

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS  
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF  
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

**SITE: NICARAGUA**

**Transcript of Yamileth Mejía  
Interviewer: Shelly Grabe  
Interpreter: Julia Baumgartner**

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**Yamileth Mejía** was born in the town of El Viejo, Chinandega in 1967. As a girl, Ms. Mejía joined the national Literacy Campaign. In 1984 she travelled to Cuba to receive training to become a teacher. She graduated with a degree in psychology and has been involved in mental health projects, particularly as they relate to gender-based violence and children and youth. She is one of the nine feminists formally accused by the Government of Nicaragua for supporting the rights of an eleven year-old girl who had been raped to obtain an abortion. She is currently working for the Project for Comprehensive Services to Victims of Gender-based Violence. Funded by the Spanish Cooperation Agency, the project provides services to victims of gender-based violence and also works to influence civil society to reduce impunity and eradicate violence towards women.

**Shelly Grabe** is an Assistant Professor in Social Psychology, Feminist Studies, and Latino and Latin American Studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Shelly received her degree in clinical psychology with a minor in quantitative statistical methods. After completing her doctorate, she switched course and became a community organizer in Madison, WI involved primarily with CODEPINK and the then Wisconsin Coordinating Council on Nicaragua (WCCN). Through solidarity relationships with the women's social movement in Nicaragua (Movimiento Autónomo de Mujeres), Grabe became learned in women of Color and "Third World" feminisms from a grassroots, decolonial perspective. She has since coupled her interest in structural inequities, gender, and globalization with her academic training to work with transnational women's social organizations in Nicaragua and Tanzania. As a scholar-activist, Shelly partners with women's organizations to test new areas of inquiry that can support positive social change for women. She joined the UCSC faculty in 2008 after a Visiting Position in the Department of Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. In California Shelly has partnered with the Santa Cruz County Women's Commission on efforts to ratify a local draft of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Walnut Avenue Women's Center to support youth outreach surrounding sexuality and violence against girls and women.

**Julia Baumgartner** holds a degree in Spanish and Sociology from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. She works as coordinator of Farmer Relations and Delegations for Just Coffee Cooperative in Madison, WI and is currently living in Nicaragua coordinating a project with Fundación Entre Mujeres, a feminist organization working for the empowerment of rural women in northern Nicaragua.

## Interview with Yamileth Mejía



[00:01]

**Shelly Grabe:** So, Yamileth, thank you for agreeing to participate in the Global Feminisms Project. We will talk for about an hour and I'll start by asking you first about yourself, about your personal history, your family, your childhood. From there I'll ask you about how you got involved in the kind of work that you currently do and then we'll end with the work you're doing now. So I know you're probably used to talking about your role organizing with women—

Yamileth Mejía: Yes.

*Childhood, Family, Feminism, Marriage, Class*

[00:02]

**Grabe: But can you start with your own personal history and tell me about where you were born, where you grew up, what was your childhood like?**

Mejía: Well, I want to thank you very much for choosing me from the many women who are the feminists of Nicaragua. In my country there are many valuable women with very interesting stories, worth retelling, strong women who were pioneers in feminism. I have been involved in feminism for a short period of time, about twenty years maybe, more or less. There are many women who have made history and have made theories within feminism.

I was born in a town called El Viejo<sup>1</sup> in the Department of Chinandega.<sup>2</sup> A peculiar name; it just doesn't fit within the norm for a settlement to be called El Viejo. It received this name, they say, because prior to the colonial times, or actually, during the colonial era<sup>3</sup> – if I'm not mistaken, the Cacique<sup>4</sup> Agateite ruled these lands. As time went by he became old, so this old man was in charge of caring for this land. Another story claims that it is because once someone, an old man, brought a statue of the Virgin to my town. People referred to this statue as the old's Virgin<sup>5</sup> and it just stuck. And there are many stories of how my town's name came to be. I don't think that is what's important.

I was born in a small, semi-rural, semi-urban town—a mixture of these two things—into a very humble, poor family that lived in the outskirts of town. My mother worked in the banana plantations, in the west side of the country, that were developed in the '60s and '70s; those were the years in which the banana and cotton industries were developed. They cut down all the trees in Chinandega and began to plant bananas and cotton for export. So my mother worked in the plantations and she was also a seamstress. She finished the second grade. I am the daughter of a man who didn't finish even the first grade, but nevertheless knew how to read and write and during some time in his life was a political leader, during the Revolution, and always ready to give his support for the Revolution's<sup>6</sup> cause. And so, I come from those two honest, hard-working persons.

We are two sisters from my mother and father, and my father had another three children outside the marriage. Today I was talking to a friend and commenting that my father was a Don Juan,<sup>7</sup> a man who, if he saw a pretty girl, he would try to seduce her, and well, sometimes the pretty girls would be interested in him too, because he was a handsome man, a very handsome man, in his youth. Anyhow, this is the type of psychological violence and even discrimination that my mother lived, because he always had many girlfriends, many other women, and my mother was there, she was his wife.

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<sup>1</sup> El Viejo translates to Old or The Old and sounds a bit strange, as if it's missing another part of its name.

<sup>2</sup> Chinandega is a western department of Nicaragua which shares a border with Honduras.

<sup>3</sup> The colonial era of Nicaragua dates from 1522-1821. It began when the Spanish landed on Nicaragua, bringing Catholicism, and ended when Captainty General of Guatemala declared independence in 1821.

<sup>4</sup> Cacique means Mayan Chief

<sup>5</sup> Since viejo is the masculine form of "old," La Virgen del Viejo translates to the old [man's] Virgin. If we drop "Virgin" we are left with El Viejo.

<sup>6</sup> The Revolution refers to the movement of the FSLN (The Sandinista Front for National Liberation) to overthrow the existing government. The revolution eventually succeeded in 1979, overthrowing Somoza.

