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**WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN SELF-HELP HOUSING:
THE SAN JUDAS BARRIO PROJECT, MANAGUA,
NICARAGUA**

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I. Introduction

In current Latin American literature there are a growing number of studies which focus on the difficulties surrounding the implementation of community participation in housing improvement programmes. While a substantial number of these studies point to the limitation of trying to promote a 'top down' participation programme on the basis that this will be met with resistance by the target group, very few studies examine factors operating at the project level which limit participation or offer an analysis of the constraints which exist between the group of self-builders. Explanations to date refer to the laziness of the participants, and to the lack of will and time to participate in voluntary labour, corruption, and to co-optation of local leaders. In all these studies little reference at all is made to women and to their work in construction, nor to the division of labour, and gender roles generally.

A case study of community participation among the residents of San Judas, a low-income barrio in Managua, Nicaragua, with which I was involved provides an opportunity to identify the important role played by women in the formulation and execution of a collective self-build housing project¹. Mobilisation around the issue of housing improvements and the decision to form a housing collective began in the community itself, and this bottom-up initiative was generated largely by women. Although the project was successful and achieved its aims, as in any other project of this type some conflicts arose between the community and authorities and between the men and women participating in the project. This paper assesses the extent to which these conflicts were gender based and also attempts to explain why the conflicts arose, how they were eventually solved and how they modified the original proposals of the project. The intention is not to exclusively attribute the origin of all conflicts to gender issues, but in this context they played a certain role and thus have very direct implications for women's role in community decision making.

An examination of these issues is overdue, since research now shows that female-headed households are on the increase throughout Latin America and there is some evidence that these are among the poorest families (Buvinic et al. 1983). Women in low-income neighbourhoods are not only users of housing but producers, thus if adequate solutions to their housing needs are to be found planning agencies must be aware of how poor women's needs differ from those of poor men. The point I would like to suggest here is that in the face of continuing shortages of housing opportunities for the poor, any future strategies by governments or planners to provide low-income housing solutions, which genuinely seek to incorporate community participation by both men and women, must take account of changing household structures and also identify the constraints to women's participation.

In this study the aim is to identify how gender ascriptive roles effect the form and degree of participation of women in San Judas and the significance which gender issues have for women's involvement in the context of self-help housing schemes. Since the project was carried out shortly after the Sandinista victory in July 1979, I will begin, by way of background, by briefly describing the political and economic context in which the project took place.

The national context

¹Fieldwork for this case study was carried out between September 1980 and January 1982, based on participant observation through living in the neighbourhood and working on the building site throughout the duration of the project.

Prior to the revolution the majority of Nicaraguans lived in extreme poverty. The levels of poverty are reflected by a number of socioeconomic indicators - the high degree of malnutrition, high infant mortality, inadequate housing and sanitation, and the general lack of access to medical care and education.

From a population of under three million, according to the 1971 census, 60 per cent of the people lived in unfit housing conditions. The general situation in housing was exacerbated by an earthquake in 1972 which devastated much of the capital, resulting in a loss of 50,000 homes, most of which were never replaced. Over 50 per cent of the population was illiterate and in rural areas this figure rose to near 70 per cent. Lack of health care and services meant that six out of every ten deaths were caused by curable diseases. Life expectancy was the lowest in Central America (NACLA 1976; NACLA 1978; Wheelock 1979). Within the general pattern of poverty the situation was particularly serious for women and children. The infant mortality rate was between 120 and 146 per 1,000 live births and over 70 per cent of children suffered some degree of malnutrition during their lives². Maternal mortality was among the five leading causes of death for women in the 15-45 age group which indicates the absence of prenatal and postnatal care of mothers. Preventable diseases were the principal causes of death; diarrhoea and infectious diseases accounting for 31.4 per cent of all deaths (Bossert 1982, p. 261).

Women comprise 51 per cent of the total population and according to 1975 statistics are heads of household in 48 per cent of Nicaraguan families. The instability of the Nicaraguan family and the abandonment of women by their male partners is not only a question of the irresponsibility of men, or attributable to cultural attitudes, but is linked to the economic model of development of Nicaragua under Somoza. Since the 1950s and 1960s the extension of plantation agriculture for the production of agro-export crops has resulted in the proletarianisation of the countryside³. The dispossessed peasant farmers increased the agricultural labour force dramatically. Low wages, and the seasonal demand for labour, meant that men were not able to support their families, giving rise to increased migration to the city. The employment situation in the cities was equally precarious, since the industrialisation which did take place was highly mechanised and did little to absorb the available workforce⁴. Migration was a constant necessity since employment in the agricultural sector was guaranteed for only three months of the year⁵.

This economic reality contradicts the dominant ideology of women being materially and emotionally dependent on men, restricted after marriage to reproduction and domestic labour. Poor Nicaraguan

²See Panamerican Health Organisation (PAHO) 1979, *Condiciones de Salud del Niño en las Américas*. Publicación no. 381, Organización Panamericana de Salud, Washington. Studies carried out between 1969 and 1975 revealed that 57 per cent of children under five years suffered some degree of malnutrition (us AID 1976, pp. 105, 185) and between 1965 and 1975 the percentage of children suffering second and third degrees of malnutrition increased 105.2 per cent from 50 to 102 per 1,000.

³38.3 per cent of the rural population had become landless in 1978; see Deighton et al. 1983.

⁴It is estimated that two thirds of the urban labour force remain outside permanent wage employment and women comprise 70.1 per cent of this category; see Molyneux 1985.

⁵Employment in agriculture was only secure around the harvesting of principal export crops. It was estimated that 21,000 workers were employed all year in cotton farms but during the 70-day harvest 160,000 were required. This meant that 80 per cent of the cotton workers had to find other employment for the rest of the year; see Wheelock 1979.

women have had no choice but to seek waged labour, outside the home, to support their children. The proportion of women wage earners rose from 14 per cent in 1950 to 21.9 per cent in 1970 and 28.7 per cent in 1977 (Randall 1981). Despite the high percentage of women in waged labour, few are engaged directly in production. Most women are self-employed, and work in services or in selling, where earning capacity is precarious. In 1981 of those self-employed people earning less than 800 cordobas a month in Managua, 77 per cent were women⁶.

It was these conditions of deprivation which drove people into popular insurrection and to seek the overthrow of the Somoza regime. Women played a major role in the struggle and were heavily involved in the actual fighting. In the final stages of the war, 30 per cent of the fighters were women. When the Sandinista government came to power, in addition to the legacy of poverty they inherited a bankrupt economy without any foreign reserves and a debt of 1.6 billion. The costs of the war were high, amounting to more than 35 per cent of the industrial, and 25 per cent of the agricultural production.

Despite the deep economic problems the government set the improvement of the conditions for the poor as one of its major priorities. The Programme of Economic Reactivation in Benefit of the People (1980) announced measures to reactivate the economy, to reorganise the structural basis of production and to attend to the needs of those most marginalised by the previous regime. In this respect the Sandinista government recognised the special oppression of women, their oppression as workers and their subordination to men, thus one of the specified goals of the Sandinistas before and after the revolution was the emancipation of women. A series of legal reforms have been taken to alter the position of women in the area of personal status, family relations and to prohibit the exploitation of women in advertising and the media (Molyneux 1985b).

In a situation of scarce resources the government places much emphasis on popular participation in seeking solutions to its social and economic problems. Women have been encouraged to consolidate their organisational experiences gained during the insurrection and to extend their participation in all aspects of social and political affairs by joining the mass organisations. By consolidating and institutionalising the high level of popular mobilisation which was achieved in the military struggle, and in mass organisations, the government, within months of coming to power, was able to set in motion a national literacy drive, massive vaccination and clean-up campaigns, and the provision of neighbourhood services on a vast scale. Women have gained much from these welfare improvements and have played a major role in the execution of these programmes. From a total of 100,000 volunteer brigadistas who were trained to teach basic literacy, 60 per cent were women. Likewise in the Popular Health Days held throughout 1981-82, 78,000 health brigadistas were mobilised, of whom 75 per cent were women. The early achievements in literacy and health have been impressive. Within six months illiteracy had been reduced from 53 per cent to 13 per cent. In the First Popular Health Day over half a million polio vaccines were administered to children under five, and no new cases of polio were recorded in the following two years. In a three-day anti-malaria campaign pills were distributed to 70 per cent of the population, resulting in a 98 per cent fall in newly reported malaria cases (Melrose 1985).

Efforts to improve the working conditions have taken place since the revolution. Women who work in agriculture now have the right to receive their own wage packet. In the cities efforts have been made to set up production collectives for women; however, to date these have been restricted to traditional female activities, clothing collectives, and food preparation. Most of the women involved in the new collectives see it as a first step towards remunerative work in the productive sector. The particular plight of female

⁶At the time of fieldwork the official exchange rate was 10 cordobas to 1 dollar.

domestic workers has been recognised, and through the formation of the Union of Domestic, they have won a ten-hour day, double pay for holiday work, and a minimum wage of 400 cordobas a month. Maternity leave and measures to improve safety standards at work have been introduced. Some effort has been made to socialise childcare to release women into the workforce and allow them to participate in social and political life. Although the facilities still only reach a minority of women, by mid 1984 43 childcare centres had been set up (Molyneux 1985a).

