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The Creation of the Hombre Nuevo: How do Men in Nicaragua Confront their Privilege and the Inequality of Gender?

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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Researchers Lens and Methodology	5

Definitions and Context	7
Why Should Men Be Involved In Gender Issues?	11
Spaces for Men's Involvement	18
Methods of Achieving Gender Equality	26
Directions for Future Research	30
Conclusion	31
Bibliography	33

Introduction

Historically speaking, it is difficult to deny that women have had less opportunities and have often been disadvantaged in comparison to men. This trend has been found in many

societies, at many times, and in many different areas. For example, women have often been denied the right to vote, own property, and have had less access to jobs. These opportunities and rights were denied to women through the act of men who sought to keep the power they had accumulated in their own hands. As a response to these differences in treatment, women have become active and started many social movements to demand their rights. They have won the right to vote and to own property in many countries across the world. Indeed, the goal of equal rights for women is now a widely accepted ideal, as evidenced by its presence in international documents and treaties, state constitutions, and equal rights laws.

Yet even today, 65 years after the United Nations first declared equal rights for all persons regardless of sex in their Universal Declaration of Human Rights, there still exists much inequality between men and women. Men still have better access to jobs and often receive higher pay than women in the same field. Men still often have disproportionately high percentages of power jobs such as in politics, in religion, and as corporate executives. Many women still face physical, sexual, and psychological violence at the hands of men. Despite the widespread acceptance of the idea of equal rights for women, men still receive a lot of privilege simply as a result of their gender.

However, many men have now started to question the patriarchal system that gives them privilege and power over women. This in and of itself is not new: men have a long history of supporting equal rights of women dating back to the 1800s when John Stuart Mill wrote his book entitled *The Subjugation of Women* and male abolitionists began to stand up for the rights of women. Despite this, women have overwhelmingly been at the forefront of gender issues and have led the debate on gender equality. With such a strong women's movement, where do men

fit into the discussions of gender equality? How can men use their own gendered experiences to contribute to the pursuit of a more equal gender relationships?

This essay seeks to explore these questions, as well as others, by examining what roles men are currently engaged in within the areas of gender and in the pursuit of social change towards gender equality in Nicaragua. Though Nicaragua has made some significant progress in recent years towards confronting the traditional patriarchal system, there is still a lot more change that needs to happen. For example, currently there are 114,000 women that report being the victims of male violence in Nicaragua every 6 months.¹ And in 2010, almost twice as many men were active in the Nicaragua's labor force than were women: 82.1 percent of men as compared with only 48.6 percent of women.² This discrepancy in access to employment gives men economic power over women and often leaves women dependent on their partners for financial support. Thus, as men start to become aware of and challenge their own gender socializations, the effect that this socialization has on both men and women, and the various factors that give them advantages over women, what roles can and do they take to denounce their own privilege?

This topic is admittedly very broad and this research does not suggest that it represents completely the variety of ways that men are involved in this topic nor does it include all of the complexities present in the subject. However it does seek to examine and analysis a small set of men and their actions in gender equality within Nicaraguan society. As such, this essay shows some the ways that men have been involved, what the effects of their involvement may be, and how their different methods of involvement fit together. It also seeks to bring a critical lens to

¹ Rebman, P. Participant-Observation: Workshop at *La Corriente*. April 17-18, 2013, Managua, Nicaragua.

² World Bank WorldDataBase. Gender Indicators. Retrieved May 6, 2013.

the topic to suggest ways in which men's involvement may or may not be beneficial for achieving successful social change.

Thus, following a methodological explanation and series of definitional and background information, this study begins with a theoretical account of why men should be and should want to be involved in gender issues. After this, the paper discusses some of the various spaces that men have come to occupy in Nicaragua in order to work in this subject and how those spaces interact with each other. Next, this essay describes and critically analyzes some of the methods that men use to confront their privilege and the patriarchal system that gives them that privilege. And finally, this research concludes with a discussion of future research that would be beneficial to clarifying and better understanding the role of men in working towards gender equality.

Researcher's Lens and Methodology

Before further explaining the findings of my research, it is necessary to qualify certain aspects of my investigation and my own personal background. As a young American man, who has only studied in Nicaragua for three and a half months, I undoubtedly missed some of the subtleties and complexities of Nicaraguan society and culture that are relevant for this research. In addition, as Spanish is my second language, I have likely failed to understand all of the idiosyncrasies of the discourse surrounding my topic that may be relevant for how that discourse influences gender relations. However, perhaps most relevant to this paper is my own gender experience and pro-feminist ideology.

I self-identity as a pro-feminist man. I take this term to mean that I believe in equality of all people regardless of gender and support movements and theoretical developments that have identified as feminist. I choose to use the term pro-feminist here in place of just feminist so as to

acknowledge that my experiences have been gendered, influenced by my male gender identity, and to attempt to express a neutral position in the debate of whether a man can be a feminist, as that debate is beyond the scope of this paper. This decision acknowledges one of the larger issues that this paper seeks to address in part: how men, as beneficiaries of male privilege in a patriarchal society should engage with issues of gender equality. As a man writing about issues of gender, I inevitably write based on a male experience and I do not contend to express an ungendered view. In addition, writing as a pro-feminist researcher, I tended to identify with other men and women working in this field that also took a feminist approach to understanding the current state of gender relations. This acknowledgement of how my own gender and pro-feminist identity has influenced my research is critically important in writing in this field. And rather than detracting from my credibility, understanding and acknowledging how these influences affects my interpretations serves to strengthen this research.