<sup>7</sup> Don Juan is a legendary Spanish character famous for his obsessive skills in seduction and philandering.  
[www.thefreedictionary.com/Don+Juan](http://www.thefreedictionary.com/Don+Juan)

Currently they are together, *juntos pero no revueltos*<sup>8</sup>, my mother will kill me the day I tell her I said this to the camera, but she decided about twenty-five years ago to separate from him because she no longer loved him the way she used to. She wanted to end a relationship that no longer satisfied her and decided to be alone. He decided to stay there, as company, which is what happens with many couples, right? And well, they continue to live in the same house. She lives her life and he lives his. They talk to each other, sometimes they fight with each other, because really they are like two very old partners, they have that type of relationship, sometimes of friendship, sometimes of divisions: this is my part and that is yours.

Within our family she broke with those norms, by separating, even though she didn't do it legally. In the family it is not permitted to leave your husband no matter what, even if he is psychologically violent or even if he beats his wife. We were a traditional family, within what was normal for families in Nicaragua. So I was able to see what a relationship like theirs was, it was not the most adequate because they were always fighting, always in an argument. I grew up listening and watching how they fought. And she would tell me, even though she was still with him, she was probably still in love with him, but she would tell me: "You have to study, so that no man can boss you around, you have to study because you have to be independent, you have to earn your own money." Those were like the first signs of autonomy, and I would have to say of feminism, at some level. I began to understand that not everything was like that, like they had lived. Another thing, which my grandmother used to say, she was still alive back then: "love does not take away knowledge," which meant that no matter how much in love you are with a man, it does not mean that you have to put up with everything all your life. That is, the knowledge that you have, you have to protect yourself and you have to love yourself. Those were the two lessons that I took from those two women, who are, they are the fundamental pillars of my own internal power.

Within my own family there were many violent men, many, many violent men: my uncles, cousins, we knew that sexual abuses were being committed. Like I said, we were an average family, like any other in this country where many sexual abuses take place, as well as violence against women, battering and where the norm you must follow—regardless of what my mother and grandmother had told me—is "you have to suck it up because he is your husband" and also that "you don't air your dirty laundry in public." But I kept thinking we can't just keep on being quiet about it, we can't be silenced, and one day I decided to talk about the abuse I lived and the abuse my nieces lived.

### *Childhood, Marriage, Activism*

[00:11]

**Grabe: How old were you when you decided that?**

Mejía: I was seventeen years old, seventeen years old, and that has to do with the fact that when I was fifteen years old I decided to start a relationship with the man with whom I still am today. So

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<sup>8</sup> "Juntos per no revueltos" is a saying used to describe a relationship where two people may be together, but there is no obligation amongst them, they may decide to be with each other because it's better than being alone, as opposed to being with each other because they can't stand being apart.

this person, just as young as I, very young, both of us very young, we would talk a lot. Now he talks less, it's terrible; he used to talk so much more! [laughter] We talked a lot about life, the situation<sup>9</sup>, what went on in our homes—in his home and in my home—anyhow, all the things that supposedly you don't talk about with your boyfriend, because the norm is that you're always kissing and hugging and touching, those are the normal things that happen between boyfriend and girlfriend. But we talked about more than just that and we decided, later, to get married. This was when I was seventeen. It was my personal decision at that age. Besides, the Revolution had triumphed,<sup>10</sup> I had participated in the National Crusade for Literacy<sup>11</sup> since I was twelve, so I had already participated in the—

### *Activism, Family, Childhood*

[00:13]

**Grabe: How old were you when you participated in the Literacy Crusade?**

Mejía: I was twelve years old, I was still a child, but I felt older, I felt mature. So I decided to become involved and my mother would say, “and with whose permission are you going?” I would say, “but it's fun, we're going to go teach” and somehow I would find a way to convince her to let me go to the training workshops to learn how to teach people to read and write.

**Grabe: How does a girl so young learn about doing that without her parents' consent?**

Mejía: Because, well you see, they were very socially conscious, so although they complained about it, my own father was involved in the Revolutionary process, he was involved with the unions. So I would tell myself, “My father is involved, I also want to be involved.” They would have cultural events and one way I could participate was singing Revolutionary songs with my father, who played the guitar. He still plays the guitar. So I would sing with him during cultural events in my town and outside my town, I'd go with him; the little girl would follow him, to sing. On the other hand, my mother who was a seamstress and a plantation worker, well she would tell me about the discrimination and injustices within her group. They were treated like prostitutes; people would say that the women who worked at the plantations were prostitutes. She would complain, but she also would refuse to feel like a prostitute, because they weren't. She would say, “we are field workers, why do they have to call us that?” So, in a way they did agree with my involvement, it's just that they were very scared because the war was going on, the war was going on. Even when the revolution had just triumphed, there were still people who

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<sup>9</sup> Nicaragua was in the midst of a civil war

<sup>10</sup> The Revolution began in the 1960 in response to the rising discontent with the Somoza Dictatorship and ended in 1979 with the dethroning of that government by the FSLN.

<sup>11</sup> The National Literacy Crusade was a huge Sandinista campaign between March and August 1980. The illiteracy rate in Nicaragua dropped from 50.3% to 12.9% in five months. The NLC recruited and trained volunteers to work with the many illiterate populations of Nicaragua in hopes of teaching them how to read. Since the first campaign there were 5 others from 1980 to 2000. Though the campaigns were largely seen as successful, many viewed the initially impressive results as temporary, and as the educational system wasn't able to sustain or support the huge boom in students, don't consider the campaigns to have had any lasting impact on the overall education of the Nicaraguan people. (Hanemann, Ulrike. “Nicaragua's Literacy Campaign” *Literacy for Life*, UNESCO Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2006. 2005: Hamburg.)

