

# Nicaraguan women & "family values" [Grupo Venancia's campaign to have the Bill for the Creation of the Ministry of the Family withdrawn]

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

In April of 1997, Nicaragua's recently elected Liberal alliance government announced its intention to pass a law that could have dramatically negative effects on all women and women's organizations in the country. The "[Bill] for the Creation of the Ministry of the Family" includes provisions to define the mission of the family as procreation and interfere with the operation of any organization that threatens the "unity of the family." Nicaraguan women's groups correctly regard this proposal as a declaration of war and have launched a campaign to have the bill withdrawn. Grupo Venancia is a Matagalpa-based feminist popular education collective which has been in the thick of oppositional efforts in their region. Helena Enriquez is a member of Grupo Venancia and was originally interviewed about efforts to defeat the bill on the Redeye show on Co-op Radio in Vancouver. The following interview is a composite of conversations that took place by telephone and through e-mail over a number of weeks, and which expanded to include discussion about the evolving nature of women's organizing in Nicaragua over the past seven years. KS: What is wrong with the government's proposal to create a Ministry of the Family? HE: The most dangerous thing about the bill is that anything that goes against its concepts can be considered an "aggression" or a "threat to the family" -- the government will be allowed to intervene and censor anybody who speaks out against their ideology. It literally defines the role of the Ministry of the Family as being the entity which will, "coordinate and regulate all governmental and nongovernmental organizations which directly or indirectly influence the family, women, youth, children, older people and the disabled." It justifies this intervention on the basis of "protecting the interests of the family" faced with threats or aggression against its "unity." The bill is meant to install the Vatican's position on the family inside the state. It describes the family as a "natural" instead of a socially-constructed institution and goes on to say that there are inherent physical, sexual and psychological differences between men and women. It defines the mission of the family as procreation. This excludes the forty-one per cent of Nicaraguan families in which the woman is the only active parent and completely discriminates against gays and lesbians. It's an attempt to interfere in the private decisions of couples and also violates the constitution of the country as well as a number of international agreements that Nicaragua has signed. It's aimed at all of the women's organizations in the country. The government is also going to promote matrimony. They've decided to recognize couples that are officially married and promote marriage for heterosexual couples that haven't decided to get married. This also violates the constitution and fundamental human rights. We fear these measures will re-introduce a concept which was prevalent during the time of Somoza the use of the terms "in wedlock": and "out of wedlock." This could lead to policies that discriminate against children who are born "out."

## FULL TEXT

In April of 1997, Nicaragua's recently elected Liberal alliance government announced its intention to pass a law that could have dramatically negative effects on all women and women's organizations in the country. The "Bill for the Creation of the Ministry of the Family" includes provisions to define the mission of the family as procreation and interfere with the operation of any organization that threatens the "unity of the family." Nicaraguan women's groups

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The bill proposes a different kind of education for young people, one which imposes the government's, the Vatican's and Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo's moral concepts and their sense of what are "good customs." They promote a very closed idea of heterosexuality -- it is anti-condoms, anti-family planning and anti-homosexual. It is quite easy to see that the first organizations in the line of fire will be women's organizations. This legislation represents a declaration of war by the government. KS: How have the results of the 1996 national election effected women's organizing? HE: The government elected in October 1996 is an alliance between the different branches of what has been the Liberal party in this country. During the Somoza dynasty the party split into the Liberal Constitutionalist Party, pro-Somoza, and the Independent Liberal Party, which distances itself from Somoza and the history of Somocismo in the country. Arnoldo Aleman, the former mayor of Managua and member of the Liberal Constitutional Party, is now the President. Prior to the election a group which involved women from various political parties called the Coalition of Women was formed. The political parties generally have very low representation by women. The Frente Sandinista and the Sandinista Renovation Movement have the highest participation of women (The Sandinista Renovation Movement is new political party that split off from the Frente Sandinista prior to the last election campaign. It is led by Dora Maria Tellez and Sergio Ramirez.) There has also been co-operation between the women's networks and the new Coalition of Women. There is a coordinating body for non-governmental organizations that work with youth and one for other NGO's, and all of these co-ordination spaces, as they call them here, or co-ordinating bodies, are pulling their membership together and creating alliances amongst themselves. There are also alliances being made with groups that were traditionally connected to the Frente Sandinista political party or the Sandinista Renovation Movement. All of these social sectors, plus the traditionally unionized working class, the women's organizations (autonomous and affiliated), and the students are pulling together in response to this government proposal. KS: How has women's organizing changed since the first electoral defeat of the Sandinistas? HE: The autonomous women's movement has been gaining strength and there are now several national women's networks. This autonomous women's movement has nurtured a particularly Nicaraguan feminist perspective. A large part of the women's movement now are small women's collectives that work in clinics for

women, agricultural production, education, carpentry, construction, craft work or communications. Of course these organizations didn't grow outside of Nicaragua's history. The majority of them are linked to the revolution in the sense that often they came into existence because of people or communities with experience from the times of the Sandinista government. And there's the war of course, which affected the most intimate corners of people's daily lives, regardless of which side they were on. There's been a lot of development projects in the country which include whole communities, groups of women and children and sectors of society, which are not directly affiliated to any political party, union or mass organization as such. Most community development projects are autonomous in the sense that the work is done by everyone, for everyone. You don't ask for party ID cards when people are interested in participating in bettering their living conditions. The same goes for women especially, which is why we have organized in networks of different groups instead of affiliating to a single, centralized organization. KS: How has the women's movement worked with its allies to resist this particular government attack? HE: What Grupo Venancia did locally was to work with other NGOs and other members of the Matagalpa Women's Network to organize a series of workshops and create publicity about the bill in Matagalpa's neighborhoods. We also distributed leaflets and a booklet that's gone out to people in the countryside. There was a demonstration of six hundred women in the region. We timed our actions to coincide with a national protest about the property rights issue. On the national level the women's movement pulled together a massive demonstration on April 29 in front of the National Assembly. We did this for two reasons: one was to try and get the law rescinded and the other was to ensure that we, as women, have access to the negotiations over property rights that are taking place with the Aleman government. KS: When is this bill scheduled to be discussed? HE: The date is a bit up in the air right now because April 29th was supposed to be the date of the actual discussion but the government postponed it when we arrived to demonstrate. We're still waiting to find out what the new date will be. It's quite likely that the bill will end up being passed because the Liberal alliance has a majority in parliament and there's only one Liberal deputy that's willing to vote against it. Of course there are other people in other parties but we aren't sure how they will vote because often they share the same kind of moral concepts. KS: What is happening now? HE: The government is pushing every day to get the bill passed in the National Assembly. We're lobbying every day to try to make it more difficult. The Assembly has been flooded with international and national petitions and letters but we need to keep the pressure up. The government would like to have the Ministry of the Family as their main event and in this way be able to marginalize every new initiative which contradicts their vision. Over the June 14 weekend, women from over 200 groups met and have created a unified initiative called, "The Initiative for Women's Citizenship in Nicaragua" as a national forum for action. We're already looking at ways to re-read the law in order to pressure the government to comply with "the protection of the family" and taking up, for example, the problems of the lack of health care, unemployment, family planning and family violence. As one woman in the gathering put it, "they've put the issue of the family on the table -- now they'll have to deal with it from our point of view!" KS: If the law does pass, what will you be asking for in the way of international solidarity? HE: We need people from outside the country to flood the national assembly with faxes and send copies to the women's movement -- the best people would be the Women's Network Against Violence. Not only does this bill violate laws that are already on the books, but it also violates international conventions and all the agreements that the women's movement has struggled for internationally from Nairobi all the way up to Beijing.

## DETAILS

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