

Woman to Woman

The FEM of Nicaragua



By Jill Clark-Gollub

In the mountains of northern Nicaragua, around 3,000 peasant women living in 17 communities are working together to improve their lives. In their eight farming cooperatives they practice agroecology to ensure the food security of their communities and food sovereignty of their country. They have an educational program that includes adult literacy classes, supplemental education for girls and young women, and travel scholarships for study in the cities. Their health program uses an all-female staff to create safe spaces in which women can learn together about reproductive and sexual rights and health and receive related individual health services. There is accompaniment for women experiencing violence in their homes, including help navigating the system of justice if needed. And the organization is an outspoken voice against femicide, leading marches and conducting awareness campaigns.

This is the *Fundación Entre Mujeres*—the FEM—or Among Women Foundation. It has created unique communities in which women are supporting each other and in the process have

created a culture of love, prosperity, and harmony that is changing Nicaraguan society for the better. Woman to Woman and Woman by Woman.

I have been fortunate enough to visit the FEM during two study delegations to Nicaragua in 2019 and 2020, receiving an intimate view into the lives of these wonderful women who welcomed us North American travelers into their homes. I was immediately taken in by their posters about “Sovereignty Over Our Bodies, Our Rights, and Our Seeds,” and also by the palpable affection and sisterhood apparent in their interactions with each other. Both times I was hosted in the small farming village of El Colorado in Estelí Department, nestled in the picturesque Segovias mountains from which one can see into Honduras. We visitors shared meals, participated in the coffee harvest, and learned about the FEM’s seed improvement and preservation program within Nicaragua’s thriving agroecology movement. Just a few feet from



where this picture was taken (I’m second from the right) is the seed experimentation area of the local cooperative, Peace and Love Among Women (COPAMUJER). There by 2019 the farmers had selected the most marketable of the 16 varieties of bean available, based on taste; they then started the process to determine which are most suitable to the local terrain and growing conditions. Each day the women make observations in the field regarding height and other characteristics of the plants. Seven 60-day growing seasons reveal the best variety, which

is then reproduced. These heirloom seeds are then placed in the seed reservoir to be stored and loaned out to cooperative members. A special reserve is not loaned out, to protect the heirloom seeds from catastrophes such as severe drought or flooding from hurricanes—events with which Nicaraguan peasants are all too familiar since the country is one of those most impacted by climate change. The women of the FEM are very proud of the fact that they use no commercial products in their growing cycles—this means no pesticides, no chemical fertilizers, and no commercially produced seeds. In this way, they help ensure the long-term health of their land and their food, while these sustainable farming practices help cool the planet by minimizing the greenhouse gas emissions found in large-scale commercial agriculture.



Silos within a seed reservoir. The women of the FEM prefer the term “reservoir” over “seed bank,” which sounds like part of the capitalist agricultural system.

Some of the most moving moments I shared in the FEM communities were with an organization that has spun off from the FEM, of young men committed to changing the culture of sexism in order to end violence against women. Initially some ten sons of FEM members had expressed interest in joining the FEM. They were encouraged to instead form their own group, which they decided to call Miyotl—a Nahuatl word that means “ray of light,” like the first light of dawn that gently brings about transformation. After hearing how they support equal rights for women, work for a life free of violence, and attend the FEM’s marches against femicide, I asked the young men what changes they wanted to see for their daughters and the women they care about. One young man said, “I want my sons to grow up playing with girls (rather than being segregated the way I was raised), so that they can get to know and respect them. I want them

to know that you don't hit girls not because they are 'the weaker sex,' but because you don't hit." This bodes well for profound change in society.

In my 2020 visit, I learned about the workshops Miyotl members attend on new masculinities, in which men learn that they can be friends with each other, be affectionate with each other, and even love each other. They are sometimes accused of being gay for this reason and ridiculed in what is still a *machista* society. One of them said, "I am not gay, but I have learned that I can be friends with men and even love them." When asked whether gay men were accepted by the other members of the group, Dennis answered, "Why wouldn't they be? We practice agroecology and embrace biological diversity. Why would we not embrace diversity among human beings?"



Some of the members of Miyotl who met with us one evening. Dennis' shirt reads: "I am a Man who opposes violence against women. What about you?"

Another inspiring area of the FEM's work is its Mobile Clinic, in which each community is visited at least once a year by a nurse who conducts PAP tests, dispenses contraceptives and other medicines, and screens for infections. At the same time, a psychologist runs a workshop in which the women learn about sexual and reproductive health, and how to identify signs of violence and sexual abuse in their families and communities. I was privileged to be welcomed

into one of these workshops in January 2020. It seems that the workshops are a key tool for spreading the FEM culture of self-care and communal support and affection. It was truly moving to see how the women not only learn together, but provide mutual reinforcement in a confidential and supportive environment. Additionally, the Mobile Clinic provides support for cancer patients that may need to travel to the city for treatment, along with a family member, and it supplements medicines and treatment supplies. I was also pleased to learn that young girls are empowered by receiving sexual and reproductive health education through the FEM.



Scenes from a Mobile Clinic workshop

The workshop room was decorated with a colorful poster that reads “Single motherhood YES, but only by choice”—a bold statement in a country whose staunchly Christian population widely endorses the legal ban on abortion. The FEM generally supports the government because of its many policies that uplift small farmers, especially women; but it never fails to push for expansion of reproductive rights and awareness about femicides (even though Nicaragua has one of the lowest femicide rates in Latin America), and was instrumental in securing the January 2020 re-opening of the women’s police stations to support female victims of violence.



This graphic produced by the FEM, contrasts conventional production with the practices of the FEM.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous Latin American countries experienced spikes in hunger, due to indiscriminate lockdowns and the interruption of supply chains. Not Nicaragua. This is largely thanks to the peasant movement, including the FEM, that accounts for about 80% of the food the country consumes, in a nation that is 90% food self-sufficient. The FEM farming cooperatives proudly produce almost all the nutrition their members need, including: basic grains, eggs, chicken, pork, dairy, tropical fruits, a wide variety of vegetables and tubers, herbs, coffee, honey, and the most delicious tea, jelly, and wine made from the hibiscus flower. And the FEM’s youth radio program educates the public about how to use healthy growing practices to enrich the family diet with backyard gardens in both countryside and city.



I look forward to traveling back to the FEM communities as soon as I am able, to continue learning from these amazing women about how to take care of our planet and each other. If you would like to learn more about the FEM and possible future delegations to Nicaragua, please contact Friends of Latin America through this link: [Contact Us – Friends of Latin America](#).