<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001460/146007e.pdf>

would show up dead around town, or we would hear about people who would show up dead throughout the country. So there was a lot of tension, fathers and mothers were very scared. She would say, “Okay, you can participate in the cultural events, but not other activities, something could happen to you.” So I would go to the cultural events, sometimes 200 kilometers from my town, we would leave one day and come back the next.

During that time I was in a group called Association of Amateur Artists [laughter] and it was awesome to be a part of that group because we would do theatre, we sang, we danced, and we expressed ourselves as youth. Later when I was thirteen, I was also the President of the Federation of Secondary School Students. Between thirteen and fifteen years old I was the president of the FSS.<sup>12</sup> I was such a young girl hanging out with a bunch of kids from 1<sup>st</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> year.<sup>13</sup> During that time, they also sent us to cut cotton to defend the revolution’s crop. So I also joined a production battalion, along with over 200 students, to go to Puntañata<sup>14</sup> and Cosiguina<sup>15</sup> to cut cotton, when those areas were still war zones. Then I went to study to become a teacher, and then returned seven months later, I went to Cuba to study to become a teacher with a brigade called 50 Anniversaries—the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Sandino’s birth.<sup>16</sup> This brigade was organized to commemorate that date.<sup>17</sup> I was part of that brigade and was placed in Guantanamo, that’s where I learned to be a primary school teacher, and then I was sent back. The members of this group, we decided—we were sixteen by then, we had been together from twelve to sixteen. At the age of sixteen I decided to go to Somoto, also a war zone: Estelí, Somoto, Ocotal, all the Segovias<sup>18</sup> were war zones, that’s where the Contras were, right, and well—

*Activism, Personal Narrative, Childhood, Education, Family, Feminism, Marriage*

**[00:18]**

**Grabe: How old were you when you went to Cuba?**

Mejía: Sixteen, yes, sixteen, and at that age, well, I went to teach in the countryside. I was in charge of a classroom with two grades, second grade and fourth grade. I had already been trained in teaching multiple grades. So then, I taught second and fourth grades in Somoto, in an area called El Rodeo, El Rodeo #2. So it was relatively close, but it was also dangerous because it was on the other side of the Coco River and on the other side of the Coco River was the Lancite Hill, which was occupied by the Contras. Every night, if we opened our windows, we couldn’t see the stars, what we saw were the tracers,<sup>19</sup> the red bullets, the tracers from one side to the other. My teaching partner, we roomed together with a family that was assigned to us, the Alfaro

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<sup>12</sup> FES in Spanish, Federation of Secondary School Students.

<sup>13</sup> In Latin America education is divided into 1<sup>st</sup> through 6<sup>th</sup> grades of Primary school and 1<sup>st</sup> through 5<sup>th</sup> grades of Secondary school. Yamileth is referring to Secondary School, equivalent to 7<sup>th</sup> - 11<sup>th</sup> grades in the United States.

<sup>14</sup> Punta Nata, Nicaragua is on the Western coast of the country on a small peninsula.

<sup>15</sup> Cosiguina, Nicaragua is on a Western peninsula of the country about 5 miles in from the Coast.

<sup>16</sup> Augusto Sandino was a Nicaraguan revolutionary leader in the early 1900s who fought against U.S. occupation and was assassinated by Anastasio Somoza in 1934. He is considered a national hero in Nicaragua.

<sup>17</sup> Sandino was born in 1895 and died in 1934. It is more likely that the brigade was commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Sandino’s death.

<sup>18</sup> The Segovias are along the Northwest border of Nicaragua and Honduras.

<sup>19</sup> Tracer ammunition (tracers) used by the U.S. Army’s M-16 assault rifle, a small pyrotechnic charge at the base ignites, allowing a phosphorous tail to burn very brightly and making the projectile visible to the naked eye.

family—very lovely people, we would say, “Fran, Fran,” I would say to her, her name was Francisca, I would say, “look, there goes another tracer.” And she would say, “Yes, let’s go to bed so we don’t see them.” “But you can hear the gun shots, you can hear them,” I replied.

At that moment I wasn’t even, I didn’t have any idea of fear. What I wanted was to develop myself as a teacher, what I wanted was to help the Revolution. I wanted to teach them like Carlos Fonseca<sup>20</sup> had told us: “Also teach them to write.” I was a faithful believer of that Revolution, of that life project for an entire nation. I am still a faithful believer that it is in education, that education is the principle base on which a nation can develop. As long as you keep people in the dark, not knowing anything, of course you will be able to do what you wish with them and manipulate them. Ignorance is the best friend of abusive people’s manipulation.

So there, I grew up that way, from the time I was twelve to when I was sixteen, in a Revolution that moved my senses, my feelings, my emotions, and mixed in with all that, my relationship with my boyfriend. For me this was a life lesson and also a lesson for that future couple, that future family. Because in those times there was a lot of talk about equality, and I believed it. I believed it. I can tell you all this now, like an anecdote, but it is true, it is real. When my boyfriend came to visit me, instead of talking of kisses and hugs and all that, what I would do was to take out a magazine that was called *Los Muchachos*, which talked a lot about sexuality and provided a lot of orientation, I think in a very advanced way. In those days it had plenty of information on the equality between men and women, about equality during courtship. Now I know that Sofía Montenegro<sup>21</sup> was also behind that magazine, because it was part of the ideological framework, of the graphic instrument that there was to be able to give information to the youth. Well, I was part of the youth that read that information.

She was already talking about sexuality. Auxiliadora Marengo,<sup>22</sup> another female psychologist, was already talking about those things. So then I was believing it because I liked it, I also identified very much with it. So I would read this with him, and then he used to say, “when we get married we’re going to have six kids” and I would think to myself, this guy is crazy! [Laughter] I don’t know who will bear him six kids, but not me. [Laughter] Me? Never! One or two, tops! And really, I have two children, a daughter and a son. But it was a good coming of age for me, a good coming of age within everything that the Revolution represented, within all the sacrifices that many of us youth made, both men and women. The people who joined the military service; the people who went and did other things. For example, the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Brigade group, we left our homes and lived in the countryside for two years, out there in the bush, and taught.