My approach to investigating this topic was fairly straight-forward. Over a period of 4 weeks, I conducted a series of interviews with people involved in various roles within the creation of new masculinities and the work on gender equality. I found these people through the recommendation of my advisor, Oscar Acuña, who works at *La Corriente*, a feminist organization based in Managua. The first people that I interviewed for my project included a series of men who are currently or have been parts of organizations that work with men in the field of new masculinities. Among these men—which includes my advisor—three of them worked as part of feminist organizations. In addition to these interviews, I also interviewed a series of men that had attended workshops at *La Corriente* about a series of themes related to new masculinities and gender relations. I also had the ability to talk with two self-identified feminist women in order to hear their own interpretations of the work that is conducted with

men. Finally, I talked with one university student to hear his own experiences with gender and to see his thoughts on this work as someone not involved in any gender focused organizations.

However, in addition to this series of interviews, I was able to attend and participate in two days of workshops, again at *La Corriente*. These workshops were part of a longer series of workshops that were be being done with *El Movimiento Juvenil Nicaragüita*³ which is a political and advocacy group that focuses on the rights and interests of youth in Nicaragua. These workshops, combined with my own informal observations of masculinity and gender in Nicaragua complemented my interviews in developing this research. In order to analyze the information from my interviews and observations, I used my notes to identify relevant themes to the topic. I then went through the information I had gathered and pulled out information relevant to each theme in order to be analyzed. I also categorized the information that I had received regarding men's involvement in gender movements. These themes and analysis are presented throughout this paper.

Definitions and context

Before further exploring how men are involved in issues of gender in Nicaragua, it is important to define some of the terms that I will use throughout this paper and give a more detailed context regarding the current state of gender relations. Understanding this background information is critical for understanding the analysis of men's involvement within gender issues. A lot of these terms can have different meanings based on different contexts, which makes it even more important to understand the ways in which I use them throughout this paper.

³ Translation: The Nicaraguan Youth Movement

Gender Socialization: This term refers to the set of processes and experiences through which individuals learn a set of expectations of their behavior based on the gender. This gender socialization occurs in many different spaces, including family, school, peers, and media institutions. For example, in Nicaragua, as is common in many societies, children from a very young age are often given different sets of toys to play with. Men are often told not to play with dolls, which is a way that children can play out care giving roles.⁴ This practice teaches boys and girls different roles about parenting and care giving that are then reflected later in life. These types of practices are common and found throughout many different aspects of children's lives.

Gender Roles: As a result of gender socialization, men and women learn a set of roles that are expectations of their actions and acceptable behaviors that are different for men and women. The total set of these social and behavioral norms are called gender roles and are different for men and women. For example, in a lot of situations there are norms for men to support their family by earning a living or for women to take care of the house and do the cooking and cleaning.

Masculinity: Masculinity concerns the specific set of norms that are considered characteristic of men. Masculinity exists in contrast to femininity, which is the equivalent set of norms for what is considered characteristic of women. Masculinity and femininity are relational to each other. Although many definitions of masculinity can exist, I refer to the most common characterization of masculinity as **dominant masculinity**. According to Everth Tercero of *La Corriente*, this dominant form of masculinity identifies men as being strong, intelligent, leaders, and providers.⁵

⁴ Centro De Prevención de la Violencia. 2009. *¿Cómo afecta a los Hombres El Machismo?*

⁵ Tercero, Everth. Interview with author, April 19, 2013.

This form of masculinity also includes in its definition the belief in only one correct form of being a man, which influences many men to criticize and challenge other ways of defining masculinity. For example, according to Douglas Mendoza, who works with the feminist organization *Puntos de Encuentros*⁶ and *Red de Masculinidad*⁷, many young boys in Nicaragua who identify with alternative forms of masculinity will often receive harassment, including homophobic bullying.⁸ This serves to continue and perpetuate this form of masculinity over others.

Male Privilege: As a result of solely their sex, men receive a certain number of advantages that women do not receive. These advantages can take many different forms, including social, economic, and political advantages. For example, in Nicaragua, men have an easier time gaining leadership roles and being involved in public space.⁹ Also, according to Johni Jimenez from *La Asociación de Los Hombres Contra la Violencia*¹⁰, men also have a privilege of time and freedom, as women are expected to take on a host of roles in the home life which include taking care of the house and the children that men are generally not expected to be involved in.¹¹ There are other privileges as well that men enjoy, such as a greater access to jobs and more safety while walking alone at night.

Patriarchy: Throughout many societies, including Nicaragua, there is a social system in which men are given more control and authority than women. This includes both political and moral

⁶ *Puntos de Encuentros* is a feminist organization in Managua, Nicaragua.

⁷ *La Red de la Masculinidad* is an network of 24 organizations throughout Nicaragua that work with men on gender issues.

⁸ Mendoza, Douglas. Interview with author, April 23, 2013.

⁹ Tercero, Everth. Interview with author, April 21, 2013.

¹⁰ Translated to The Association of Men Against Violence

¹¹ Jimenez, Johni. Interview with author, April 24, 2013.

authority as well as personal authority over decision making in the family structure. One strong example of this system in Nicaragua is the division of power within the Catholic Church, which carries a large moral influence over many people in Nicaragua. Men hold the majority of the positions of power with the Church, as women are not allowed to serve as priests which often gives men significant moral influence over their communities. Men also are often viewed as decision makers in their families.