As part of the reactivation programme the Ministry of Housing and Human Settlements (MINVAH) was created to tackle the massive housing deficit, estimated at 240,000 units. Following government guidelines, MINVAH places a very heavy emphasis on the participation of residents through the mass organisations for developing housing improvement schemes. In particular, much support and encouragement is given by MINVAH to local initiatives of community self-help by supplying materials and technical help. The residents of San Judas were among the first of the community groups who requested the collaboration and assistance of MINVAH to improve housing conditions in their neighbourhood.

The project setting - San Judas

The settlement of San Judas began to develop in the late 1950s and today it is one of the oldest and most densely populated barrios in Managua with a population of 37,000. The earliest occupants were poor migrants from rural areas seeking seasonal farm work. Plots were sold on a system of 'rental with promise of sale', whereby the buyer would assume the title with the final rental payments. The early development and growth of the barrio was sporadic, and lacked any urban planning. Subdivisions were sold without the installation of basic services or official subdivision standards. The area largely remained as farmland, being situated on the periphery of the city and more than seven kilometres from the old commercial centre.

After the 1972 earthquake the population of the barrio almost doubled overnight, with the influx of homeless abandoning the centre of the city. Vacant plots were quickly parcelled off by the subdividers but no provision was made for the installation of basic services. In addition, residents who had already paid for their land over the years but had not received titles from the subdividers found that their plots were resold. This illegal secondary subdivision of plots has given rise today to pockets of gross overcrowding.

A variety of housing types are to be found: independent houses consolidated over the years by the occupants and built of good materials, and a large proportion of less solid structures, of wooden boards, cardboard, and pieces of tin. The most precarious housing type, however, is the 'cuarterias' which represent the 'infill' development since the earthquake. These are rooms built around a communal space with water, washing and cooking facilities but which lack sewage connections and pluvial drainage. Access to the street is by a network of small passageways. Obscured from outside light, they are badly built wooden structures and represent the most unhygienic, cramped living conditions. It is not uncommon for two or three families to share one room and up to six or seven families sharing services. After the revolution San Judas became one

of the 'repartos intervenidos' and therefore an area scheduled by MINVAH for urban improvements⁷.

⁷Ley de Repartos Intervenidos - in October 1979, just two months after the revolution, the government took over the administration of 400 barrios (neighbourhoods), 125 of them in Managua. In these areas the landlords had failed in their legal duty to install basic services. In addition many residents had paid for their plots of land but had not received titles. The new law specified that repayments were to be withheld

San Judas is a low-income community, made up of unskilled factory workers, and self-employed men working in a range of services: mechanics, chauffeurs, taxi drivers, and some construction workers. Unemployment and underemployment is highest among the women who are restricted to jobs in the lowest paid sectors, such as washerwomen, domestics, and sellers. Work for both men and women is irregular and men often experience several months without employment. There is a continual cycle of migration within the city and to rural areas in search of seasonal work. A small proportion of San Judas residents is made up of lower middle class workers who have regular incomes working in government offices, teaching and administrative posts who live in two government built residential estates which now fall within the boundary of San Judas neighbourhood.

from landlords and paid directly to MINVAH, and they took over responsibility for the installation of basic infrastructure. Residents of these barrios were also to be given land titles whether they had finished paying their mortgages or not.

II. Community Mobilisation

Women community mobilisation and the Church

Nicaragua is a devoutly Roman Catholic country with 90 per cent of the population belonging to the faith, and it was from their adherence to their faith that many Christians were drawn into the armed struggle against Somoza. Traditionally the Nicaraguan Catholic Church as throughout Latin America was firmly identified with the ruling class, maintaining stability and reinforcing cultural traditions such as male domination. However, a fundamental transformation of the relationship between the Church, society and politics began with the Second Vatican Council in 1962. Church activities were no longer to be confined to tending to the spiritual affairs of the congregation, as priests were encouraged to become involved in the daily lives of their communities. At the Latin American Bishops' Conference at Medellin, Colombia, in 1968 the radical change in the Church expressed itself in a new liberation theology which called on priests to defend the rights of the oppressed, particularly the poor.

In Nicaragua new priests trained in the philosophy of Medellin began to work at the grassroots level, developing Christian Base Communities (CEBs). These early efforts in community organisation brought together people of the same neighbourhood and in choosing key biblical texts, the radical priests opened up discussion on the immediate economic and social realities facing the poor: they encouraged community development projects through mutual support and working together. With the increased corruption and the systematic repression which characterised the Somoza regime, particularly after the earthquake in 1872, the work of the CEBs became more politicised. From within the religious communities' priests, religious lay preachers, and Catholic youth, began to make links with the FSLN fighting forces. The Church was to become a key place for people to organise against Somoza, and an important force in mobilising women.

The greater proportion of church attenders were women, and activities associated with the Church were traditionally the only significant area of public participation for women outside the home. Under the cover of Church business women were able to become involved with the FSLN and in political work. Talking about San Judas during the war, Maria Silva Lopez, 35 years old, who is separated from her partner and has five children, said:

We in San Judas were Sandinista right from the start. We had everything organised for the final struggle against the Guardia. When they tried to take the barrio in June 1979 we were ready. In the early days, though, when we were organising - in 1977 and 1978 - I had a small shop, selling ' frescos' . It was a good place to organise from, you see people would come to my place, stop for a drink and pick up information or messages. I remember, those early days, too when the first 'compa' came from the Frente, to give us political orientation. A young companera (woman) from the Ministry of Health. We'd meet in my back patio, people would come from outside the barrio. We were all organised, my daughter Estrella carried messages and my son who went off to the mountains.

The residents of San Judas were well known for their participation in the popular insurrection. No heavy fighting took place in the barrio, but many young men and women left the barrio to join the FSLN fighting forces. For those women with family responsibilities the Civil Defence Committees (CDCs) organised at a street and block level, offered them the opportunity to take part in the struggle against Somoza from their homes. The activities of the CDCs were very varied and the participation of women took many forms. Through these neighbourhood networks, food supplies and distribution were controlled, clandestine hospitals and first aid were organised, 'safe' houses were set up and information on

the movements of the National Guard was transmitted to the muchachos, the Sandinista fighters. Women in San Judas, like almost every woman in Nicaragua, have a story to tell of the insurrection period and how they as women became involved. For the majority of Nicaraguan women the insurrection period had been the first opportunity to break with their traditional gender ascribed role as mothers, subordination by their male partners, and confinement to the domestic sphere. A much smaller number of poor women, however, had earlier experiences of politicalisation and social struggle in community politics. Maria talks about her own political development in this way:

I remember at twenty-two I lived on the lakeside, by the slaughter house conditions were terrible, we were 'the poorest of the poor', we would make a living by cooking up a type of sausage made from the waste from the slaughter house selling it in the mercado central. It was a miserable life. Only the church cared for us there. I remember there was about 300 families and we got together with the priest and got enough materials to put up some houses, we even put a pharmacy in my house, but the guardia moved me on from the lakeside, they thought I was a communist. It was after this that the church started to organise against Somoza, they looked out for people like me and we would go off to clandestine meetings where we were told things like 'you have got the right to land' that was in '68. After that, I had two more children, then my husband left me but community work.

From mobilisation to community decision making: origins of the housing collective

After the war, the same level of community organisation generated in the CDCs (renamed CDSs, Sandinista Defence Committees) continued. In San Judas the barrio committee (CBS) was actively organising the community in salvage operations from the war damage. Work brigades were set up to repair damaged property, food was distributed, and clean-up campaigns and health days were organised to avoid epidemics. Importantly, women continued to mobilise for improvements in the barrio. For example, a group of working mothers set up a childcare centre, on a voluntary basis. The centre later received financial assistance from the Ministry of Social Welfare. The barrio committee comprised four male representatives, one from each of the four zones of San Judas, and four women representatives who had special duties, including health, community development, propaganda and information, and culture. This equal representation of men and women in the San Judas barrio committee is a typical feature of community level politics in post-revolutionary Nicaragua and it reflects an increase in the numbers of women actively taking on decision-making roles - women represent 50 per cent of the total CDS membership. The barrio committees in San Judas chose to take immediate steps to tackle two major problems of the barrio, housing and unemployment. Within months of the triumph several production collectives were set up and Maria Silva, representative of zone four on the barrio committee, was elected to take special responsibility for housing and community development.

