policies (imports, luxury goods, and so forth) have suffered some financial loss, as have most women from the privileged classes as a result of higher taxation.
is also the case that while poor women benefited from the welfare provisions, they were also the most vulnerable to the pressures of economic constraints and especially to shortages in basic provisions.39

In terms of practical gender interests, these redistributive policies have also had gender as well as class effects. By virtue of their place within the sexual division of labor, 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 AMNLAE have been directed at resolving some of the practical problems women face, as is exemplified by its mother and child healthcare program, or by its 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.40 A feature of this kind of campaign is its recognition of women's practical interests, but in accepting the division of labor and women's subordination within it, it may entail a denial of their strategic interests.

With respect to strategic interests, the acid test of whether women's emancipation is on the political agenda or not, the progress which was made is modest but significant. 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, inkind, or in the form of services. This also enabled the issue of domestic labor to be politicized in the discussions of the need to share this work equally among all members of the family. The Land Reform encouraged women's participation and leadership in cooperatives and gave women work for their wages and titles to land. There has also been an effort to establish childcare agencies such as nurseries, and preschool services. Some attempts have been made to challenge female stereotypes not just by outlawing the exploitation of women in the media, but also by promoting some women to positions of responsibility and emphasizing the importance of women in the militia and reserve bat-
talion. And finally there has been a sustained effort to mobilize women around their own needs 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, 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 not been represented in state policymaking. The Sandinista record on women is certainly uneven, and it is as yet too early to make any comprehensive 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 (except Cuba) in recognizing 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 defense of the revolution because the latter provides the necessary conditions for realizing a program for women's emancipation, it is, with certain qualifications, correct.

Yet these qualifications are important nonetheless, and have a significance which goes beyond the Sandinista revolution to the wider question of the relationship between socialism and feminism. Three of these issues can be listed here in summary form. The first is that what we have called strategic gender interests—although recognized in the official theory and program of women's emancipation—remains rather 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 of women's emancipation remains alive and open, and does not become entombed within official doctrine.

The second issue concerns the relationship 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 that constitutes the problem—principles like social equality and women's emancipation can only be realized within
determinate conditions of existence. So linking the program for women's emancipation to these wider goals need not necessarily be a cause for concern because these wider goals may constitute the preconditions for realizing the principles. The question is rather, the nature of the link. Are gender interests articulated into a wider strategy of economic development (for example) or are they irrevocably subordinated to it? In the first case we would expect gender interests to be recognized as being specific and irreducible, and requiring something more for their realization than is generally provided for in the pursuit of the wider goals. Thus, when it is not possible to pursue a full program for women's emancipation this can be explained and debated. The goal can be left on the agenda, and every effort 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 minimized. The issues are trivialized or buried; the program 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 long run. For the moment, the intense pressures which the Sandinistas are under make it difficult to resist the pattern which has emerged elsewhere in the socialist bloc of countries, that of subordination rather than linkage or articulation.

And this raises the third general issue, which is that of political guarantees. For if gender interests are to be realized 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. Women's organizations, the official representatives of women's interests, should not conform to Lenin's conception of mass organizations as mere "transmission belts of the party." Rather, they must enjoy a certain independence and exercise power and influence over party policy, albeit within certain necessary constraints. In other words, the issue of gender interests and their means of representation cannot be resolved in the absence of a discussion of Socialist democracy and the forms of state appropriate to the transition to socialism; it is a question therefore not just of what interests are represented in the state, but ultimately and critically of how they are represented.
NOTES

This article is based on research carried out in Nicaragua with the help of the Nuffield Foundation. It is part of ongoing research into state policies, women, and the family in postrevolutionary societies. Many thanks to the readers of an earlier version of this text, especially to Anthony Barnett, Ted Benton, Hermione Harris, and Azar Tabari. A shorter version was published in Critical Social Policy [London], no. 10 (Summer 1984): 59-75.

1. The Association of Women Confronting the National Problem was founded in 1977 to counter Somoza's excesses and promote gender equality. Its general secretary was Lea Guido, now minister of health. See AMNLAE, Documentos de al Asamblea de AMNLAE, Managua, 1981, for an account of AMPRONAC's history and its list of aims; and Margaret Randall, Sandino's Daughters [London: Zed Press, 1982].


3. The women writers have been more interested in this question. See especially Elisabeth Maier, Nicaragua, La Mujer en la Revolution [Mexico: Ediciones de Cultura Popular, 1980].