Power: Directly related to privilege and patriarchy, on a societal level men have more power than women. The basic notion of power is based on the ability to control and exert influence one's environment, including other people. As a result of this power, men have the ability to exert more influence than women in a variety of situations. In addition, this difference in power is what accounts for the fact that gender violence, almost always includes men as the perpetrator and women as the victim. As explained by Oscar Acuña, in his workshop, violence always flows from someone with more power to someone with less power and is a way of maintaining one's power.¹²

Violence: Thus, power is intimately connected to violence. It is important to specify here, that throughout this paper I use the term violence to include not only physical and sexual violence, but also psychological violence, verbal abuse, and emotional violence.

Machismo: Machismo is a term to describe cultural practices throughout Latin America, which roughly equate to the set of beliefs and practices that place men ahead of women. This can include violence against women, belief in male superiority, and misogyny.

¹² Rebman, P. Participant-Observation: Workshop at *La Corriente*. April 17-18, 2013, Managua, Nicaragua.

Micromachismos: This term, originally coined by Luis Bonino Méndez, refers to the subtle and often invisible acts of domination and violence that men exert against women.¹³ These micromachismos take a variety of forms but can include acts such as an unwillingness to work on domestic tasks, the control of household finances, and a control of decision making. This concept is helpful in understanding gender violence, as many men only see the most extreme forms of violence against men as part of the Machismo culture.

Why should Men Be Involved in Gender Issues?

Today, issues of gender equality are often viewed as synonymous with women's issues. Many men do not see issues of gender as concerns for themselves. For example, when gender issues became an important issue in the discourse on development, they were originally referred to as "Women in Development" during the 1970s.¹⁴ And historically, it is true that women have put issues of gender into the public debate; much is owed to women as leaders of movements of gender equality. However, holding this view of gender problems being fundamentally women's issues has alienates men from gender debates and keeps them from addressing issues of power and privilege in their lives. Jackson Katz, a leading anti-sexist activist from the United States framed the issue in this way:

A lot of people hear the word 'gender' and they think it means women. ... This is one of the ways that dominant systems maintain and reproduce themselves, which is to say the dominant group is rarely challenged to think about its dominance because that's one of the key characteristics of power and

¹³ Bonino Méndez, Luis. (2004) "Michromachismos: La violencia Invisible en la Pareja."

¹⁴ Proudlock, Karen. (2004). " 'New' Masculinities, Old Shortcoming? The implications of a New Male Focus for Gender and Development (GAD)."

privilege: the ability to go unexamined, lacking introspection, in fact being rendered invisible in large measure in the discourse about issues that are primarily about us [men].¹⁵

This view as gender issues of women's issues prevents men from being involved in issues where they are important to achieving widespread social change. It allows men to avoid examining their own privilege and questioning the system that gives them that privilege. And this ability to avoid critically examining and understanding social hierarchy and not be harmed is something that only belongs to people of privilege.

Furthermore, the framework of gender equality as a women's movement leaves men without a space to be active in gender debates except through anti-feminist backlash. The lack of available space contributes to why many men view feminists with contempt and has contributed to the development of "men's rights" movements, though they admittedly have never seen much social acceptance.¹⁶ Without spaces for men to positively engage in gender debates, their only other option besides an anti-feminist position is to move outside of the framework of gender entirely. Which in turn, prevents them from questioning the social construction of masculinity and the inequality of gender. And if men fail to question and challenge the dominant structures of patriarchy and their own privilege they inevitable contribute to its continuation.

Therefore it is important to give men spaces in which to discuss gender and reframe issues of gender so that people do not only understand them as women's issues, but understand them as men's issues as well. Furthermore, there are many important reasons why both feminist women and pro-feminist men should want men's engagement in confronting gender equality. First and foremost, the reality is that in many problems faced by women, men are the causes. For example, in discussing gender violence, as Oscar Acuña pointed out in his workshop at *La*

¹⁵ Katz, Jackson. (2013). "Violence & Silence" at TedxFiDiWomen.

¹⁶ Connel, R.W. (2003). "The Role of Men and Boys in Achieving Gender Equality."

Corriente, men have more power than women in Nicaraguan society and violence, as a way of maintaining power relations, almost always goes from the more powerful towards the less powerful.¹⁷ Across the globe, men are overwhelmingly responsible for violence against women and as such, reducing this violence requires changes in men's attitudes, beliefs, and actions. Johni Jimenez, who works with the *Asociación de Hombres Contra La Violencia* contributed the founding of his organization to the realization that men needed to change in order to achieve more gender equality, that when women returned home from gender workshops they repeatedly were subjected to the same gender violence that they faced before.¹⁸ This point was also echoed by members from *La Corriente* and *La Red de Masculinidad*. Finally, feminist organizations should be interested in including men for the very pragmatic reason that based on current social hierarchies men have more power and resources available to them. Though this division of resources is problematic and sexist, involving men does inevitably bring with it access to economic, social, and political resources that can be used to challenge male patriarchy. Men can use their privilege that they receive from just being men to work towards gender equality rather than perpetuating inequalities.

In addition, there is strong rationale for why men themselves would want to be involved in the work for gender equality. *Machismo* affects men as well as women and the ways that men are socialized to act in certain ways in line with the dominant conception of masculinity are detrimental to men as well. Men receive a lot of pressure from other men to conform to traditional definitions of masculinity, which limits their ability to act in non-heteronormative ways. For example, many young men face homophobic bullying if they step out of line with the traditional masculinities. This makes it difficult for many men many to be themselves. In

¹⁷ Rebman, P. Participant-Observation: Workshop at *La Corriente*. April 17-18, 2013, Managua, Nicaragua.