From this energetic approach to local problems the self-help housing scheme took its roots. Maria as representative of housing organised a census of the whole barrio, via the CDS street committees, to establish the number of families who were refugees and to record the conditions of housing and tenure patterns in the barrio. It was clear to Maria and the members of the CBS that if they were to tackle the housing difficulties of the barrio they would have to look beyond the newly formed Ministry of Housing, which was itself in a state of reorganising and restructuring. Maria took up the challenge to search for funding. It was through Maria's efforts that a donation of one million cordobas was acquired for housing from an international religious organisation, CONFER⁸. Maria explains how she was successful in getting

⁸CONFER is the National Confederation of Nicaraguan Religious Organisations.

funds:

I knew if we could get money our people could build their houses together. I took the idea of a housing collective to the priest and the nuns in the barrio. They already knew the needs of the people, and they had seen the power of the people to organise themselves - they knew me well too, they liked my idea, so they took our case to CONFER we had lots of meetings at that stage in the Church - and that's how we got the money.

The donor agency played no formal part in the formulation or evaluation of the scheme. The only condition attached to the donation was that the money should be channelled through the Ministry of Housing and any repayments from the scheme should go towards generating similar community self-build projects.

The San Judas self-help scheme was the first project to be co-ordinated by the Department of Home Improvements, within MINVAH. Self-help schemes and community programmes had not formed part of the activities of Somoza's Housing Bank⁹. Within the new ministry there were no personnel with experience of working directly with communities. The new ideology propounded by the revolutionary government emphasises popular participation in decision making at all levels, and in ministries providing services to the communities (health, education and housing), direct representation from the mass organisations means that professionals are accountable to and work directly with communities and community leaders. This called for a period of adjustment and for re-education for the officials whose own professional and class perceptions had to be dealt with. The San Judas project therefore was seen very much as a training programme for the ministry personnel, as well as for the community.

Various ministerial staff were involved at different stages of the planning and programming with the residents of San Judas. Three representatives were assigned to work directly with the collective. The architect and civil engineer dealt with all technical aspects and quality control, and the social worker was responsible for all organisational and intercommunity affairs. It is worthy of mention that of the total number of personnel involved in the San Judas scheme, there were two female architects, a male social worker, a male civil engineer, and a female representative from the Department of Co-operatives. Whilst precise figures of male and female employees for the ministry are not available a rough estimate indicates that of 51 per cent of the employees in MINVAH's Central Office are women¹⁰. Although the exodus after the war has left Nicaragua short of trained staff to fill government and administrative posts, an important consequence of the revolution has been that women have taken up employment in positions which would traditionally have been reserved for males. Mayela the chief architect on the project put it in this way.

In Somoza's time very few women had the opportunity to study, only the privileged rich. I was lucky enough to study in Europe, but I didn't find work in Somoza's Housing Bank. In 1978/79 I

⁹The Housing Bank was the Ministry of Housing during the Somoza regime. Although it was a public ministry with responsibilities to provide popular housing for low-income groups, it operated more as a private bank, particularly after the 1972 earthquake when Somoza personally took control of the building industry and the Housing Bank was a convenient way to secure loans from abroad to continue his own private business interests in land and property speculation. See Wheelock op. cit.

¹⁰According to information from MINVAH's Central Office in Managua, of the 657 employees, 335 (51 per cent) are women. It should be noted that although the Minister is male, the three other most important positions are held by women. These figures exclude MINVAH's regional offices and also the construction companies.

was organised with a group of students at the university, making a study of the conditions in Las Americas (a low-income housing scheme constructed after the earthquake). We all knew the struggle would have to win before any changes could come. I came to work in MINVAH a few days after the triumph. There is much to organise, and old practices will be hard to break.

As part of the retraining of ministry personnel, the officials on community schemes were encouraged to work on site with the participants, sharing in the physical work where possible and offering encouragement and guidance rather than directing operations from their office positions.

According to MINVAH's plans the formation of the housing collective was not only to be an exercise in housing construction to satisfy the shelter needs of the participants; it was also seen as part of a much broader programme of skills training which would complement other government schemes which emphasised long term social development through the consolidation of community participation. Each of the beneficiaries was to be encouraged to participate at all levels of the planning and execution of the housing scheme, with responsibilities for management and decision making to be shared by the membership, and not reserved for the leadership. According to a MINVAH planning document for San Judas the objectives were:

1. To assist a community inspired effort of collective action.
2. To consolidate popular participation through community organisation.
3. To develop the skills of all members of the collective with appropriate training in building, management and administrative skills.
4. To produce a housing design that could be built by a collective self-build method, and which could be afforded by the beneficiaries.
5. To integrate the new urbanisation with other major improvements in the barrio.

The next section will assess the extent to which these objectives were achieved. In subsequent sections we will examine the extent to which the ministry plans were realised in the execution of the project and identify to what degree the problems which arose were gender specific.

III. Stages in the Preparation for the Housing Project

The beneficiaries

Eligibility criteria for most housing improvement schemes normally requires that a deposit or down payment is made. Other criteria can include proof of fixed employment as opposed to self-employment, and in some cases family composition is taken into account; the nuclear family unit, of parents and children, is used to select the target group. Using these criteria can exclude the poorest sections of most Third World city dwellers, who are dependent on casual work, and who therefore lack a regular income (Lycette and Jaramillo 1984; Machado 1983). In the case of San Judas, the selection criteria were worked out by the CBS committee, MINVAH officials and Maria, who, as she put it: 'knew the people far better than any ministerial official'.

The criteria were overwhelmingly based on need, rather than on any proof of fixed economic status or family type. The criteria included families living in overcrowded or share accommodation, refugees, or families whose present accommodation was located precariously close to the storm drains. The census showed that there were at least 200 urgent cases. Since the donation could not cover all these needs, the final selection of beneficiaries was made by the barrio committee. An initial selection of 48 families was made, but under pressure from Maria and the CBS committee the Ministry agreed to adjust their costings per unit to allow for the construction of 60 units.

The majority of the beneficiaries were low-income households, with an average of six or seven persons per family and total earnings which periodically fluctuate between 500 and 2,000 cordobas a month. (In Nicaragua, earnings less than 800 cordobas are considered as low income.) Of the 60 families who were originally selected, almost half were female-headed households, 22 of whom were single women supporting their children, separated from their husbands, or widowed. This high percentage of female heads of household in the project is in keeping with national statistics for the country as a whole.

The age range of women heads of household in the project was 24-53, with the mean age being 35 years. Of the women household heads, 36 per cent had not attended school, and only 10 per cent had reached seventh grade. Their jobs include unskilled factory work, domestic service, and taking in washing. While the average income range of all families within the project was between 500 and 2,000 cordobas a month, the range in the female-headed households was between 500 and 1,500. The males in these households were mostly involved in services too, as chauffeurs, porters, garage hands, and a few as semiskilled construction workers. All the families experienced periods of fluctuation in incomes. At the time of their selection almost all the families had been dependent for several months on food aid, distributed by the barrio committee. Only two of the male heads of household in the project had retained their jobs throughout the war, and five of the men were unemployed for long periods during the project. To compensate for the precarious economic conditions of the families, the Ministry of Social Welfare provided basic foodstuffs to prepare a communal meal on workdays.

Community involvement in design and decision making

From MINVAH's preliminary calculations it was estimated that the donation would cover the cost of construction of 48 units. The original plan presented to the beneficiaries was a basic unit with all services installed, and with tiled floors. Many people who had not become beneficiaries in the CBS selection attended the weekly collective meetings; others, who did not know Maria, wrote

to her in the hope of getting a place in the scheme. For example, Vilma Silva recalls how she became

involved:

I filled in the forms in the CBS census, but I didn't get selected in the first round. Neither did my neighbour Manuelita, but we both really needed a house. The owner of the land where we live now lost everything he had in the war, even his house; he had nowhere to go, he had only that little piece where we live, so we needed to move and quickly for his sake. So I wrote again to Maria, I went to see her every day at the committee office to see if there was any news, any chance we might be accepted. That's how I became a beneficiary by being involved in the meetings, by taking part, and hoping I could get a place through hard work.

It was from pressure like this, particularly from women who had not been successful in the first round of selection, that Maria, and the CBS committee, made a request for alterations in design whereby costs per unit would be cut to allow for the construction of 60 units, to accommodate more participants. The modifications in design meant that the beneficiaries would themselves have to purchase the sanitary units, pay for the installation of electricity, and finish the houses by plastering, tiling the floors and putting down footpaths. The collective meeting of beneficiaries voted to accept these changes and with them the extra financial burden that each family would have to take responsibility for. To meet these extra costs the beneficiaries set up their own collective savings and held regular fundraising events. In this way, the group collectively bore the responsibility of consolidating the project as and when the collective funds permitted improvements. Discussion finalising the design features of the project were taken in a series of collective meetings in which the architects presented several alternative design models. Surprisingly, these meetings were mostly attended by the women, and only a few of the men. The majority attitude among the men was that 'at these meetings all you get is a lot of chat, a lot of women talking. We can attend when the real work begins.'

