

# National Symbolism in Constructions of Gender: Transformed Symbols in Post-Conflict States

by Karima Omar

*Because the nation has symbolically figured as a family—and as such has acquired a patriarchal hierarchy within which members are assigned distinct roles in accordance with their gender—as in the patriarchal family, for the nation to sustain itself it needs both masculinity and femininity. For without masculinity femininity cannot exist, and without these twin constructions the nation as we know it would not exist either.*

—Anne McClintock, “No Longer in a Future Heaven”

## INTRODUCTION

According to Anne McClintock, an academic pioneer in the emerging field of nationalism and gender studies, established theories of nationalism, which often oppose each other, have consistently failed to include gender as a relevant component of the nation.<sup>1</sup> Based on recent feminist interpretations that explore the intersection of gender and nation in nationalism, conceptualizations of nation-ness are gendered, personifying the national landscape with the traits of both woman and man. For instance, national mythologies that feminize the fertile land as the nurturing wife and mother lend legitimacy to the masculine ideal of the warrior protector who guards the nation against those who try to defile it. At the same time, modern references to the “fatherland” and the “motherland” are not alien to the discourse of nationalism and to the ethnocrats who attempt to manipulate it.<sup>2</sup>

As opposed to traditional interpretations of nationalism that hinge exclusively on the impetus of print capitalism in promulgating nationalism, feminist nationalist theories move beyond and attribute nationalism’s relevance to its inherent symbolism. The expression of nationalism manifests in physical symbols such as national anthems, flags, and costumes.<sup>3</sup> In many cases, these symbols take on gendered roles, such as Lady Liberty or Rosie the Riveter, in the case of the United States. By viewing nationalism and its rhetoric through the lens of symbolism, it becomes apparent that nationalism is inherently a gendered experience.

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It is necessary to focus on gender when examining nationalism, especially in current cases of nationalist conflict, since women and children are more frequently the victims of nationalist struggles. Contemporary case studies illustrate that women have also taken up arms, becoming active participants in conflict. Whether a participant or a victim of the nationalist struggle, these wars are militarized and therefore conceptualized in male terms, leading to a tendency to further ignore the issue of women in nationalist discourses. Women are and have been active, yet invisible, participants in national revolutionary struggles as suggested by conflicts in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Libya, Eritrea, Vietnam, and Yugoslavia. In order to encourage the participation of women in nationalist struggles, the nationalist rhetoric of ethnocrats manipulates national female symbols and links women's concerns with the national agenda in an attempt to mobilize both sexes to arms. In the midst of conflict and with nationalism at its height, women are empowered as a means of furthering the cause, yet once liberation is achieved, the importance of women and women's issues diminishes. One would expect the socio-political status of women in post-conflict states to improve relative to that of wartime; however, the opposite scenario has become the norm in which women are once again subordinate members of society.

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This study focuses on the process whereby women, once active combatants in national revolutionary movements, are pushed aside because their elevated status during times of conflict does not conform to the traditional gender roles that consistently reemerge after nationalist wars. Four established reasons why women are disempowered after liberation include: 1) the nation's need to keep women in the home and out of the workforce so male veterans can seek jobs; 2) economic priorities that stress modernization over social welfare; 3) political systems that view women's active participation in national affairs as a temporary expedient; and 4) families and communities that turn to the past for a comforting, nostalgic view of life.<sup>4</sup> The following discussion, however, offers a fifth reason as to why women are neglected in postwar revolutionary societies. Gendered national symbols, previously manipulated during the struggle to empower women to become active combatants, are transformed in the post-conflict state to reconstruct traditional gender roles and resurrect pre-existing gender stratification structures, which results in a collective dismissal of women and women's issues in society. In other words, the resumption of normalcy in post-conflict states reinstates traditional gender roles that subordinate women through an onslaught of gendered symbol systems emanating from society. While the temporarily suspended patriarchy empowers women during war, post-conflict society on the other hand is unable to uphold wartime gender roles.

The research examines two nation-states, Vietnam and Nicaragua, which in the past fifty to sixty years have experienced national liberation/revolutionary movements in which women had a participatory role. I have chosen to study Vietnam and Nicaragua because each country emerges from similar Marxist beginnings that allow for an almost uniform approach to revolution. Moreover, each case exhibits similar gender stratification before and after armed struggle. It is important to establish that revolutions in both countries were nationalist as opposed to strictly Marxist. Despite the large Marxist influence of the Sandinista guerillas, the main purpose of their struggle was to oppose the U.S.-sponsored capitalist and corrupt Somoza "dynasty" that was placed in power during the American occupation of the 1930s, against the will of the general populace.<sup>5</sup> The same holds true for Vietnam. Hundreds of years of colonialism in Vietnam under the Chinese and later the French, followed abruptly by the U.S. military campaign, led many Vietnamese to associate the armed guerilla struggle against the United States as a fight against another foreign colonizer. This subsequent violent nationalism was cloaked and presented within the context of Marxism, the antithesis of Western values and beliefs. The following case studies will further examine Nicaraguan and Vietnamese nationalism as it relates to women, beginning with a historical analysis of the nationalist conflict and the various uses of gendered national symbols that shaped gender roles.