After that I moved to the west and continued teaching and being part of the brigade. Later the Ministry of Education incorporated the bunch of us who had studied to become teachers. When I was in Somoto, the person who monitored our revolutionary activities as much as our

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<sup>20</sup> Carlos Fonseca was a Nicaraguan teacher and librarian who founded the Sandinista National Liberation Front. He was assassinated in 1976, three years before the SNLF took power.

<sup>21</sup> Sofía Montenegro is a revolutionary journalist who joined the FSLN in 1978. She worked most prominently as international editor of *Barricada*, the official Sandinista newspaper from 1979 until 1984. The Global Feminisms archive contains an interview with Montenegro.

<sup>22</sup> Auxiliadora Marengo is a psychologist and sexologist.

educational activities—and I had no idea that I would meet her again, later in life—was Martha, her, Martha Munguia,<sup>23</sup> was part of the Ministry of Education and the Association of Nicaraguan Women (AMNLAE<sup>24</sup>), which was a joint project, and they worked together. And well, I asked her one day, Martha, when I saw a picture of her when she was young, I said, “Martha, this woman, she is the one who would visit us in Somoto for the meetings with the Ministry of Education.” And she tells me, “That woman is me, I would go to those meetings with the Ministry of Education in representation of AMNLAE.” So I told her, I was in one of those meetings. So there you can see how chance later brings you into contact with those same people, you see? So, in my life: a Sofia Montenegro, through paper, through concrete information, and also a Martha Munguia, through her follow up and monitoring work that she did back then, I don’t remember what they called it. But to see yourself as part of that network, of that revolution, well, it’s nice. If you stick to the objective of honesty, the objective of equality for all, for women and for men, not just equality for men—for those four men who today are the owners of a made up Revolution—but of a whole revolution for a whole country. To be a part of that... you felt like a piece of sand and suddenly you see yourself with all these monumental women, because of their thoughts, because of their actions, because of their honesty, because they are part of what is now that great women’s movement, how all that was built slowly, I think it’s beautiful. In addition to the seed, that concern, that my mother and grandmother had already planted in me and of my need to do something social, which I saw in my father, with the work I had with all the organized men and women in Monterrosa,<sup>25</sup> which is a sugar processing plant, well, I slowly formed myself in that way and that concern of searching for something that represented the women, searching for something that re-signified, re-signified what it is to be a woman.

When I turned seventeen, I said, “Alright, we’ll get married,” bowing to my mother’s pressure, but still I said to myself, I am getting married, but I’m doing that because I want to be free. This is contrary to the norm. My mother calls that “dog’s enrollment” which is to say that you enroll yourself [to marriage]. She says, “You are the one who enrolls yourself and then the man owns you.” But I said to myself, why? No, for me getting married was my ticket to freedom, so I would not have to live under my father’s orders, nor my mother’s. I had it easy with my boyfriend, very easy [laughter], very easy. So I told myself, “No, this is my ticket to freedom, I am getting married because that way I will be free.” And I really was. And yes, I married because I was in love, if I had not been I’m sure I would not have done it, and certainly not that young. I see myself in my daughter who is just sixteen now and I tell myself, “But she’s just a year younger than when I decided to get married.” And they tell me, “Mom, you were crazy, you

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<sup>23</sup> Yamileth Mejía and Martha Munguia were two of the nine women who were caught in a legal battle concerning their support of a nine year old girl receiving a, then legal, abortion after having been raped by her step father. The legal battle began in 2008 and ended in 2010 with all charges dropped against the women.

<sup>24</sup> Asociación de Mujeres Nicaragüenses Luisa Amanda Espinoza, English: Luisa Amanda Espinoza Association of Nicaraguan Women. The original Sandinista women’s movement. Due to its close links to the FSLN, feminist issues such as abortion and women’s rights were pushed aside to organize around FSLN issues. (Bayard de Volo, Lorraine. *Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs: Gender Identity and Politics in Nicaragua, 1979-1999*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore. 2001.)

<sup>25</sup> Ingenio Monterrosa, located in the Department of Chinandega, was one of 4 sugar processing plants that were confiscated and given to the workers as a result of the Sandinista triumph of July 19, 1979. Years later, during President Violeta Chamorro’s government, they were privatized.

were crazy, how could you?” And they tell their dad, “But Dad, how could you do that, you were so young? You were only nineteen and Mom was only seventeen?”

### *Marriage, Family, Childhood*

[00:29]

**Grabe: What year was it that you got married?**

Mejía: Um, I was seventeen and now I’m forty-three, you do the math [laughter], it was in ‘80-, ‘80-what? ‘87, around then. ‘86, I think, ‘87. More or less around that time. I was a baby, I was just a baby but with a critical mind that I don’t know where I got it, too early...but I think that we are a generation matured with carbide, carbide is the thing they put on bananas to make them mature faster. We were a generation that matured very quickly, very fast, with a lot of responsibilities. For example, I became responsible for my sister when I was 6 years old. I began to take care of my sister when I was 6 years old, I took care of my sister who was 1. My grandmother took care of both of us, but when my mother would go to work, and my father worked out of town and only came home every two weeks, so during those two weeks I would stay under my grandmother’s supervision, and my sister under my supervision... a 6-year old girl! I was like her mom when I was 6. So then, I took care of her and my mother would tell me before leaving for work—she went to work at three in the morning and would come home at 11 at night from working in the plantations—so she would say, “Yami, I’m leaving two córdobas,<sup>26</sup> take them and buy the milk, the firewood for the beans and the tortillas.” So this was something normal for me, to take on responsibilities. I didn’t think it was a big responsibility, all I knew was that I had to carry it out, period. You see? I was 6 years old, so at seventeen, well I think I had done a lot, don’t you? So then, it was time for me to win some freedom, I wanted to be free [laughter] and that’s what it meant for me. And aside—