Most of the changes in design therefore were taken when women were present, and this to some extent explains the type of changes in design that were introduced. The original plans showed semi-detached units but the beneficiaries voted to build detached units. Although many of the beneficiaries had come to the city when they were young, they were mostly from peasant or artisan backgrounds and many of them, both men and women, still retained their links with the countryside. This expressed preference for detached units came about because they said that 'each family could have a good size of garden for planting'. Tending the household garden has traditionally been a women's task in the rural areas, and with the very low wages of farmworkers the family garden provided the subsistence for the peasant household.

Both men and women would have preferred to build what the community termed 'minifalda', that is, a wooden frame set on a few layers of blocks. Again, data from women's work in rural areas show that women were often responsible for building and repairing the house and since their arrival in the city single women constructed their own shacks of wooden boards. Although these shacks were very flimsy structures, they showed that working in wood was familiar to all the beneficiaries. Most therefore felt that building on a few layers of block would give the house an adequate degree of permanency. The Ministry objected, however, on the grounds of cost of treating wood, and the maintenance problems associated with wooden structures. The Ministry preferred to use reinforced block, since in their view it provided a permanent unit which does not need replacement in a short time, and which would allow the participants their first experience in simple housing construction. Prefabricated materials were considered as another option but this was rejected unanimously by the beneficiaries, perhaps because no one had any direct experience of using the materials.

The choice of site was limited by the fact that there was very little vacant land available within the barrio, but the final choice was favoured by all the beneficiaries; for those men who did work outside the barrio,

the site was directly on the main bus route, and the women were satisfied that it was next to the new market complex, which included a health clinic, library, school, and child day care centre. It also fulfilled MINVAH's objective of densification and consolidation of the existing urban area. The plans which were agreed upon consisted of plots 203 m², and a built area of 44 m². This represented a constructed area taking up only 21 per cent of the total, leaving part of the plot vacant for future development as and when the resources became available. The unit was made up of reinforced block, zinc sheet roofing, and doors and windows of wood. The unit came without partition walls so that each family could adapt the space to their own needs. The women were keen to retain the tiled floor so although the modifications in design meant that each household would be responsible for laying the tiles, the ministry provided the tiles and the cement. In the architect's programming schedule, three of these units could be built every month with an average of 864 hours' work per unit. The project was to be completed in four phases by working at weekends only.

After work on Sundays general meetings for all the beneficiaries were held. These weekly meetings were to be the main decision-making forum of the collective, and were attended by the three ministry officials. In the Ministry's view these weekly meetings were of equal importance to the project as the actual building work itself. Through group discussion the beneficiaries were to be encouraged to search for collective solutions to problems that occurred during work, any problems being referred to the meeting as part of a self-educative process.

Meetings had been organised from the outset by Maria and were usually chaired by her. Two other women had been elected to serve as treasurer and secretary. A weekly contribution of two cordobas was taken for the collective fund which was increased to ten cordobas when the decision was taken to modify the design of the houses. Gloria, the treasurer, was not a beneficiary in the scheme, but worked voluntarily because, in her own words: 'someone needs to look after the reales (the money), and I already keep the books for La Clementina (the school) and do the church accounts. Everybody knows I can keep an eye on the purse strings.' Gloria was highly respected, and admired by everyone for her honesty and goodwill. She had lived in San Judas for many years, happily married for fifteen years with two children, and expecting her third, and she considered she had quite a secure life. She and her husband had a very good relationship, she said, 'he is a kind man who doesn't drink or squander money like other men.'

Both Gloria and her husband were very involved in church affairs, and this partly explains why Gloria was organised in many of the activities of the barrio. She had a degree of independence from her husband which was quite untypical of most Nicaraguan women, who were submissive to their husbands and confined to a mothering role. Although Gloria's sister was receiving a house, no one felt that Gloria's involvement was due only to her sister, but out of genuine interest in community affairs. Due to her economic security and stable home Gloria, unlike many other women, had time to participate. That it was the women who took charge of setting up the rudimentary collective structure illustrates how women in post-revolutionary Nicaragua had gained confidence in themselves as organisers, and were prepared to take on tasks beyond their traditional role as mother and childbearer.

Discussions in these early meetings were not limited to planning and programming the scheme. The agenda included topics for discussion which reflected the needs and interests of the beneficiaries. The issue of lack of employment among the beneficiaries was taken up for consideration and some concrete initiatives did come out of these discussions. Maria, together with five other women, drew up proposals to start a tortilleria¹¹ and run it as a small collective which could offer employment for twelve women, and allow them to combine remunerative work with their responsibilities of childcare. The women were

¹¹A tortilleria is a small baking workshop producing tortillas, a staple of the Nicaraguan diet.

successful in acquiring funds to purchase a mill. The men worked out some proposals to establish a carpentry workshop which would provide employment for some of the beneficiaries and provide the barrio with a materials bank. Exploring these employment initiatives in the early meetings not only kept the interest in the collective alive during the planning and programming stages, but it also helped to generate friendships within the membership as the group made plans to live together as neighbours, and to organise employment on a collective basis.

Skills training and organisation

Before the building work commenced the weekly meetings were given over to a training programme run by the social worker, which included setting up a more formal legal structure for the running of the collective. Elections were to be held to appoint office holders to administrative, finance and discipline committees which would constitute the permanent management team of the collective. All office holders received practical instruction in the use of administration documents and record-keeping. Office holders' positions were to be rotated periodically to allow as many members as possible to serve on committees and gain management experience. Study sessions for all the members included 'How to Run a Meeting', 'How to Make Decisions', and 'What is a Housing Collective?'

Several sessions were devoted to discussing broader issues of co-operation, organisation of work teams and collective responsibility. The themes were introduced by the social worker, and the meeting would study the topics through a series of cartoon literature and then act out in a social drama some of the potential scenarios they thought were likely to arouse conflict on a building site. Attendance at these meetings was not compulsory, but the majority of those who did attend were women. Many of the men stayed away, considering that 'this wasn't real work, just more chat'. We will see later that the absence of men from these meetings did have an effect on events when the building work began. At the end of the training programme office holders were elected. Below is a diagram showing the committee structure and the office holders.

DIRECTOR
Maria Silva

ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE

CO-ORDINATOR
Julio Perez

SECRETARY
Juana Reyes

ADVISOR
Eduardo Medina

FINANCE COMMITTEE

CO-ORDINATOR
Antonio Castillo

TREASURER
Gloria Berrios

SECRETARY
Sylvia Salazar

MAINTENANCE COMMITTEE
(STORES) (HELPERS)

Lucila Jimenez
and
Rosario Castillo

Francisco Ruiz
and
Roberto Miranda

DISCIPLINE COMMITTEE

CO-ORDINATOR
Julio Toledo

SECRETARY
Nubia Araica

FISCAL
Gabriel Cardenas

According to the ministry, in order to form as equal and as balanced a workforce as possible, the work-teams were to be chosen taking into account factors such as level of political awareness, sex, economic activity, and previous experience of construction work. The ministry's emphasis here was directed towards involving all the beneficiaries, both men and women, in the various tasks of housing construction. The selection of work-teams was discussed on many occasions at meetings, but no firm decisions were taken about the composition of the work-teams or the division of labour because the women and unskilled men resisted being allocated to a particular work-team until they had commenced work on the first nine houses and had gained some experience in the different building tasks. Four team leaders, all of them men, were chosen on the basis that they had had experience in the building trade and could act as trainers on site. They took part in several training sessions with the architect to discuss the technical aspects of building, with the rest of the beneficiaries having to learn on the job.

The four men with building experience put forward tentative suggestions on how the teams should work. For instance, Alberto, who claimed he had spent twenty years in construction, reckoned that there should be four brigades, each consisting of four armadores with four helpers, two tracers with two helpers, four excavators with four helpers (women), two masons and two foremen. In total he suggested twelve male officials and ten helpers, with the rest of the workforce performing the supporting activities, such as carrying water and mixing cement. Not only did Alberto's suggestions explicitly exclude women, they

were equally unrealistic since the bulk of the men had no building knowledge.

Alberto's proposed arrangements for work-teams were in marked contrast to the way in which MINVAH had articulated the organisation in their planning documents. These stated that teams should be balanced between skilled and unskilled workers, and have an equal mix of men and women. Effectively the ministry were proposing a radical departure from the culturally accepted work relationships between the sexes. Not only were they promoting the idea that men and women should work together side by side on the building site, but effectively they were advocating a policy of gender equality, with no distinction between men's work and women's work.

IV. Implementation of the Housing Project

The first conflicts

The above section described how the project evolved and how the ministry and the community visualised the form the collective should take. The first selection of beneficiaries had been made in January 1980, and the procedures for the selection of the site, the negotiations on design, the training programme and the clearing of the sites took a year to complete. Within that time numerous interruptions in relations between the collective and ministry staff, together with a mix of bureaucratic delays, meant that the building materials did not arrive in the community until the end of 1980. By that time, considerable changes had taken place in the membership of the collective: some had found employment and moved to other barrios, others dropped out when they realised that they would have to build the houses by collective labour whereas others felt the project would not get off the ground, and resigned. Nonetheless, there were those who had attended meetings and helped clear the land on a voluntary basis in the hope that they would be accepted into the collective. In this section this process of implementation will be described.