¹⁸ Johni, Jimenez. Interview with author. April 24, 2013.

addition, many of the conceptions of what it means to be a man in Nicaragua harm men. For example, men in Nicaragua have difficulty expressing their emotions or showing affection, even from father to son.¹⁹ This is not only limited to showing affection. CEPREV, *Centro de Prevención de la Violencia*, which works towards preventing gender violence has published an entire packet on the affects of *Machismo* for men in Nicaragua which includes, among other things, emotional repression, difficult relationships for boys and their fathers, an unwillingness to use medical care, and being viewed as an economic object.²⁰ Thus, men also have an interest in seeing changes in how masculinity is constructed and especially in seeing the acceptance of multiple or alternative forms of masculinity.

It should be noted at this point though, that framing the debate in terms of men's benefits is often times problematic. Men do benefit in many ways from the patriarchic system of power and it is important that men acknowledge this point order to have a full discussion of gender power and privilege. To omit the ways in which men benefit from their gender keeps men from identifying and questioning their privilege which is a critical first step in confronting it.

Men also have relational interests in addressing their own gender privilege. Most men form a variety of meaningful relationships with many women, whether that be as a partner, as a parent, or as a friend. As men who care about women in their lives, the fact that these women often face violence and discrimination at the hands of other men should, and in fact often does, appeal to men as a reason to be involved in issues of gender. For example, in discussing the laws prohibiting therapeutic abortion in Nicaragua, the *Asociación de Hombres Contra la Violencia* asks adult men to imagine that their daughter was in need of a therapeutic abortion and how they

¹⁹ Tercero, Everth. Interview with author. April 22, 2013.

²⁰ Centro De Prevención de la Violencia. 2009. *¿Cómo afecta a los Hombres El Machismo?*

would feel in that situation.²¹ This approach, which emphasizes the personal relationships that men have with women in their lives, has been effective for the *Asociación de Hombres Contra la Violencia* in helping men to examine and question some of their beliefs, in this case their beliefs about the rights of women to control their own bodies.

And then there are the broader societal benefits of gender equality that benefit men and women alike. First of all, eliminating or reducing gender violence contributes to an overall more peaceful society that brings benefits for both men and women. As discussed, there are also hierarchies of power within men based on dominate forms of masculinity that result, in a similar way, in violence against men. Decreasing the overall level of violence benefits everyone. In addition, societies with a lot of gender inequality miss out on a lot of productive contributions that women could make to economies, politics, and societies in large. For example, during the workshop he was leading, Oscar Acuña told the group of men attending that, “We cannot talk about development without a gender perspective: if you are organizing and the women are at home cooking, cleaning or taking care of the children you have no development.”²² When women do not receive as much education or are expected to only take care of the home and not have a presence outside of that domain, entire societies miss out on the benefits they could be contributing. Jonathan Hernandez, who helped facilitate the participation of his organization *El Movimiento Juvenil Nicaraguaita* in a series of workshops on gender at *La Corriente* said that he realized it was important for his organization to participate, not out of a sense of pity for women, but out of the realization that his country was missing a lot of benefits because of the lack of participation of women in politics.²³ This perspective reflects an important concept: that gender issues are not just women’s issues, that their causes and their impacts mandate the

²¹ Jimenez, Johni. Interview with author. April 24, 2013.

²² Rebman, P. Participant-Observation: Workshop at *La Corriente*. April 17-18, 2013, Managua, Nicaragua.

²³ Hernandez, Jonathan. Interview with author. April 17, 2013.

inclusion of both sexes in order to really address the problems and contribute to widespread change.

Finally, men have an ethical or moral responsibility towards confronting the patriarchal society that creates an inequality between the sexes. As it is men who are responsible for almost all violence against women and for acting in ways that perpetuate their privilege, men have an obligation to fight against this. As Milagros Romero, a feminist activist told me that for her, she cannot just forget about all of the issues that affect other women throughout her society, but that she doesn't often see this same conviction to gender equality from men.²⁴ Yet all people who believe in equality between the sexes ought to have this same moral sense of a need to work to change the current system that places men ahead of women.

In summary, there are many important reasons why men should be involved and should want to be involved within gender issues. As men have been excluded from gender debates for quite some time, they have often been left without a productive space to express their concerns as men and work in gender issues. Men need to make changes in their beliefs and actions in order for a more peaceful world to be achieved, as men are overwhelming the causes of violence against women. Men also often act as gatekeepers for gender change; as men hold more resources and more position of power, there are very pragmatic reasons why allowing them into working in the field of gender issues and allying with the women's movement can help make social change a reality. And on top of this, men have many interests themselves in be involved with redefining masculinity and changing other men's opinions and actions regarding gender. They have personal benefits, relational benefits, and benefits from the gains made to society as a whole that would result from the changes to the systems of gender.

²⁴ Romero, Milagros. Interview with author. May 2, 2013.

And indeed, this realization has been made on a world level. In 2004, the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women held a session devoted to “the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality” which urged all key stakeholders to promote the involvement and increase the contribution of men towards furthering gender equality.²⁵ This argument for men’s involvement in gender debates, though it has just recently gained popularity, has already become widely accepted as an important part of creating a more gender-equal society.

However, at this point I do want to take the time to discuss one important consideration in how men must be framed within this debate. The reality of the situation is that gender equality and women’s rights have had the successes that they have due to the strong and dedicated work of women. It was women who put these issues on the public agenda and men have much to thank for that. Still today, there are actually very few men involved in the field of gender, though that number is rising. Regardless, as Oscar Acuña pointed out to the boys attending his workshop at *La Corriente* that it is critical that we give autonomy to women in this field and be careful to avoid framing men as the saviors for women.²⁶ Part of the belief in gender equality is that women are just as capable as men. Even though men have an important role to play in achieving gender equality and many men need to change in order to prevent violence of all types towards women, real change has and will continue to come from women demanding power. For men to try to do this for women, simply puts men in the same hierarchical position that they have long occupied and continues rather than challenges gender inequality.

