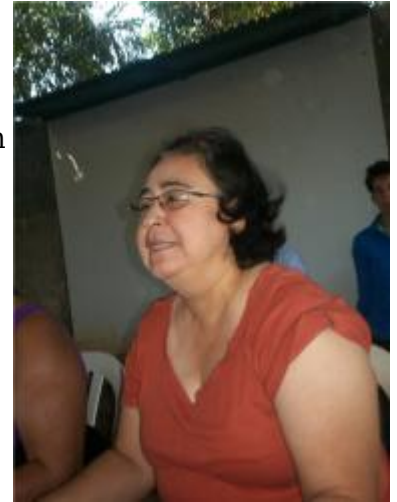


The Sandinista Government has Failed the Women of Nicaragua: Solís

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Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega and the Sandinista government have failed the country's women. That was the message delivered by Azahalea Solís, an attorney and a member of Nicaragua's Autonomous Women's Movement, speaking at the Ben Lindner Center in Managua on January 17 to an audience of Nicaraguans and American students from various universities. In a systematic presentation that touched upon politics, economic, employment, migration, and education, Solís presented a devastating critique of the government's policies.



"I studied law," said Solís, "thinking that law could be useful in the class struggle, and later saw that law could also be useful in the fight for women's rights." The problem is, Solís said, that the government doesn't enforce the law and the people don't care about the law because, they say, the law doesn't feed us. "The ones who pay for disrespecting the law are women," declared Solís.

If one looked at women in political and governmental positions, one might think that Nicaraguan women were doing well, said Solís. After the Sandinistas returned to power in 2006, women were appointed to many cabinet positions, including ministers of Health, Natural Resources, Culture, and Interior, the head of the nation's police forces. But, said Solís, women are not free to speak their minds. She gave the example of the former director of the Nicaraguan Cultural Institute (INC), Margine Gutiérrez, who was removed from office after she criticized President Ortega for his illegal and unconstitutional gift in 2007 of a manuscript dealing with Simón Bolívar written by the national poet Rubén Darío to President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela. For daring to criticize the President, she was immediately removed.

Solís suggested that women in high positions in the Sandinista Front and in the government have no freedom of expression, but have to toe the party line. "Women who hold government positions can't talk about their work, they can't speak to the media, and they can only speak when they are told to," she said. "So they can't really express themselves."

And, added Solís, the Constitution requires that all ministers and ambassadors be appointed by the president and confirmed by the National Assembly, but none of them have received parliamentary confirmation. Legally, she said, all of the ministers and vice-ministers are illegal.

The system of taxation in Nicaragua also has a negative impact on women, Solís explained. Carlos Pellas, one of Nicaragua's richest men, has built the \$250 million Guacalito de la Isla Hotel on Nicaragua's "Emerald Coast." The hotel was built with a loan from a government bank and pays no taxes, Solís told the audience. "Yet workers have to pay a tax of 10 percent and another value added tax of 35 percent. "The very rich are exempt from taxes, while the working class has to pay ever more taxes. And this is done without consulting the working class. The government only talks to the rich," Solís said.

High unemployment has led many men and women to migrate abroad in search of work, either to the United States or to Spain or Italy. Nicaragua's official unemployment rate has fallen from 8.2 percent in 2010 to 6.3 percent today, while an estimated two-thirds of Nicaraguans work in the informal sector.

"During the last few years, more and more women have emigrated to other countries to seek work," said Solís. "What does this mean? One has to leave one's family and one's country to go to countries where xenophobia or discrimination may exist. One may have to learn a new language. And women sometimes face problems of sexual violence. Most don't want to emigrate, but they do it out of necessity."

It's all about jobs. "Formal employment has not increased. Those who have formal sector jobs have regular employment and social security, but those in the informal sector have neither. Informal work has increased, meaning no steady work and no guarantees of benefits. Most women work in the informal sector."

Solís put the employment problem in the broader economic context. "The government says exports have increased, but that's not true. We have the same quantity of exports, though at better prices. Meat and coffee have been selling at good prices. We have been selling the same goods at higher prices and this hides a terrible reality, because now the prices of those products are starting to fall."

There are other economic problems as well. "Many coffee plantations have been affected by blight, so there will be less product and lower prices."

Even where production has risen, productivity has not, says Solís. "Many Nicaraguans work in the cattle industry and do so as we have for 200 years. We have an extensive form of cattle production, meaning that trees are cut down to create new pastures. Now entire forests are being affected."

"We really have two problems," said Solís, "anachronistic forms of production and thousands of uneducated workers."

"This government is spending less on education than previous governments have. Yet we know that no society will make progress in the twenty-first century without education. The Free Trade Zones in our country which use unskilled labor correspond to our low level of education."

While Nicaragua has lower levels of domestic violence than Honduras or Guatemala, the situation for Nicaraguan women is worsening, Solís believes. "We are having more cases of domestic violence every year, and women are being affected at increasingly younger ages."

"The situation has led some women to talk about 'state terrorism,' and you might think that this term is inappropriate," said Solís. "But according to human rights workers, the government is responsible for not taking measures to protect women."

"In Nicaragua, most criminals are not punished. Impunity is a constant throughout the country, and this affects the rights of women. We have a very notorious rape case here in Nicaragua where a man accused of aggravated rape was given eight years in prison, when the possible penalty was twelve years. He appealed and the penalty was reduced to four years. He then appealed to the Supreme Court which once again reduced the penalty arguing that the victim had collaborated with the rapist and that there were mitigating circumstances because the rapist was drunk. The idea of being drunk as an extenuating circumstance thus became a precedent. We protested vigorously against this." Few crimes against women go to court, said Solís, and guilty verdicts represent only

10 percent of all decisions.

When asked by one of the American students present what should be done, Solís said that the most important thing was to raise consciousness, to make the Nicaraguan people more aware of their rights. Touching on the broader question of the nature of the Nicaraguan government today Solís said that the Samozas had a personal dictatorship, while the Sandinistas had an "institutional dictatorship," and while there were not the kinds of assassinations and massacres that occurred under Samoza, the government had found mechanisms to dominate politics and control society.

Michael Kelly is an American writer living in Nicaragua. This is the first of a series of Nicaragua Notes.