The first stage of the group working together was the preparation of the work sites, which began in October 1980. This was a slow and arduous task as the site was spread over four manzanas¹² and these were heavily overgrown with trees and scrubs, which had to be cleared by hand using machetes. Division into work-teams for the clearing of land was not seen as necessary, so everyone worked together. Many of the women were accompanied by their children, and often fourteen year old worked all day alongside their mothers. There were no written rules on representation per household at this stage, only an understanding among the beneficiaries that as many people as possible should attend as the work was so tiring and a large area of land had to be cleared manually.

Written attendance records were not kept, although the ministry advised that attention must be given to attendance. Ministry records showed that the women's attendance was consistently higher than the men's. Since the sites were located near to a fault line another task at the preparation stage was to take seismic tests. This entailed an equally arduous task of digging a deep trench which had to be filled in again. Everyone took part in this activity: men, women and children.

Within a month, however, of the building work starting on the first nine houses, the monitoring reports of the ministry and the team leaders recorded that:

1. The work brigades were not functioning.
2. That the few skilled men who could push ahead with the work (i.e. the team leaders) were directing a group of unskilled workers, leaving no-one to provide training or get on with the job adequately.
3. That attendance was so varied that the team leaders could not be confident of having a full brigade on any workday.
4. That even when attendance was high the participation of workers was poor, particularly the performance of the women.
5. There were too many women present on the building site.

¹²One manzana equals 0.7 hectares, or 1.68 acres.

This report, together with a proposal from the team leaders, recommending that women should send men to represent them on the building site, was presented at the general meeting for discussion. Both the report and the proposal provoked angry reaction from the women. In particular those women who had a good work record were very angered; firstly, because the report had been compiled by the team leaders and reflected their interpretation of the situation, which was for the women totally biased; and, secondly, the report was explicit in linking the slow progress at work to women's presence on site. The women's fundamental grievance was that when they were clearing the land there had been no objections about the quality of women's participation or work performance. They had carried out the greater part of this work, while the men took it easy. Sylvia opened up the discussion with these comments:

Look when we were clearing the land, you men were happy enough to let us women sweat and toil with the machetes, and our children too. Some of us women have other responsibilities and cannot be here all the time. You all know in my case that I have work on Saturday mornings, but my boy, my thirteen- year-old, never missed a Saturday morning, and you all know that I joined him as quickly as I could each afternoon. That arrangement was good enough for you *jefes* when we cleared the land, so why isn't it good enough now ?

Those women who attended regularly and who had also taken part in the training programme run by the social worker were most confused about their role because according to the discussion on collective working, men and women would participate in all activities. These women felt that the team leaders were at fault for not taking their responsibilities as trainers seriously, and to demonstrate the various jobs to be done, instead of 'shouting orders all the time'. Thus, if the men were unimpressed by women's presence on site, and their work performance, the women were equally critical of the men's behaviour towards them on the site. Cristina Jarquin expressed her views in this way:

The problem with the *jefes* (the team leaders) is that they like to shout orders at the women, they don't show us what jobs to do, it's all shouting, do this, bring me that, fetch the water, we just have to run after the men and when they don't need us we just have to stand around until they shout at us again.

This particular meeting collapsed in complete disorder; feelings ran very high as the women felt they were going to be expelled from the project but no alternative proposal was put forward on how to improve relations at work. The ministry were privately worried by the number of women on site given the level of discontent it had generated with the team leaders. They feared that work would continue at a slow pace and subsequently the morale of the workforce would suffer and the team leaders might threaten to abandon the project altogether if the disputes were not settled. The only recommendation forthcoming from the ministry, however, was that the work-teams would be reformulated at the beginning of stage two of the project.

From the women's comments and from my own observations on site, we can glean some explanations as to why there was so much misunderstanding between the men and the women. First, that no conflicts arose during the first task, the clearing of land, can best be explained by the fact that within the dominant ideology working with a machete was considered to be both men's and women's work. Empirical data from the rural areas show women had worked alongside men in the fields, sowing, planting and harvesting, so in this instance women's participation in clearing the site was non-problematic for the men, and acceptable within the traditional gender ascribed roles. In addition, clearing the land to construct the family dwelling, collecting materials and some of the construction and maintenance work were traditionally part of women's domestic tasks in the rural areas. However, in contrast to traditional

housebuilding practices, the industrial production of housing using modern materials and requiring technical skills is the men's domain and the construction industry is exclusively a male trade. It was therefore 'unnatural' for the men to have women involved in 'men's work' on a construction site.

Despite the discussion in the training programme, the men, particularly those who had worked in construction, were behaving as they would on any building site. It is quite significant that when Adolfo was asked by the meeting why he had such an ill temper and shouted all the time he replied:

Look, I worked on Somoza's construction gangs, the foremen always shouted, there was no sitting around joking or chatting, if you missed a day you were fired, if you stopped work for a rest, and the foremen saw you, you were fired - if shout, it's because shouting is all I know.

Adolfo's authoritarian approach in his attempts to train people was influenced by his own experience of working in construction. He kept notes on his group's performance, he blew a whistle if he felt anyone was lazy on the job. The women complained that he never allowed them a rest period or time to take refreshment. All of the team leaders had experience of working in construction gangs - all had equally vivid memories of how demoralising it was to be a member of a construction gang in Somoza's day: 'It was a cruel existence with pitiful wages, a worker felt robbed of all dignity'. All of them agreed that none had had such a bad experience as Adolfo, who said that to keep a job it was necessary every so often to give a back-hander to the foreman from the miserable wages. Thus, while the negative attitude towards women on the building site can be understood in gender terms, the subordination of women can be linked to Adolfo's own feelings of class subordination. The team leaders had never been properly trained, and in this respect they found difficulty in sharing their knowledge with the unskilled men, let alone the women.

Francisco, who was employed by the Ministry of Education as a sites foreman, was also said to be 'ruthless, shouting orders, but not getting his own hands dirty'. Antonio and Chico had a more flexible manner, both towards the workers' attendance, punctuality and performance, and standards of work. Chico was the only foreman who had formulated a workplan although he did not keep any written notes for his apprentices, whereby he could maintain a continual check on the work and the ability of his group to work together. He was in charge of the armadores, making up the reinforced steel. Several women periodically worked on his team and remarked that he was the only one who was willing and patient enough to demonstrate and explain in full the jobs to be done. It is not merely coincidence that Chico in his own personal experience in construction had in his own words 'been lucky enough to work with a reasonable maestro de obras (foreman). At a general level the women who were regular attenders had a legitimate point in criticising the men for being poor trainers. By virtue of being excluded from the skilled tasks they were relegated to the role of passive onlookers by the men. Their contribution was limited to carrying water and blocks, acting in a supportive role for the masons. In excluding the women the team leaders were reinforcing the old patterns of sexual division of labour.

The issue of women's poor work performance, however, was a more complicated issue because at the same time as the men were reinforcing gender ascribed roles most of the women themselves were uneasy about entering into the tasks on the building site. It was for all of them a 'man's world', in which the women found it equally difficult to break with old practices. Even those who had a good attendance record and were eager to work, tended to stay on the sidelines and they did not push the men to explain to them the various skilled jobs. It was only in meetings that they felt confident enough to criticise the men's attitude towards them, but on the building site most of the women felt intimidated by the atmosphere created by men at work, the older women in particular complaining of the crude jokes as inconsiderate on the part of the men. In addition, the situation was further complicated as some women preferred to remain at home and take little part in the work. When they did turn up on site they treated the occasion as

if it were a picnic, sitting in the shade. This did little to ameliorate women's position vis-a-vis the men, causing the dominant male view to vacillate between women who were attempting to integrate into the activities on site and those who avoided coming to work at all.

Essentially, the two opposing ideologies operating within the collective explain the various definitions given to men's work and women's work among the collective members. On the whole the men were operating with the old ideology, that the building site was a man's domain, and that women should act in a supporting role only, attending the male labourers. The women, on the other hand, who had a good attendance, were operating within the new ideology propounded by the ministry officials that through mutual help they would achieve equality in work relationships.

To achieve that equality in work relationships the women had many obstacles to overcome: on the one hand their lack of skills and exclusion from the workplace, and on the other hand proving their capability as reliable workers to the men. Yet a woman would have to be quite extraordinary to be considered as capable as a man on the building site, because independent of her desire to take part a woman continued to bear the main responsibility for reproduction, care of children, and the burden of housework. These responsibilities set up conflicting demands on their time and energy, and some women were unable to take full advantage of the opportunity to become involved in work because of the lack of time. The men did not have such conflicts, and they reinforced the old ideology by expressing that the qualities required of the workforce were regular, stable and reliable labourers. This would automatically exclude those women with heavy demands on their time.

A complicating factor in breaking down the stereotypical female tasks was that Maria, the director of the scheme who never attended work on site but controlled the meetings, took the side of the women who were poor attenders, and in effect reinforced the old ideology. At the meeting Maria used very emotive speeches on how the revolution had been made for the poor, and that the men would have to be consciente with the women giving them the lighter jobs to do.