### *Work, Education, Feminism/Women/Gender, Activism, Politics*

[00:32]

**Grabe: What kind of work did you focus on after you were married?**

Mejía: Well, I continued to teach at night and I went to college. I finished high school at night and taught during the day. Then I moved to Managua<sup>27</sup> to go to college, for five or six years, and I continued working in the afternoon. I studied in the morning and worked in the afternoon. He, my partner, did the same, he worked at night in a restaurant as a disc jockey and I would go as well and washed dishes and made some extra cash, in addition to teaching. And we saved, and with that we saved enough to buy the first bed we had. Well, for us it was not difficult, I mean, it’s not that I would cry because of the situation we were in. No, it was part of life; part of what we had to do and always with that concern of becoming part of something bigger. I was studying psychology when I learned of the existence of the Network of Women Against Violence, in ‘92.

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<sup>26</sup> The córdoba is the Nicaraguan currency.

<sup>27</sup> Managua is the capital city of Nicaragua

So I went, when they founded the Network, to see what was going on. Then, about two years later I showed up again when they introduced Violeta Delgado.<sup>28</sup> She was the new Executive Coordinator for the Network, and I was at that meeting, I even remember how she was dressed, she had on light blue pants and a white shirt. That was Violeta Delgado. I told myself, “I want to be part of this, I like how these women think, I want to be like them.” So I began to learn about how to be part of this grid that is the Network of Women. So at this point I’m talking about when I was 20 or 21 years old. There’s a time where all I did was study and work. But I wanted to be part of something else, so I become involved with the Network and continued doing other jobs, I continued working, and I continued going again and again to the Network’s meetings. After I finished my degree, Psychology because it’s what I liked best, I think it was what meshed better with what I did and with what I had lived. And maybe I also chose it to find myself and take care of myself, of my mental health, because as I’ve told you, I had had a pretty full life, and so I had to find a way out. So I acknowledge this because many people say, “Well, psychologists study psychology so they can cure themselves” but I also studied it because, because I wanted to contribute through this career, I wanted to contribute to other women. Yes, I wanted to work with other women. For a long time, while I was still studying, for about two years, I worked at *La Verde Sonrisa*,<sup>29</sup> an NGO that worked with children. So there I learned to do community work, how to relate to young boys and girls who are glue-sniffers, the children who inhale fumes from glue, who are addicts, who have been led to such savagery by poverty, to forget who they are or to forget the violence they have suffered. So really, they were there, living violence in real life within their families. I also saw that they had also been abused, boys and girls. There was another group that we worked with, and had pedagogic assistance, to help them study. Everything I had learned during the revolution was turning out to be very useful; this was about when Doña Violeta won the elections. So I also joined the Network and also, I started doing, well, I guess you could call it political work. This is because this organization promoted development and education, but it also included ideas from the Sandinista Front,<sup>30</sup> and I was also part of that. So I worked there for two years.

After finishing college, I went to work at *Dos Generaciones*.<sup>31</sup> This is where I learned to work around issues of sexual abuse, because *Dos Generaciones*’s focus was the prevention of sexual abuse in boys, girls and adolescents, as well as treatment for the victims. So I learned more and continued to be part of the Network of Women. I continued hearing a lot about feminism, continued seeing Violeta Delgado and started to meet with Juanita Jimenez,<sup>32</sup> and with Martha in their sphere of influence. And I would say, “Wow, these women know so much, they know a lot, they produce ideas and promote Act 230.<sup>33</sup> How are we going to get laws like this passed?” So

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<sup>28</sup> Yamileth Mejia and Violeta Delgado were two of the nine women caught in a legal battle concerning their support of a nine year old girl receiving a, then legal, abortion after having been raped by her step father. The legal battle began in 2008 and ended in 2010 with all charges dropped against the women.

<sup>29</sup> The Green Smile

<sup>30</sup> The Sandinista ideas she is referring to may be the socialist, leftist views the group was founded on.

<sup>31</sup> Two Generations

<sup>32</sup> Juanita Jimenez was also one of the nine women caught in a legal battle concerning their support of a nine year old girl receiving a, then legal, abortion after having been raped by her step father. The legal battle began in 2008 and ended in 2010 with all charges dropped against the women.

<sup>33</sup> Act 230 was a law making domestic violence illegal and punishable by jail time. The law was passed in August of 1996. Many people were critical of it, considering it to be only a law on paper, as there was not a reliable way to enforce it. [www.fsdinternational.org/country/nicaragua/weissues](http://www.fsdinternational.org/country/nicaragua/weissues)

<http://www.cavnet2.org/partnersdetails.cfm?DocID=2854&partnerid=1145>

they brought in a bunch of women lawyers at that time, Juanita was one of them, also Azalea, Angela Rosa Acevedo, who is now on the Supreme Court and is part of the FSLN, she is still part of the FSLN but she has to—it's horrible to have to use "but"—well, she is still also a feminist woman, it's just she does her work within the FSLN. Not us, none of us do. What I also want to say, with this, is that at some point in my life, when I was very involved in the Revolutionary processes, the youth organization was *La Juventud Sandinista*.<sup>34</sup> According to the rules, whoever was doing the type of work that I was doing had to be a member of the Juventud Sandinista. I refused and I would ask myself, "Why do I have to sign up for something that I feel for, that I live for, that I want to do?" And they wanted to make me sign up, they would say, "Yamileth, we are going to make you an Honorary Member, we are going to give you political affiliation with the Juventud Sandinista." And I would tell them, "No. If you want me to continue contributing, the way that I do, doing the work I do, don't force me. I am not going to sign up; I don't want a piece of paper to force me to be here, because I am here because I want to be here." So that was the struggle, always, and well, then things happened the way they did in the '90s and there was the division, where Doña Violeta won the elections and well, there was like a disintegration of those agencies that the Sandinista Front had formed, it was as if a bomb fell on them and had destroyed them. So then, the Juventud Sandinista also fell apart, at least in my town, and well, everyone who was still there continued doing their work in the best way they thought possible; I decided to work with women, others decided to leave the country, to become laborers in Costa Rica or in the United States, or to go to El Salvador, to Honduras. Lots of people emigrated, many left, lots and lots and lots of the *Juventud Sandinista* left the country. Others went to other departments, but very few stayed in the country, at least in my town.