²⁵ Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children. (2005). “Masculinities: Male Roles and Male Involvement in the Promotion of Gender Equality.”

²⁶ Rebman, P. Participant-Observation: Workshop at *La Corriente*. April 17-18, 2013, Managua, Nicaragua.

Spaces for Men's Involvement

Having established the importance for having men be involved in gender issues, several questions still remain. Among those questions is the issue of what spaces exist for men's involvement. If men want to be involved in working towards gender equality, where can they take part in efforts to confront male patriarchy? The reality is that men occupy a variety of spaces that each contribute differently towards achieving social change. In addition many men are engaged in multiple areas that often overlap with each other. While in reality, these spaces somewhat fluid and interconnected, it is possible to categorize the areas in which men engage in gender issues into three different spaces: personal engagement, government and policy, and non-governmental organizations (which can further be broken down into gender focused feminist organizations, gender focused men's organizations, and non-gender focused organizations). This section analyzes who is involved in these different areas, how they interact with each other, and the role of each in promoting gender equality and challenging male privilege.

The first area where men engage gender issues and attempt to influence social change is in their own personal lives. The use of this space is based on two fundamental assumptions. First of all, it is based on the belief that for men who want to change gender hierarchy, the first step is to create change in their own lives. Many men who considered themselves dedicated to creating social change expressed the belief that achieving gender equality is a very long process that begins with changes in themselves. For example, Everth Tercero, who now works as a facilitator for the workshops at *La Corriente* told me even though he has been engaged with gender issues for many years he still has a long way to go in his personal change.²⁷ This

²⁷ Tercero, Everth. Interview with author. April 22, 2013.

viewpoint was shared by many men: that change is a long process and they need to start by living the change that they want to see.

Second, this space contains the belief that the personal is political. This viewpoint has long been present in feminist theory and includes the notion that personal actions affect political processes, which include any power relations. By personally rejecting traditional conceptions of gender roles that lead to unequal relationships between men and women, men can begin to influence others in their personal lives to begin to question the socialization of their own gender. Many men explained how after having attended workshops focused on social construction of gender and making changes in their personal lives, they were able to start to question the behaviors of their friends or family and influence them to adopt new ideas about gender. Jose Ines, who attended a series of workshops on issues regarding the social construction of gender and the current state of inequality says that now he has been able to make significant changes in the way he acts and even has challenged his friends to think about the ways they act.²⁸ The fact that his friends have noticed the changes in his life means that his personal decisions support a different conception of gender roles and encourage others in his personal life to introspect on the gender roles they have been taught and the option of alternative frameworks.

This space is also an important space for those men who do not have the ability to commit to a more active role within social change organizations but still want to support the development of a society with more gender equality. It allows men who, for example, devote their time to other social justice issues to still engage with and be involved with changes in gender relations. According to Oscar Acuña, the reality of men's involvement in gender issues in Nicaragua, is that very few men are actively engaged with organizations solely dedicated to

²⁸ Ines, Jose. Interview with author. April 29, 2013.

promoting changes in gender relations.²⁹ But by having men live the changes that they would like to see happen, the information that originally comes out of organized groups is able to be spread across a bigger section of the population and engages a larger audience. It also allows for the information to reach an audience that would be unlikely to attend an organized event about gender equality, which is the population where the biggest change is most needed.

In addition to personal engagement and change, another space that is important for achieving positive social change is men's involvement in government and policy advocacy. Many government policies have important impacts on gender relations. For example, one of the most influential and also controversial laws in Nicaragua is the Law 779, or the Comprehensive Law Against Violence Towards Women. The law, which guarantees women their rights to live free of both physical and psychological violence has allowed many women to report abuse they from men. And though many people I spoke with still criticized the law for its lack of enforceability, overall they viewed it as a step in the right direction for preventing gender violence. Thus government actions and public policy do have the ability to assist in creating positive change and reducing the power differences between men and women.

However, the government itself as a means to social change, was questioned and doubted by many of the men and women organized in feminist groups. Many people were concerned with the governments true interests in implementing pro-feminist policies. Everth Tercero expressed his doubts in the government's commitment to gender equality and told me that the reality was that the government does very little to support gender issues.³⁰ These views express the common held sentiment that although policy is important and governments can contribute to gender equality, the current Nicaraguan government hinders progress more than it helps it. The

²⁹ Acuña, Oscar. Interview with author. April 24, 2013.

³⁰ Tercero, Everth. Interview with author. April 22, 2013.

consensus among gender advocates was that the current government is comprised of *machos* who do not want to give up their own power and privilege as men. Some activists cited Daniel Ortega's personal history of sexual abuse as evidence to the governments lack of support for gender equality.³¹

Thus, among activists, the general belief is that policies that will help achieve gender equality have to come from pressure and support of social movements and organizations outside of the government not from the government itself. For example, Luz Marina Torres from the feminist group 8 de Marzo, who lead a discussion of the Ley 779 at a workshop for el Movimiento Juvintil Nicaraguita, said that the success of the passage of the law was not due to the government but the committed women's movement who advocated for the law.³² Thus ultimately, the men currently engaged in pursuing gender equality via government policies tend to not be members of the government themselves, but rather achieve policy change through advocacy and by putting pressure on elected officials to support positive legislative changes.