As several of the women became pregnant during the course of the project and could only do the lighter tasks, Maria's general point was valid. However, her intervention made the issue of women's role all the more ambiguous, and the added emotion did nothing to convince the men that they should exercise more patience and share their knowledge and encourage the women to become more actively involved in the skilled work. The ministry officials and the collective members had made no provision at the planning stage for the domestic and reproductive role of women, yet these responsibilities would determine to a large extent the ways in which women could organise themselves in collective work. If the goal was to assure the active participation of women in the projeCt, it would be necessary to develop new and different forms of organisation, which in turn would require that men take on more responsibility in the home.

Reformulation

That the men as opposed to the women in the collective had most influence over the ministry officials was explicitly demonstrated a few weeks later, when the draft contract of work, a formal document setting out the rights and responsibilities of the beneficiaries, was read out by Eduardo (the social worker) at the assembly meeting. Several clauses dealt with absenteeism, but Clause Twelve served to increase the gender bias in the project. Clause Twelve stated that:

For married women it is obligatory that their husbands participate in construction work; single women must make the effort to find a male relative or any other person to work on their behalf.

The team leaders also requested that an additional clause should be added which stated that: ' no children could be accepted as adequate representation of a household on the building site.' The details of the draft contract of work together with the previous report from the team leaders seemed to confirm some of the women's fears that they would be expelled from the scheme if they failed to find a male partner to work on their behalf. To understand the basis of the women's fear requires a more detailed examination of their personal circumstances in order to allow us to identify their precise difficulties in finding men to work for them in the event that Clause Twelve would be adopted by the collective.

Gloria's 26-year-old sister, Carmen, was one of the youngest women to be included in the collective. When she was selected as a beneficiary she was living with her husband at her mother-in-law's house. From the date of her selection to the commencement of the building work, a year elapsed in which time her husband had deserted her and was living with another woman. Consequently she had to move out of the mother-in-law's house and into Gloria's house. There she had a room which she shared with her two small children, aged four and eighteen months. Her husband refused to support her or the children, so she became financially dependent on Gloria. In turn, Carmen contributed to Gloria's household by helping Gloria sell clothes. Although Carmen did have older brothers, none of them lived in Managua, so Gloria's son came to work with Carmen on the building site. However, if children were to be excluded, Carmen had no adult male relatives who could represent her.

Manuelita, 39 years old, had worked in the project voluntarily from the beginning, and had been accepted as a beneficiary just a few weeks before the draft contract was introduced at the general meeting. She did have a husband but he was elderly and in poor health. He had had several operations to remove cataracts from his eye, so was not fit for work. Manuelita had no children, and no brothers living in the barrio. Apart from supporting herself and her husband, she had the extra burden of looking after her sister who was handicapped since childbirth. Her sister had married but her husband was killed fighting in the war, and she was left to bring up three children, aged twelve, nine and eight. Manuelita felt very responsible for her handicapped sister, and supported her as much as she could, although Manuelita herself was one of the poorest beneficiaries in the scheme. She earned a living by childminding when she could and depended on neighbours's help during the time her husband had his operation. It was out of Manuelita's reach to consider paying a male to represent her at work.

The Espinoza family had been selected as beneficiaries because they were a large extended family living in very overcrowded and unhygienic conditions. The mother, Dora, was the original beneficiary, but she couldn't get any of her brothers to work for her, so she gave the allocation to her daughter Carmen. Carmen was several months pregnant but her relationship with her husband was very strained and he refused to work for her. Although Carmen desperately wanted the house and was prepared to work for it, if Clause Twelve was adopted by the collective she knew she would have to forfeit the house unless she could convince her husband to work for her. In effect these women, and many others in similar circumstances, had no option but to work for themselves. They could not afford to pay for men to represent them, so they resisted signing the contract of work.

General discussion about various clauses of the contract dragged on for weeks and a stalemate situation meant that women continued to turn up for work without any male relative. The team leaders continued to specify poor attendance as the most limiting factor to the progress of the scheme, but none of the sanctions in the work contract was implemented, for various reasons. On the one hand, the whole issue of the difficulty of maintaining a regular workforce was identified as a problem for all the beneficiaries, not just the female-headed households who had the triple burden of housework, childcare and contributing to the housing collective.

Adolfo and three other men together with the social worker from the ministry were absent from the project for three months due to their commitments to military training in the militia force. The men were not obliged to find replacements for the period they were absent, as the contract of work specified. Ernesto went into hospital and had a long period of convalescence. There were also cases such as those of Chico and Julio, who both found jobs which took them outside Managua for several months at a time. They came to an arrangement with the collective that they pay 400 cordobas a month for their absence and, although in theory this remunerative contribution would be sufficient to hire skilled labour, the rest of the beneficiaries were taking the responsibility of working for those males during their periods of absence. Thus the reformulation plans as set out in the contract of work were not adhered to and were seen by men and women alike to be an unrealistic set of rules within which to operate.

Gradually, women did gain recognition from the team leaders for their work. Several factors were responsible for this. At the inauguration of the first nine houses, the ministry presented certificates of merit for consistent good work. Several women, including Manuelita (mentioned above), received certificates. In addition, those women who had male relatives who could work on their behalf and who themselves had good work records were influential in improving the status of women on site. In particular Cristina, who was also pregnant during the project, worked alongside her brother who was a skilled mason, and from him she learned the basic skills of masonry. Likewise, Gladys worked with her sixteen-year-old son, and through him she gained the basic knowledge of the various tasks to be done. These women gradually acquired confidence and were accepted by the men, and this respect percolated through the site to improve the relationship between the team leaders and the female workforce.

Allocations

The allocations of finished houses sparked off a further series of disputes between the men and women. Discussions dragged on for weeks and dominated many of the general meetings. In the planning and programming stages no firm decisions had been taken between the ministry and the collective members on who would allocate property. At the completion of the first stage, Maria as director of the collective drew up a list of families most in need of rehousing. The ministry objected on the grounds that they would be making the selection based on various criteria such as work record. Maria's insistence that the houses should be allocated by the collective and not by the ministry was expressed at meetings in numerous speeches:

Only the assembly of collective members has the right to allocate the houses. We know who has the greatest needs among us, we know which of the women live in the most miserable conditions, and only we know who has worked and struggled in this community. The people have won the right to decide these sorts of issues, it is not up to those in the offices to decide any more.

The collective members were united in their opposition to the ministry's taking the decisions, but they were divided as to how the allocations should be made. Maria, and a few of the women who had an irregular work record, stressed that the houses should be allocated on the basis of need. The regular attenders, both men and women, felt that they should draw up a set of criteria to include attendance at work, contribution to the collective fund, and the urgency to be rehoused. There was a third body of opinion held mainly by the skilled workers and the team leaders that each family should be able to select their own plots. Each had different reasons for holding opposing views. The men were dubious about the fairness with which a selection could be made by Maria or the collective members.

That the single women were keen to see that the collective take Maria's line can be explained in terms of the general situation of uncertainty surrounding penalties for absences. In the context where the sanctions for irregular attendance had not been settled, they felt that they were liable to be expelled. At the time allocations became an issue, the final cost of the houses was still unknown and was part of the reason that the contract of work was not signed. The men wanted to have details of repayments because they feared that the houses built in the last stages of the program would be more expensive, due to increased costs of materials. In these uncertain circumstances the single women were concerned that they would not be able to make the repayments if they didn't receive allocations in the first phases, and would end up renouncing the houses.

The allocations in the first phase were in the end decided by a raffle from twenty families. Maria had the final say in this question and had put forward those families she considered eligible. Of the nine who were housed, three were single women, one a widow and six male-headed households. However, at the announcement of the successful beneficiaries there was a great deal of speculation about the inclusion in the selection of Chico, the team leader. There were mutterings among the group that 'he had a good job with the Ministry of Education, and he had no great need because he could afford to wait since he lived with his sister'. Rumour had it that he privately spoke to the architect Mayela and secured his selection by promising to remain as foreman on site for the duration of the project. If this rumour were to be true it would indicate that the ministry had in fact had some say in the final selection (despite Maria's control), and they had imposed a shift in allocation criteria from need, to time and effort invested at work.

Examining the final selection, however, would tend to suggest that within the community, despite initial differing views, both men and women put more weight behind the importance of need as opposed to performance at work. This was demonstrated by the action of Antonio, a team leader, and Gladys, a single mother, who had both been selected but each chose to hand over their allocations to Jose Manuel and Bertha, one of the widowed women in the collective. These gestures reinforced the allocation terms that Maria had publicly emphasised and it appeared from Antonio's gesture of handing over his allocation to Bertha that he, as a team leader, was in agreement with Maria. Stage two was not problematic in terms of allocations, since there was a clear understanding from the outset that of the four houses built in this phase, two were to be used as stores and the other two were to be allocated to the two storekeepers, Rosario and Lucila.