### *Feminism, Activism, History*

[00:41]

**Grabe: Just to be mindful of time, I want to ask you to tell me a little about the work you focused on when you were at the Network of Women Against Violence? What kind of issues did you work on and what kind of strategies did you use?**

Mejía: Yes. When I started, I was responsible for a commission that we called the Commission on Psychosocial Development, which began after Hurricane Mitch.<sup>35</sup> A large group of psychologists, social workers, health workers, and mental health workers got together and we began to organize ourselves in a way that we could contribute our skills to the aftermath of such a large natural disaster, and contribute the feminist focus, which each one of us had already embraced, that each one of us had already incorporated into our work. So we began to organize processes of emotional healing, but with a different focus, not the traditional clinical focus, but a feminist focus and a focus on human rights as well. Because if there is a woman who comes to you and tells you "I feel bad because my husband died and I am happy" and you ask her why she is happy and she tells you "well, he used to beat me and so now I am happy that he is dead, I'm happy that the mudslide took him with it." So then, which is the only explanation that can justify

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<sup>34</sup> The Sandinista Youth

<sup>35</sup> Hurricane Mitch was a powerful but slow moving Hurricane that hit Central America in October of 1998. Between 9,000 and 11,000 people were killed, largely due to flooding, and roughly 2.7 million people lost their homes.

the pain, the guilt and the happiness of that woman? It's the feminist focus and the human rights focus, because the traditional focus would have blamed her more, the traditional focus would have told her she has a disorder, while our focus was telling her, "You're right, you're right to feel that way. Your feeling is valid. His time was up and he died. Now what? What are we going to do now so that from now on you don't go on carrying the guilt of feeling happy?" You see? So you only get this from a different angle, a different focus, a different look at psychology. It is not the traditional psychology. We received a lot of help in this work from the Wisconsin Delegation, a lot of help with alternative therapies, non-traditional therapies, of working through reprocessing traumas through ocular movements, with Reiki<sup>36</sup>, all that we learned from that delegation. Also massages, acupuncture, that is, everything that was non-traditional we learned from that delegation, and we applied that new knowledge through a different focus. I feel I am a psychologist who can work with a woman who is living with domestic violence, but I work with her with a different focus, a different view point, I see her as a human being, in charge of herself just as any other human being, with rights, with opportunities just like everyone else. I do not see her as a mentally deranged being, without values, just because she decided to feel happy about her husband's death. That liberated her! His death liberated her, as simple as that, it is her opportunity to be happy. So, from my focus, I do not blame her. That is the opportunity that feminism gives me, that the Network of Women, with its focus on human rights, and also that *Dos Generaciones* gives me. *Dos Generaciones* works through the focus of human rights.

So how do we connect all those strategies? That is the main strategy we introduced in the Network of Women, and all those things that we did for people outside the Network, we also did for those within the Network: processes of emotional recovery with women from the Network, some of them decided to become a part of this, some did not. They had their right to choose. And after that, to become a member of the executive board, professionally. So there we were, Rosa Maria, Juanita and I trying to push the national processes. I was no longer part of a Commission, in that large national umbrella organization, but rather part of the umbrella, but I also felt like a member because of my own personal responsibility, due to the training I had and my leadership experience. So, to train women as leaders, they are the leaders. Someone once asked me, "And you are going to teach me to be a leader?" To which I replied, "No, you are already a leader, you will teach me in the process." What we wanted was for other women, who were also leaders in their own communities, to share their knowledge, so that the other women, all the female leaders, can have the possibility, the opportunity to hear about the different theories that other valuable women have built. To learn about how women in other countries had written about feminism, to discover other women, from the French Revolution, I mean the beginning. Many of the participants came to me and said, "How is it possible that so many women participated in the French Revolution and they didn't even include them in history?" Well, what is happening in this history? Women were also erased from the history of this Sandinista Revolution. So then, how to awaken, unveil, break ground, and also how to identify feminist books? For example, to know about Carmen Alborch,<sup>37</sup> who talks about the rivalries among women, how the machismo forces us to become rivals and see them as the trophy. How sexism or the way we are socialized to be women domesticates us, we are domesticated like animals. We are told what things women should and should not do and what things men will do freely. We are taught the right way to

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<sup>36</sup> Reiki is a Japanese stress reduction and healing technique of laying hands on another to promote healthy energy flow.

<sup>37</sup> A Spanish politician and author.

perform our domestic duties, that's why they call them domestic duties, and women perform them because they have been domesticated to do so. It's as if they can just turn on a switch when placed before a stove. I do not like to cook, I do it because otherwise I go hungry, but I learned to dislike it. But you know, men and women should learn to cook, men and women should know how to clean a house, men and women should know how to decorate a house and have it look nice, like this one. But no, because that is a woman's work, because it is domestic, it is what domesticates them and forces them to stay inside the house. So we learned all that in the processes of feminist formation in the Network, of which I, fortunately, was part of that Network.

**Grabe: And how many years were you at the Network?**

Mejía: Nine years.

**Grabe: What year did you leave?**

Mejía: In 2007.