Therefore, this space for change is directly related to the third space: non-governmental organizations. This is the space from which most of the changes that occur in the other two spaces originate. For example, many men learn about the social construction of gender and masculinity through non-governmental organizations and then implement changes as a result in their personal lives. In addition, many of the policy advocacy that has been so critical in advancing supporting laws has come about as the result of efforts done by non-governmental organizations to educate citizens and pressure government officials. This space can be broken down further into gender focused feminist organizations, gender focused men's organizations, and non-gender focused organizations. Each of these groups are distinct in who participates,

³¹ Dias Reyes, Maria Jose. Interview with author. April 30, 2013.

³² Rebman, P. Participant-Observation: Workshop at *La Corriente*. April 17-18, 2013, Managua, Nicaragua.

why they participate, and what methods they use. Yet, they all interact with each other in important ways that makes each one more successful.

First, gender focused feminist organizations are unique in that they apply a feminist analysis to gender issues and are lead by feminist women. Recently, various feminist organizations have begun to include working with men as part of their institutional goals. This has been because of the realization that changes in men's behavior is important in supporting and complementing the work they do with women.³³ Within feminist organizations men do not take institutional leadership roles. These feminist organizations are spaces for women to take leadership, and the men that work with feminist organizations recognition the advantages that men have in society at large and thus do not want to remove the power that women have been able to develop through their involvement in the feminist movement. However, men do work in various positions that support the overall mission of the organization and in addition, work in the initiatives that feminist organizations have started with men, where they can take a more active role.

In order to create a space for men to take a more of a leadership role in confronting the Machismo culture, various men's organizations have been created with their sole focus as working with men about men's issues and gender. These organizations, such as *El Red de Masculinidades* and the *Asociación de los Hombres Contra la Violencia*, direct all of their efforts towards men, masculinity, and men's behaviors and beliefs. In these organizations, men take an active role in designing programs and acting as leaders and spokes people for their organizations. This is not to say that women do not play a role in these spaces however. One of the things that the *Asociación de los Hombres Contra la Violencia* always does is to give space for feminist

³³ Acuña, Oscar. Interview with author. April 24, 2013.

speakers to speak to the men that come to their workshops.³⁴ Therefore, despite this space being mainly run by men and directed towards men, there are still areas where women get involved.

In addition, the other form of non-governmental organization that engages men in gender issues are those that are not specifically focused on gender. For example, two organizations that I encountered, *El Centro Recreativo* and ASODEL, both in Chinandega, have different institutional goals that using gender analysis was able to help them reach. *El Centro Recreativo* is focused on helping children develop and thus conducts a series of discussion groups with the children about issues of gender socialization and gender roles in order to help them to develop positive ideas about gender and create a space for children to be positive role models of good behavior for each other.³⁵ Or with ASODEL, one of their goals is to confront abuses of power within politics and so they decided to initiate an effort to learn about and confront their own power discrepancies within the organization and with the young adults that they work with.³⁶ Therefore, many organizations that deal with other social issues have realized the importance of achieving gender equality and have wanted to add a gender focus to their work.

These three types of non-governmental organizations generally all work together and their work complements each other. For example, the feminist organizations act as the base for a lot of the development of the methods for talking about gender and challenging men to think about their own gender socialization; all the people that I had spoken to from the non-gender focused organization had attended workshops with feminist groups in order to prepare themselves to lead reflections on the subject within their own organizations. And this is indeed one of the goals of the feminist groups. The men that come to the workshops at *La Corriente* are almost always organized with some sort of organization. The idea then, is that these men will

³⁴ Jimenez, Johni. Interview with author. April 24, 2013.

³⁵ Vargas, William. Interview with author. April 30, 2013.

³⁶ Dias Reyes, Maria Jose. Interview with author. April 30, 2013.

then be prepared to lead their own workshops at their organizations and act as supports of gender equality within their current jobs.³⁷ The men's organizations also always work with alliances with various feminist organizations throughout the country that help them to develop their methods that they use for engaging men in gender issues. Thus, the feminist organizations within Nicaragua, that include men in their organizations act as a basis for the information that other organizations then use. The use of this information also benefits the feminist organizations, as this allows their information to reach a wider audience and influence more people.

However, there are some significant differences between the ways that the various types of organizations focus their efforts in working with men. Generally speaking, feminist groups use more depth and add more complexity to their work with men than do other organizations. For example, the men that I talked to who had attended workshops at *La Corriente* were able to talk about Micromachismos, power, and privilege. In addition, they all expressed new questions that they had over many societal institutions and had a lot more doubts. For example, with Jose Ines, he expressed that after having attended a series of workshops with *La Corriente*, he had now began to question his religion as Catholic and says that while he still maintains his faith in God, he no longer believes in Catholicism because of its patriarchal system than he had not questioned prior to the workshops.³⁸ Therefore, issues such as religion, a women's right to abortion, or the gendered nature of pleasure are topics that the feminist organizations will discuss with their participants that other organizations may avoid discussing. This fact has lead a lot of individuals within the feminist movement to question the work that men's organizations do with men. Milagros RRomero told me, many organizations talk about issues of gender at a very

³⁷ Acuña, Oscar. Interview with author. April 24, 2013.

³⁸ Ines, Jose. Interview with author. April 29, 2013.

shallow level, and she does not trust them as a result.³⁹ The reality is that most of the efforts of the men's organizations revolve around a certain theme, which is often an extreme of gender inequality such as physical or sexual violence. These groups spend less time focused on the subtleties of the power differences between men and women and fail to examine some of the more controversial issues in Nicaragua. Because of this, there is a general opinion within the feminist organizations that the men that attend these workshops do not or will not change in reality. And there is good reason for them to doubt the conviction of these men. For example, *La Asociación de los Hombres Contra la Violencia* is currently not engaged in any work in the area after they had a scandal in which it was revealed that one of the leaders had beaten his partner.⁴⁰ If the leader of an organization dedicated to preventing domestic violence is himself engaging in domestic violence, it is easy to doubt the conviction of those less involved.