Circumstances surrounding the commencement of building work on stage three provided a flashpoint for further conflict. Two single women, both heads of large households, requested at the general meeting that they be allowed to receive their materials and build their houses with hired labour. They appeared to have very legitimate reasons for making their requests. Maria Teresa, and her ten children, were being threatened with eviction by their landlord and she felt that if she didn't secure an allocation in stage three she could not afford to wait until stage four. At the same time, Petronila Rios, who suffered from periodic bouts of asthma, and her family of twelve, knew that with the rainy season approaching their existing shelter would not survive. When their cases were presented to the meeting there was unanimous agreement that they should be given their plots in stage three and they would receive their materials under a set of conditions pending further discussion with the architect.

Although the men recognised the particular needs in the case of both women, the granting of materials to them aroused great unrest among the skilled men about when they would receive their plots - privately they held the view that apart from Chico no other skilled men had been allocated to a completed house. It is worth noting that the skilled men, in their judgement of allocations policy, chose to ignore the fact that six male workers were already selected and that Antonio, a team leader, had renounced his claim to a property in phase one.

The individual requests made by the women were followed by a flood of demand from the skilled workers who wanted the ministry to give them their materials and allocate plots on which they would build their own houses. Effectively, they were threatening to break the collective labour link, arguing that each family could build their own houses with their own resources. In adopting this stance the skilled men were attempting to exercise authority through their status as skilled workers and were seeking to gain changes in the selection procedures which would guarantee them priority in allocations. Between meetings there was fierce speculation about the way in which the ministry would handle the crisis and whether the men would receive their materials.

The complexity of the dispute can be illustrated by describing in greater detail the discussions of the meeting held after the requests were made.

The meeting began with an outburst by Julio, stating his claim to the first plot in stage three. He pointed out that as he lived outside the barrio, at weekends his five-year-old daughter was left on her own because he had to come to work. He had spoken with Mayela, the architect, and she was supposed to understand his circumstances, and he had also worked overtime in the project and people must take note of that.

Gloria's sister, Carmen, spoke up wanting the same plot as Julio. She complained that she had not been considered for the raffle for the first nine houses, but everyone should understand her personal situation. Her husband had deserted her, and she and her two small children were dependent on Gloria's goodwill. But she needed to move because Gloria has no room to keep her for long. Carmen also claimed that she had spoken with Mayela the architect, and with her team leader Chico, and she felt the first house should be for her. Maria intervened saying that both Julio and Carmen should be selected in stage three. The meeting was breaking down as Julio continued to shout from the back that he would have the first house or resign. Gloria, who usually never participated in disputes, entered the argument on her sister's behalf:

It seems to me that those who shout the most, and use vulgar language, are the ones who think they can get ahead. Julio might have worked better than Carmen, that I will not deny. But are we going to give Julio this house just because he pushes us for it? There is no order here, that's exactly how things were in the old days, those who threw their weight around got ahead, the rest of us had to get by. If Carmen hasn't worked as well as she should then I will come and work on her behalf, but we cannot have types like Julio getting their way.

This battle between Carmen, Gloria and Julio continued in the midst of the meeting, when Mejia decided he would put his case to the group. He had been employed by the Ministry of Construction outside Managua, and had been absent from the work site for four months, during which time he had paid 400 cordobas a month, a contribution towards hiring a mason. He had nine small children, and his wife was pregnant, so he felt he should be included in stage three because 'his regular financial contribution should be recognised as his sincere interest in the collective'.

Antonio, the team leader who had been selected in the first nine houses but had given up his allocation to Bertha, interrupted Mejia and in another long monologue gave the meeting a description of his particular circumstances. He had already taken days off work to be present on the building site and he had asked Mayela if he could take a month off his employment to build his own house. She had refused, so he was now letting the collective meeting know that:

If he and Julio, who had given all this extra time to the collective, did not get the first and the third houses, of stage three allocation, they would resign, and the collective would have to pay them the number of hours extra they had worked on the project.

In the general uproar, Jose Davila yelled at the top of his voice:

The problem with you 'big men' is that you want to choose exactly where you want to be, and you think that you are the only ones who work in this project. Everybody else is doing the best they can and with a lot less fuss than you.

Maria tried to bring some order to the group by calling for the meeting to take Julio's and Carmen's case to the vote. Carmen was so embarrassed by this time that she said:

Don't bother, let him have the house, I wouldn't want it anyway after all this drama - if he wants it and that's the way he thinks he should go about getting it, I don't want to know any more about his problem - let's end the affair here.

The meeting ended by Gloria handing in her resignation, saying that there was no honesty or principle among the collective members.

The degree of discontentment illustrated by the proceedings of the above meeting indicates the deep division associated with allocations policy. The men and women were operating on a different set of rules, most women wanting allocation on the basis of need, and most of the men wanting allocation on the basis of time and work invested on the building site. The skilled men like Julio and Antonio were prepared to use status rank to negotiate for themselves an allocation in stage three. Julio had achieved his goal in securing the first house in the stage three, and Antonio was given the plot he wanted, but the rest of the men were known to disapprove strongly of the behaviour of both men. It is significant that throughout the arguments in the meeting some members identified Julio's selfish and intransigent attitude to be somocista. After the revolution somocismo and machismo were synonymous and through the revolution attempts were being made to reassess roles between the sexes. Julio's dominant and aggressive behaviour towards Carmen was a display of machismo, which was challenged publicly by Gloria and Carmen. Many references were made about the incident between Carmen and Julio long after the event. It was remembered by both men and women in this way: 'Carmen may have forfeited her house, but Julio had forfeited his dignity'.

After the quarrel between Julio and Carmen, the allocations of all the remaining beneficiaries were made. There was a shift in selection procedure but this was not biased against the selection of women, since they continued to receive houses. Despite all the misunderstandings between the men and the women of the collective, progress on the houses continued with an average attendance on the building site of about 75 per cent. Some women had learned building skills and took on tasks which normally would have been done by the men. Stage four was allocated to all the remaining regular attenders, and the final six houses were for those who had been penalised for poor attendance.

At various stages of the project, differences of opinion between men and women jeopardised its progress. However, when there were disputes, or an individual had a grievance, he or she had to argue their case with their peers, not with the ministry. In this way, the collective had to arrive at realistic solutions which suited the needs of its members. For instance, working out a set of ground rules had been a difficult process which had started with the contract of work but when the terms of the contract had failed to resolve issues of discipline, the group found a more appropriate sanction when working out the terms of the allocations policy. Any economic sanctions were of limited use in a situation where the majority of members were poor and had so few economic resources. The group found that the only effective sanction was to make the offenders wait until the final stage of the project to be allocated a house.

Divisions of labour

At the outset of the project there had been difficulties between the men and women on the question of the division of labour. The women's contribution had been seen to be limited to carrying water and blocks to the masons, and preparing the communal meal. The general conflict arose because of the differing perceptions of men's work and women's work. Also at issue was a distinction between men's and women's commitment. The men tended to put more value on the physical and skilled work on the building site, than on the general administration and management of the project (a task largely run by the women: Maria as director, Gloria as treasurer, and Rosario and Lucila as storekeepers).

At one point during the project, Maria was criticised by the men for not participating on the building site 'to show a good example' to the rest of the women. As mentioned earlier, Maria, as director, never participated in the building work, and was rarely present on site during working hours, but her commitment to the project matched that of any of the skilled men if commitment is to be measured by the number of hours she spent handling collective business. Maria had campaigned to acquire the funds for the scheme. She had petitioned the City Council to supply a tractor for the clearing and preparation of the site. Throughout the period of the building work, she maintained a bargaining position with the ministry officials. It was her awareness of the precarious economic situation of individual collective members which led her to approach the Ministry of Social Welfare and successfully negotiate the food allowance for workdays. When it came to the installation of electricity and water, Maria handled the negotiations with the services institutions.

Her work for the collective required her to make many trips to different government offices, and, together with her responsibilities as representative for health and housing on the barrio committee, she incurred considerable travelling expenses in carrying out these duties. Yet all of her work was done voluntarily and had been her fulltime occupation since the triumph of the revolution (over two years), during which time she had depended on the little cash that she received from friends, family and from a few small collections made by the collective. Maria's contribution to the collective work, however, remained 'invisible' and lacked full recognition up until the point where she informed the collective that she might be forced to resign her position as representative on the barrio committee to find paid work, in order to survive economically.

This triggered a quick response from the collective members. The men volunteered to help Maria financially and to 'represent' her family on the building site in recognition of her work for the collective. In contrast, when some of the men experienced periods of unemployment they offered to work extra hours on the building site during the week, but only after negotiating a weekly wage with the collective assembly. This indicates that whilst men would work for remuneration, women were expected to give their time and energy voluntarily.