### *Activism, Feminism*

**[00:49]**

**Grabe: And how did you make that decision to leave?**

Mejía: Well, within the Network, as it was growing, our process was that every three years there would be one Coordinating Commission and three Network Executives; our term was coming to an end, it ended in 2007. The possibility of a second term with the Network existed, but this transition period coincided with the presidential elections and there was a rupture within the women's movement. Some women who were members of the Network decided to also become involved in that Autonomous Women's Movement<sup>38</sup> and we also decided we wanted to do things a different way. Another group decided they wanted to do things differently. Really there were two groups within that Autonomous Women's Movement, which led to a rift—some of us decided to do things one way, to do things in a certain way, politics, to do politics one way while others decided to do politics differently. This all coincided with the Executive Commission's transition period. Now the Women's Network was comprised of women and is comprised of women, of women's organizations, of women from the feminist movement, and women from the autonomous movement, there are individual women and they all decided that there would be no second term, period. They decided there would be a new Coordinating Commission to steer the Network and that our term was over, period. That was a political decision that the Network made up of a group of over 150 women's organizations. And it was a great learning experience because they tell you that, well, what the assembly wanted, and the democracy we are promoting, we promote it from within and this can work for or against an organization. We could have decided that half the previous members of the Coordinating Commission could stay, so there would be some continuity, but no, they were more radical. They said, "No, we are going to have a new Coordinating Commission." But the thing is they also said we were very partisan because we dared to voice our preference for X or Y party because it was more in line with our ideas. Yet, during a different moment in history, when the Network was just starting, many

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<sup>38</sup> An umbrella term used for all groups promoting women's rights, feminist principles, and gender equality.

women were also members of the FSLN and decided to run for a seat in the Assembly and the Network supported them. So I dare to say that even within those women's organizations, I dare to say—me, personally—that there are still many ideas that convene with those of the old FSLN. My friends and colleagues in the Women's Movement may not agree with me, but I do see it that way because in that FSLN there are still many authoritarian attitudes, attitudes that tell you “This is what we are going to do and it's what we are going to do.” But we tried, I think we at least tried very very hard to democratize that space. And I think that was one of the legacies that both our Coordinating Commission, as well as the one prior to ours, left: to attempt to have democratic processes within that organization, and well, they are still there.

### *Work, Feminism, Politics*

[00:54]

**Grabe: So where did you start working after that?**

Mejía: Afterwards I worked as a consultant, voluntary work, activism, voluntary work with the Autonomous Women's Movement and the Women's Network Against Violence. I consulted for Xochilt Acalt,<sup>39</sup> for the women in Chinandega, Women's Movement of Chinandega. In León, in Matagalpa, I lent my support to different places in Nicaragua.

**Grabe: Until you started with your current organization?**

Mejía: Yes.

**Grabe: Because the time is ending, could you—**

Mejía: Yes, well, after that what I did was apply for a job that appeared in the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation's<sup>40</sup> website. I liked it because it sought to support and strengthen that critical route that we had talked about for so long in the Women's Network and how to strengthen it so that the institutions would finally, once and for all, start providing services to women. We wanted a concrete project that would support the Women's Police Station, the Public Prosecutor's Office, the Institute for Legal Medicine, women's organizations and shelters. Shelters are necessary so that fewer women become fatal victims of violence, so that women, although they have lived through violence, know where they can go to place a complaint and know that they will be well received at those places where they place the demand, treated respectfully. We didn't want just words, but for women to be taken, in a timely manner—not two or three months later—to the Institute for Legal Medicine. We wanted this woman not to have to return home, not to become a victim again. So that is basically what this project is trying to do and I felt that I was a perfect match for it because of all the work I had done in the Network.

So now I am doing the same things I was trying to do in the Women's Network, but now it's based out of this project—called the Comprehensive Services to Victims of Gender-based

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<sup>39</sup> Xochilt Acalt Women's Center, located in Malpaisillo, Department of León.

<sup>40</sup> Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo

Violence Project,<sup>41</sup> within the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation.<sup>42</sup> I feel that we are introducing the same feminist focus in all these processes with the state institutions, they don't walk the talk, they have refused to—and still refuse to—work with women's organizations, even though women's organizations have been providing services for women victims of violence. These women's organizations have even provided treatment models for them to follow! So, simply stated, Daniel Ortega<sup>43</sup> said, "No more work with women's organizations, now you must work with the ETC" and they broke away with the coordinating network they had built.

So with this project we have been able to rebuild some of that network of inter-institutional coordination, as well as coordination with the women's organizations, at least at the local level, at least in Puerto Cabeza, a little bit in District 6 and some of the other districts in Managua. Proof of this is that the Police Station, for example, sends women who are victims of violence and in danger of death, well they send them to Acción Ya, to Acción Ya's shelter; but they don't include them in the National Budget. So, the women who are coordinating shelters, at this point, they are the ones who have to scramble to keep and support the women victims of violence and also those women whom they have at their shelters.

### *Feminism*

[00:57]

**Grabe: I have two more short questions; you've used this term feminism. Can you tell me what it means to you? How do you define it?**

Mejía: A better way of living life, a way of finding balance, the equality between men and women, between men and men, and between women and women. It does not only mean to find equality between men and women, but to find it between all human beings. For me, it is a philosophy of life that I apply to my life every day, and it's hard to undertake sometimes because it's also about principles. It's among the most revolutionary philosophies of life. It's super revolutionary because it goes against injustice, not just injustice towards women, but towards men and women; it is in favor of full citizenship, a citizenship without any type of discrimination. That's what feminism is for me.

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<sup>41</sup> Project for Comprehensive Services to Victims of Gender-based Violence, funded by the Spanish Cooperation Agency (AECID), it aims to support public institutions that provide services to victims of gender-based violence, as well as to influence civil society to reduce impunity and eradicate violence towards women. It is currently being implemented in two cities: Managua and Puerto Cabezas.