6. This is usually translated as "poor neighborhoods."

7. This organization is involved in various anti-imperialist and pro-peace campaigns and gives support to the bereaved and those anxious about daughters or sons in the battle zones.

8. 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 The Alternative in Eastern Europe [London: NLB, 1979]. Others have not reached the level of economic socialization that qualifies them for inclusion in this category.

9. See, for example, the attitudes of women to this in Carola Hansson and Karin Liden's book of interviews, Moscow Women [New York: Pantheon, 1983].


11. This position is a logical extrapolation of its premises, and is one frequently expressed at meetings and discussions within the women's liberation movement. However, there does not exist, to my knowledge, any written theoretical elaboration of it.
12. This discussion necessarily leaves out the specific situation of women in Nicaragua's ethnic minorities. The Miskito Indian communities in particular require separate consideration because they have, and have had historically, a very different relationship to central government than that which is described here.

13. Male power—whether institutionalized or interpersonal—and the essentialist or naturalist arguments which legitimate it, do play a part in the explanation of women's continuing subordination after revolutionary upheavals; but the importance of such factors should not be exaggerated. There are differing definitions of patriarchy, but most of them agree that patriarchy describes a power relation existing between the sexes, exercised by men over women and institutionalized within various social relations and practices, including law, family, and education.

14. There is a third usage of the term “interest” round 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 Edward Benton, *Realism, Power, and Objective Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); and Barry Hindess, “Power, Interests, and the Outcome of Struggles.” *Sociology* 16 (1982): 498-511.


16. 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.


18. This is the position of some radical feminist groups in Europe.


20. Borge's speech was delivered on the occasion of the fifth anniversary of AMNLAE. It was published in the newspaper *Barricada* on 4 October 1982, and is available in translation from Pathfinder Press, 1982.

21. Ibid.

22. These principles were laid down at the 1921 Comintern Congress and stressed six main goals: to encourage the entry of women into wage labor; to socialize domestic labor and childcare; to provide juridical equality; to provide greater protection for mothers and the family; and to promote the mobilization of women into political activity and public administration.

23. In the first three years, only one case had been tried and this was of an abortionist accused of gross malpractice.

24. Approximately 20 percent of economically active women are in agriculture, with similar percentages for personal services and marketing activities. Women account for only 15.25 percent of the formal sector urban work force. See Deighton et al.

25. Figures from the Oficina de Mujer, the office which coordinates the activities of AMNLAE with the FSLN.
26. Supporters of the White House view of Nicaragua as "totalitarian" forget that the Western liberal democracies suspended certain civil liberties and normal democratic procedures (including elections) during wartime.
27. Substantial numbers of women were in favor of conscription and bitterly resented the council of state's decision in 1983 to exempt women. AMNLAE fought a popular campaign to revoke the decision which resulted in women having the right to volunteer.
28. 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.
30. This viewpoint has to be compared and contrasted with many nationalist movements that call for the sacrifice of women's interests (and those of other oppressed groups) in the interests of the nation.
31. In agriculture this is already evident. In some of the regions most affected by the war (Matagalpa, Chinandega), where male conscription is high, women had come to represent as much as 40 percent of the work force by February 1984. [Interview with Magda Enriquez, a member of AMNLAE's national directorate, March 1984.]
32. Data are from figures supplied by the Oficina de la Mujer and the central planning agency MIPLAN.
33. These provisions were contained in decrees 573 and 538.
34. Data are from Oficina de la Mujer, 1984.
35. For a fuller account of Sandinista social policies see Thomas Walker, ed., Nicaragua Five Years On (New York: Praeger, 1985), and for their policies on women, see my article "Women," chap. 6 in the same volume.
36. See Walker.
37. For a discussion of the agrarian reform and its effects on women, see Carmen Diana Deere, "Co-operative Development and Women's Participation in Nicaragua's Agrarian Reform," American Journal of Agrarian Economics (December 1983).
38. Data are from the Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos, December 1981.
39. Basic provisions were rationed and heavily subsidized until 1983 when it became increasingly difficult to peg prices due to mounting economic pressures.
40. AMNLAE argued that the implications of women conserving resources under a socialist government were radically different from those under capitalism because in the first case the beneficiaries were the people, and in the second, private interests.
41. Although there are no women in the nine-member junta that constitutes the FSLN leadership, the vice-president of the council of state (until the elections of November 1984) was a woman, and women assumed many key positions in the party at the regional level. On three occasions after 1979, women filled ministerial posts.
42. This argument was put forward to quash the new Family Law in the council of state. See reports in the national press during November 1982.