As well as the subordination of women to men in work relations, there was the more traditional form of gender subordination of wives to husbands and male kin. This is illustrated by one of the disputes which occurred towards the end of the project. Mayela introduced a new responsibility for members which was very unpopular. She reported that the ministry felt it necessary that the community should make out a nightly rota to guard the building materials which were located in an open space, and therefore liable to be stolen. The ministry were not in a position to replace any materials and the security of the materials must therefore rest in the hands of the community. The discussion that followed this announcement indicates the men's objections to the involvement of women.

Manuel opened the discussion by shouting that he would not do any guard duty for the collective because

he already had commitments at his place of work several times a week. He was, however, furious at the suggestion that women should be included in the rota. ' This is a job that requires a weapon, it's dangerous work, we can't have the women doing it'. Nubia, a young single mother, who was very much involved in the women's organisation (AMNLAE), replied that women were already integrated into vigilancia revolucionaria (guard duty organised at a barrio level by the CDS). 'Women have already taken up arms, in militia practice. There is no difference in protecting our own materials from protecting our own community against contra¹³ attacks, and women are doing that in this barrio'.

Rosario and Lucila added weight to Nubia's argument. Both of them, as storekeepers, had been responsible for the safety of the materials in the first stages of the project because they lived nearest to the stores:

We would have to get up at night, at whatever little noise we heard, we didn't have any help from the men then, nor did we ask for any. Nothing has been stolen to date, so it's everyone's duty now to look after the materials, and women are capable of it too.

Narvaez, a team leader and member of the collective administrative committee, said that a rota including women wouldn't work because:

Just as the single women hadn't the time to work on the building site, they wouldn't have time to do guard duty. They would have to be indoors with the children and just as they couldn't find males to represent them at work they were hardly likely to find males to represent them now, unless their 'husbands' appeared at night.

Narvaez's remarks enraged the single women, because of his insinuations about their sexual conduct. They shouted back at him:

Some of us have chosen to have children, but not husbands, because husbands are too much trouble, and a bad influence on children. Besides we can put the children to bed, and do an early shift, from nine to midnight, don't blame the women if this rota doesn't work.

Aside from Narvaez's comments about single women, the men were almost unanimous that guard duty was not a job for women, and in particular the husbands who had wives present at the meeting insisted that it was a family responsibility, and that husbands or male relatives would bear the responsibility for the task.

In accordance with the subordination of women within the household and marriage relations, in their objections the men were exercising their control over the mobility and activity of the women. Women are identified with the domestic sphere, and the nurturing of children, while men represent women and the family in the wider society. The fact that their wives would be in the streets at night was too powerful a threat to the established notion that women's place is in the home. Being seen in the street at night was not the proper behaviour for a respectable woman.

Antonio, another team leader, in his objections expressed his fear for the safety of women, asserting that any robber was liable to assault and abuse the women and on these grounds he would refuse to let his wife take part. Antonio's wife, Vilma, spoke up in the meeting at that point saying that she would do the

¹³Contras are the counter revolutionary forces largely made up of ex-National Guard who periodically carry out raids on isolated peasant villages, sabotage key installations, destroy crops, and kidnap and murder civilians.

guard duty, despite her husband's objections.

What is noteworthy here is that Vilma was using the public arena of the assembly meeting to challenge the power and authority of her husband. In the private domain of their home, her opinion would have been allowed little legitimate expression. In contrast, the collective meeting provided a basis for women to tackle the narrowness and lack of freedom in the home, and to question the old prejudices of their husbands. Vilma was supported by the other women at the meeting, and in this way the women succeeded in being included in the guard duty arrangements. Not all women would find it easy to have the time to participate, nonetheless they felt they had won a significant victory in establishing their right to participate.

V. Conclusion

Women's participation in the implementation phase of 'top-down' low-income housing projects has usually been limited mainly because they are thought to lack the relevant skills. Furthermore, even when women have participated in construction efforts in 'bottom-up' housing programmes, their contribution has rarely been acknowledged. This paper has attempted to identify the problems experienced by women who have been actively included in self-help housing construction, and to demonstrate that under certain conditions they prove to be successful self-builders.

This analysis of women's role in implementation in the San Judas project has shown, first, that women successfully acquired construction skills; second, that despite major material and ideological constraints experienced by low-income women, they made a major contribution to the construction of 48 houses; third, that they gradually succeeded in gaining acceptance by men of their presence and importance on the building site; and, finally, that they persuaded the various ministry officials responsible for overseeing the project that they were capable of skilled manual labour.

These achievements were undoubtedly facilitated by the political context in which the project took place. On one level, the practical and political experience women gained during the revolutionary struggle equipped them with a variety of skills and gave them a measure of public visibility. On another level, and equally important, was the overall ideology of the government which involved a commitment to gender, as well as class, equality. However, the above factors, at least at the outset, were unable to resolve conflicts at the project level. Many of the disputes within the community represent the struggle to dismantle the material barriers which restrict women's access to housing and the ideological barriers which subordinate women in society. In broad terms the gender conflicts described in this paper reflect part of a much broader confrontation between old and new values within a society undergoing radical transformation.

As I have shown in the case study, the shift towards a more 'gender aware' ideology was insufficiently translated into all aspects of project execution. Thus, while positive discrimination in eligibility criteria guaranteed that many poor women were included in the project, inadequate provision was made for their full involvement in the implementation phase. As far as the latter is concerned, women's responsibilities in the wider aspects of production and reproduction were not fully taken into account; for example, inevitable periods of absence of women during pregnancy. Neither did the planning for the implementation phase recognise the different needs of different women. For example, women who headed households were restricted by material constraints whereas women with male partners were restricted more by ideological constraints emanating from their subjugation to male authority within the household.

However, many of the disputes which were expressed by the community in gender terms and which emerged particularly at the allocation stage, are perhaps part of a more general conflict between altruism and reciprocity under a regime which called for a fundamental transformation in traditional individualistic attitudes. In many self-help projects in other parts of the world, allocation of housing units is made on the basis of each according to their financial and labour inputs, which for women, who cannot compete on an equal basis with men, means they often fail to complete their houses within the strict time schedules of the programme, and/or are eliminated from the project. The experimental nature of the Sandinista revolution permitted a radical and innovative approach to self-help projects in Nicaragua. The project was targeted to meet the needs of the poorest, and thus San Judas was one of the first recipients of a donation of funds which did not have to be recovered by the state. Repayments to generate similar projects for the future were calculated on the basis of family income, not on the costs of the house. In part the fact that funds were donated for San Judas meant that ultimately a high degree of altruism could emerge in the project.

The costs of differential labour contributions among beneficiaries were not taken into account to the extent that they might have been if the beneficiaries had had to purchase materials or if materials and other costs had had to be recouped by the state. Therefore, although many men resented the presence of women on the building site and complained that they were not contributing an equal amount of skills and labour, this conflict was probably resolved through the fact that altruism rather than rigid notions of 'reciprocity' became a cornerstone of a project in which both poor men and women were beneficiaries of a donation. Even though many of the initial biases towards female participation by the male beneficiaries were reinforced via MINVAH (as evidenced in the discriminatory terms of the work contract), the fact that the officials were 'willing to learn' from the experiences of grassroots involvement in community participation meant that problems associated with traditional attitudes at both community and ministry level came eventually to be reconciled.

The major conclusion from this case study is that the San Judas project demonstrates that women are capable builders. This finding has important lessons and implications for projects elsewhere, especially given that female-headed households are increasing worldwide and because many poor women household heads cannot afford to pay contractors. A general lesson from the San Judas project suggests that planners must pay much more attention to the form and organisation of mutual selfhelp and recognise women have different needs from those of men. For instance, the issue of co-operation between men and women on the building site may slow up the building work. Much will depend on the cultural context, but female construction teams may be more appropriate than mixed groups. Training of women in building skills is a crucial component, and from the San Judas experience it would appear that much of the conflict between men and women could have been avoided if training in building skills had preceded the implementation phase, thereby setting women on a more equal footing with men. In addition, empirical studies from Panama and Sri Lanka show that training in construction skills can lead to better employability of women, and thus training in both construction and management skills should also be seen as a long term investment which can draw women into more productive sectors of employment (Fernando 1985; Moser and Chant 1985; Lycette and Jaramillo 1984).

Training must also be backed up with financial incentives, particularly during the implementation stage, to compensate for the loss of earnings during the construction period. This can either be in the form of stipends as in Panama (Lycette and Jaramillo 1984) or as in San Judas, the provision of basic foodstuffs on each building workday. Appropriate provision for childcare facilities is also critically important to ensure women's participation (Moser and Chant 1985). Finally it is worth noting that participatory mutual self-help takes time to develop and thus flexibility and patience on the part of project staff is critical and ultimately control over the organisation of work schedules must be left to the group of self-builders rather than project managers if the programme is to be successful.

A final conclusion is that if government and aid agencies are concerned to orientate housing programmes to the poorest sectors of society, the target group is likely to consist of a large number of female-headed households. If sufficient steps are not taken to adapt building schemes to women's needs at all phases of project execution it is unlikely that women will be able to exert any influence or control over the type of housing that is produced for them.

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