<http://www.aecid.org.ni/coop-bilateral/proyecto/44-proyecto-de-atencion-integral-a->

<sup>42</sup> The Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID) is a public entity within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, responsible to the Secretary of State for International Cooperation and for Latin America (SECIPI). Under the International Development Cooperation Act 23/1998, of 7 July 1998, AECID is the governing body for Spanish policy on international development cooperation, and its fundamental aim, according to the AECID statutes, is to promote, manage and implement public policies for international development cooperation, with particular emphasis on reducing poverty and achieving sustainable human development in developing countries, as defined in each four-yearly AECID Master Plan. <http://www.aecid.es/en/aecid/>.

<sup>43</sup> Daniel Ortega, a FSLN leader, was president of Nicaragua from 1985-1990 and was elected president again in 2007 for a term ending in June 2012. He won elections in November 2011. Since the revolution Ortega has been a divisive figure within and outside the FSLN as many within the party believe he has too much control over the policies and platforms of the party. His political career has been wrought with controversy.

**Interviewer: Are you a feminist?**

Mejía: Yes, [laughter] until the day I die [more laughter].

*Feminism, Politics, Family, Personal Narrative, Work*

[00:59]

**Grabe: And I also want to ask you, how have the consequences you've received politically affected your life?**

Mejía: Well of course, because from the beginning we were harassed by the husbands of the women we defended; we were harassed by the President for supporting Zoilamérica;<sup>44</sup> we've been harassed by the Church for abortion—in general as well as supporting therapeutic abortions—

**Grabe: And how has it affected you personally?**

Mejía: Personally? Well, I guess personally it does affect you because whether you like it or not, your family becomes involved, whether you like it or not your children become involved. When they brought charges against us, against the nine feminists,<sup>45</sup> at the end of the year—it was 2007—my son was getting ready to graduate from high school, and he comes up to me and tells me, “Mom, you know, I was thinking, I had a dream and I've been thinking a lot about it.” “About what?” I said. “Well, you know, the moment that you take me by the arm to receive my diploma, if the police show up I will call my friends and we will surround you so that the police can't take you.” Well, I laugh about it now, I laugh and share it with my friends, because it didn't happen. And well, I didn't think that it was something he was really pondering about, but really he was, he was thinking about those things. A friend told me once, “That story you shared about your son, well it really got to one of our members, tears were running down her face.” And you know, it wasn't until that moment that I really realized how much it affected my son and daughter. My daughter would say, “Don't worry Mom, they won't come for you.” Or at times they made light of it, when we would hear police sirens nearby they would joke, “Mom, they're coming for you” and I'd laugh and say “No, they won't come. They won't come.” You know that's something we Nicaraguans do, we make light of serious situations, of suffering, but really they were very affected by it and they told me later. They would also say, “Mom, don't go to the marches, Mom, they're going to hurt you, don't go.” I'd try to calm them down, “No, don't worry, nothing is going to happen to me, don't worry, nothing is going to happen.” As they got older and the marches became more violent—we were attacked with stones, they would insult us,

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<sup>44</sup> Zoilamérica Narváez, Daniel Ortega's stepdaughter, accused Ortega of sexual harassment/misconduct in 1998, went to court, was represented by lawyers from the Women's movement. Zoilamérica won the court case, decided to settle privately with Ortega, and later the family reunited. This was a pivotal moment in the FSLN, and the division of the FSLN is often partially attributed to these accusations

<sup>45</sup> The nine women Ana Maria Pizarro, Juanita Jiménez, Lorna Norori, Luisa Molina Arguello, Marta María Blandón, Martha Munguía, Mayra Sirias, Violeta Delgado and Yamileth Mejía, were caught in a legal battle concerning their support of a nine year old girl receiving a, then legal, abortion after having been raped by her step father. The legal battle began in 2008 and ended in 2010 with all charges dropped against the women. <http://pthblog.amnesty.org.uk/tag/yamileth-mejia/>

they wanted to beat us with sticks, all of that—well, they started to see things were much more serious. They lived that harassment very close to home.

I lived that harassment too, but I was incredibly angry, I mean, how dare they say that we had engaged in unlawful association to commit a crime? We are not criminals; we are defenders of human rights. They would say we were in favor of abortion,<sup>46</sup> yes, so what? What is the problem with that? They are our bodies, right? They would accuse us of being accomplices to sexual abuses, when the biggest accomplice was the President's wife!<sup>47</sup> And the criminal was the President, not us. So, because we were in favor of human rights they were making slanderous and defamatory allegations about us, accusing us of being criminals; we weren't criminals. We were not criminals. Oh, I would get so angry, so very angry.

I also was not able to get a couple of jobs that I applied to. They would say, "The thing is, while you have this unresolved matter, we just can't hire you." Same thing happened to Martha, they told Martha, "We can't hire you because you have an unresolved matter with the courts." And this affects our survival, it affects our children's survival and our right to employment, right? Until, well the Spanish Agency for Cooperation ventured to hire me, although I still had that unresolved matter—well, unresolved for them, not me. After that, I just pressed forward.

**Grabe: Yamileth, I wish we had more time. I want to thank you for participating in the interview today, your story is very inspiring.**

Mejía: Well, if it helps at all. [laughter]

**Grabe: Before the light completely goes, I'd like to take a picture of you.**

Mejía: Sure.

**Grabe: But you can take your microphone off.**

Mejía: I can take this thing off now?

**Grabe: We have a lot in common; I love, I love at the beginning you acknowledged the women who came before you—**

Mejía: This thing got stuck! [Laughter] I have another boob in the middle, how horrible, a third boob [laughter], they're already small and now this.

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<sup>46</sup> Yamileth said they were called "abortistas" which would most accurately be a person who performs abortions.

<sup>47</sup> Rosario Murillo, wife of 3 time (and current) President Daniel Ortega, disavowed her daughter, Zoilamerica Narvaez, and the accusations of sexual abuse Narvaez brought against him.