Yet, these groups do occupy a space that the feminist organizations do not fill. If we use the model of reeducation and change that Everth Tercero talks of, in which renouncing male privilege and questioning societal institutions is a lifelong process, there is good reason why both of these approaches are valuable. Many men have absolutely no experience thinking about how society treats them differently as men and how there is pressure for men to act in certain ways; this is why this is the first question that *La Corriente* asks in their workshops. A lot of men with no background in examining gender privilege tend to view the feminist organizations as extreme or anti-men. This was the view expressed to me by a male university student that I interviewed regarding his views on gender equality. He told me that he didn't see a lot of examples of gender discrimination in his generation and that he felt that the feminists were too extreme.⁴¹ Thus, the groups such as *La Asociación de Los Hombres Contra la Violencia* act as allies and can facilitate

³⁹ Romero, Milagros. Interview with author. May 2, 2013.

⁴⁰ Jimenez, Johni. Interview with author. April 24, 2013.

⁴¹ Marcos, Ariel. Interview with author. April 24, 2013.

the beginning of a process of questioning and relearning gender roles. And indeed, this is what they have done. Despite the doubts of their ability to change, Johni Jimenez has told me that he has seen men start to make small changes in their lives as a result of their work with them, such as helping with household chores and paying more attention to their children.⁴² In addition, Johni estimates that his organization has been able to engage with over 5000 Nicaraguan men throughout their history.⁴³ Thus, the two different types of organizations work at different levels: the men's organizations work at a broader level where they are able to reach a larger target audience where the feminist organizations work with fewer men but do so at a level of depth necessary for men to truly denounce their privilege. Therefore, I propose that the problem comes from a lack of further opportunities for the men from the men's organizations. As they progress in understanding and challenging their own conceptions of masculinity, it is necessary for them to have opportunities to explore these issues in more depth and have a space to receive a feminist analysis of gender relations.

Methods of Achieving Gender Equality

Just as men occupy a variety of spaces in order to work towards gender equality, they also employ a variety of methods. Some of these methods are dependent on the area in which men are working, but the majority span across multiple areas. Overall, the process of creating social change to try to change the hierarchy of power and to create a less patriarchal society is long, difficult, and lacks an obvious solution. Yet men have still been able to work through a variety of different methods. However, before describing and analyzing the various methods

⁴² Jimenez, Johni. Interview with author. April 24, 2013.

⁴³ Ibid.

men use, I will first discuss who men work with and the general goals that span all the different ways men work in this theme.

First of all, consistently throughout my research the men that I talked with, worked with other men. This work could span many different areas but men almost always only worked with other men. There are a few reasons for this. To begin with, the men who lead workshops lead workshops with only men. This is because having only men, allows the participants to feel more comfortable talking about gender relations and allows them to more easily reflect on their shared experience.⁴⁴ In addition, men play an important role in helping to facilitate contact between other men and feminist groups or feminist theory. For example, one of the goals of the *Asociación de Hombres Contra la Violencia* is to create spaces for women to speak with men about gender.⁴⁵ By sharing a gender experience with other men, the *Asociación de Hombres Contra la Violencia* is able to break down some of the barriers that prevent men from listening to women in this area such as the belief that feminists hate men or are too extreme. In this way, men are able to use their own gender in order to create a space for women to share their experience and discuss with men about the importance of gender equality. The only exception to this rule came from two organizations that I spoke with, *El Centro Recreativo* and *ASODEL*, who both used mixed groups when discussing gender relations. The difference here, is that both these organizations do not specialize in gender based issues and there was not a specific focus on the role that men play as promoters of gender equality. Instead, in these groups a gender focus was used to supplement their overall organizational goals and the facilitators of these processes were also included members of both sexes.

⁴⁴ Acuña, Oscar. Interview with author. April 24, 2013.

⁴⁵ Jimenez, Johni. Interview with author. April 24, 2013.

There are important reasons why men largely focus their efforts on other men. It is critical for men in these positions to be aware of their privilege and their position of power and how their involvement in this theme affects gender relations. For men to confront their ability to exert influence over other women by trying to influence other women to question and reject traditional gender relationships is rather problematic. This relationship continues the relationship of having men exert power over women that reaffirms rather than challenges gender hierarchies. Not only this, but men's responsibility to issues of gender violence and privilege fall more with working to change fellow men and using their privilege to facilitate spaces for women to be heard. And finally, the reality of the situation is that there is much need for work with men, men have advantages in working with men, and there are far too few people in this field. Thus as more men enter the field, it is most productive for them to work with other men, where they are more needed and can be more affective.

Because men's effort focus on other men, the essential nature of these methods is to facilitate and begin to challenge men's perceptions of gender roles and masculinity in order to promote a worldview that includes gender equality. As mentioned early, all people go through a process of gender socialization where they learn the expected gender roles of their society, family, or peers. They also develop concepts of what it means to be a man and masculinity. Thus, as Everth Tercero puts it, his main job in working with other men is to engage them in a process of reeducation.⁴⁶ Or in the words of Oscar Acuña, the goal is "to challenge men to question their socialization and to leave them with doubts about what they had previously accepted."⁴⁷ Thus, these processes seek to show men the ways in which both genders are socialized and how this socialization contributes to inequality between men and women. They

⁴⁶ Tercero, Everth. Interview with author. April 22, 2013.

⁴⁷ Acuña, Oscar. Interview with author. April 24, 2013.

further try to challenge men to think about how their actions may perpetuate this inequality and why they should be concerned with it.

Based on these goals and this audience, there are multiple ways in which men seek to contribute to a society with more gender equality. Based on my research, I classified these into three categories: campaigns, workshops and discussion groups, and a bystander approach. These methods also are mainly from the organized spaces through which men seek change, however there is significant overlap with the other spaces. For example, the workshop that I attended at *La Corriente* included sections designed to inform the attendees about the Law 779 and also on how to react when other men act in violent or sexist ways in their own personal lives. Thus, this workshop also included aspects of the bystander approach and political advocacy.

The first of these approaches, campaigns, includes publications and advertisements designed to challenge dominant conceptions of masculinity and gender inequality. The *Red de Masculinidades* has used a very extensive advertising campaign in order to involve as many men as possible. Their campaigns have included *Ser Machista es Balude*, *Que Tuani No Ser Machista*, and *Ganar las Ganas*.⁴⁸ These campaigns all include a few things in common: they are all developed with youth, they use colloquial language, and they are designed to reach a large audience by employing TV advertisements and working in schools.⁴⁹ These campaigns function by trying to create social norms that influence youth to act in respectful and non-violent ways; they all suggest that behavior in stereotypically manly ways are considered unpopular. They also use t-shirts and stickers to allow young men and boys to show their support for a different definition of masculinity.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ These campaigns translate as Being Machista is Uncool, How Cool Not to Be Machista, and Make the Effort. The third campaign focused on preventing teen pregnancy by encouraging young men to use condoms.

⁴⁹ Mendoza, Douglas. Interview with author. April 23, 2013.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Next, the largest method that is employed by men in order to try to achieve gender equality is the use of workshops and discussion groups. Men are usually recruited to these events based on their membership in organizations or from community leaders. These events can take a variety of forms and cover a wide range of topics. In men's organizations they tend to focus on single issue areas such as male violence or paternity and tend to be at a less critical level. However, they do serve a purpose as they give men a space to start discussing issues of gender, which many men have never thought of as particularly important to them. They also serve to allow men to create spaces for feminists to speak with groups of men that would otherwise be hard to reach. However, workshops in feminist organizations often include multiple sessions and span a range of topics. These workshops are often tailored to help train the attendees to be able to facilitate conversation and discussions about gender with their own organizations or groups.

Finally, men employ an active bystander role in order to confront examples of violence and dominance against women when they see them in their own lives. This approach, is one of the most important approaches in order to confront the inequality of gender. Even though men may not themselves participate in violence against women, they need to be willing to take an active stance to confront it when they see it being expressed by their peers, neighbors, or family. This approach is especially relevant because this allows men that cannot otherwise be involved in giving workshops or developing campaigns to still take an active role in achieving a more gender-equal society. For example, Jose Ines was able to take this approach following his attendance at a series of workshops in *La Corriente*. Because his job does not use a gender focus he is not in a position to be involved in these other ways. Yet, he is able to confront his friends

own Machista practices and challenge them to think about their own privilege.⁵¹ If this approach is able to be strengthened through developing active bystanders in workshops, men will have a much bigger opportunity to challenge the patriarchal society and leave their own privilege.

Directions for Future Research

While this research has begun to answer a lot of questions regarding why, how, and in what spaces men are involved in confronting patriarchy, challenging their privilege, and redefining masculinity, it still leaves a lot of potential questions unanswered. More research in this field would be useful in helping to develop evidence as to examine the effectiveness of the various ways in which men can work in this field.

First of all, further research should more systematically examine how men decide to come to workshops or discussion groups to learn about gender issues and/or how they are recruited to come. For example, *La Asociación de Los Hombres Contra La Violencia*, told me that many of the men that they work with, especially in rural areas, are encouraged to come by community leaders.⁵² Thus understanding how community leaders learn about these events, why they decide to encourage their community members to attend, and what factors make it more likely for the community members to come would be helpful in developing strategies in order to most effectively recruit participants.

Next, and more importantly, there is a necessary series of research questions regarding the effects of various methods of involving men in gender issues that would greatly benefit men's efforts. If a systematic analysis of the effects of the various strategies and spaces men occupy could be conducted, men could focus their efforts on their most effective strategies and

⁵¹ Ines, Jose. Interview with author. April 29, 2013.

⁵² Jimenez, Johni. Interview with author. April 24, 2013.

thus have the biggest impact. Because the biggest criticism of men's involvement is that the men the work with do not actually change, being able to document what is and what is not effective would be crucially in gaining support for men's involvement in gender issues.

Conclusion

This essay sought to examine some of the ways in which men have become active in the pursuit of more gender equality. The reality of the situation is that men's involvement can be very helpful and very important for improving gender relations if it is done in the right way. It's important for men to know their place in gender issues and be willing to leave control over work with women to other women and to not try to take control of feminist organizations that women have spent lots of time and energy developing. However, within the appropriate spaces, men can be very effective in making changes. In order to make full changes and gain a full understanding of gender issues, men must take part in critical analysis of the current system that goes in depth and doesn't only focus on a few key issues. Men also need to be willing to question the beliefs that they have been taught starting in their childhood. Yet, this is difficult for many men. Therefore, the single-issue focused work that is conducted by men's organizations is also very important to reaching a wider audience and to challenge people to start to think. Therefore, the methods that men have employed in Nicaragua, are necessary to complement each other and work at different levels in a long process of reducing gender inequality.

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