## VIETNAM

The case of Vietnam reveals a national culture, derived from a unique historical experience, which honors both the image of the nurturing mother who instills the virtues of the nation within the home and of the warrior princess who takes up arms against the unruly invaders.<sup>6</sup> Though Confucian maternal imagery, laden with female subordination, served to define the roles of Vietnamese women strictly within the domestic sphere, Vietnamese women had for centuries fought against foreign aggressors, beginning with the Chinese in 43 C.E., and later the French and Americans, creating a legacy of women warriors entrenched in the Vietnamese psyche of national culture. In Hanoi today, several national monuments are dedicated to this dual role of women. A commemorative statue located in the center of Hanoi depicting a Vietnamese woman with a child in one arm and a rifle in the other pays tribute to the sacrifices that Vietnamese women have made for the nation, both as mothers and warriors.<sup>7</sup>

During the Vietnam War, 1.5 million Vietnamese women once again took up arms against a new enemy, the United States, and fought in both the National Liberation Front and the North Vietnamese Army. Carefully crafted Communist propaganda, evident in so called "emulation campaigns," encouraged an end to traditional Chinese Confucian notions of female subservience in order to generate a mass military mobilization of men and women against the common enemy. To this end, the Communist Party in the North facilitated the equalization of gender relations in all aspects of life. According to Goodkind, women in the North gained unprecedented autonomy and power at the local and national level throughout the war as a result of

the migration of men to the front lines and the socialists' educational policies.<sup>8</sup> Women's empowerment grew and sustained itself over the course of the war, yet declined steadily during the "post-liberation" period following 1975. Goodkind further noted that despite the gender inequities that exist today as a result of this decline in women's empowerment, advances toward equality have been erased mostly.<sup>9</sup> The following analysis will examine the intersections of gender and nationalism in Vietnam before, during, and after conflict.

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#### *Historical Context*

Before the firm establishment of Chinese Confucianism in Vietnam, indigenous family customs, codified in written law in the fifteenth century, were based largely on the traditions of bilateral kinship and the right of inheritance for women, allowing for the development of a relatively balanced system of gender relations.<sup>10</sup> During the Chinese invasion, women took up arms not only to defend their land, but also to defend a culture that had exalted them.<sup>11</sup> Heroic women warriors immortalized and celebrated in indigenous Vietnamese legend include the famed Trung Sisters that fought the Chinese in a fierce battle around 40 C.E. A legendary story of this time period is one of a female Trung commander by the name of Phung Thi Chinh, who gave birth during battle only to immediately resume fighting with her infant over her shoulder.<sup>12</sup> Other notable female warriors that have become symbols of Vietnamese nationalism include Lady Trieu and Bui Thi Xuan.

Once Chinese Confucianism had overtaken the indigenous Vietnamese culture, the high status women once held began to wane. Since then, Chinese Confucianism has heavily shaped Vietnam, injecting it with a moral and legal framework that bound women to the home.<sup>13</sup> This system was promulgated in the Three Submissions: 1) at home, a girl is subject to her father; 2) a married woman is subject to her husband; and 3) when the husband dies, his widow is to care for her eldest son.<sup>14</sup> The Four Virtues also dictated the personal character of Vietnamese women within the Confucian ideals of proper speech, good conduct, solemnity, and tolerance.<sup>15</sup> These gendered conceptualizations of Confucianism, which permeated Vietnamese culture at this time, shaped gender roles for hundreds of years and became symbols of the Vietnamese feminine ideal.

During periods of armed insurrection, however, indigenous legends of women warriors would be evoked to inspire women to take up the nationalist cause. This manipulation of gendered national symbols would temporarily suspend traditional Confucian gender stratification. During the war against the French, Ho Chi Minh, leader of the anti-imperialist nationalists, set women's equality high on his agenda, leading many women to join the nationalist struggle. According to a special issue of

*Vietnamese Studies*, their heroic feats revived a legacy of fighting women, inspiring a host of modern-day Trung queens and reminding their fellow male cadres of their true Vietnamese history and identity within the context of an already fierce nationalist revival.<sup>16</sup>

#### *Vietnamese Women's Empowerment*

During the Vietnam war, propaganda that intended to attract even more “latter day Trung Queens” was formalized by the efforts of the North Vietnamese-sponsored Women’s Liberation Association that worked out of South Vietnam. The Women’s Liberation Association was given the task of mobilizing women in the South to have more women on the fighting lines, while at the same time encouraging them to take up more social and political responsibilities at the village level. To this end, members of the Women’s Liberation Association began emulation campaigns that primarily publicized the courage and heroism of female fighters to develop a sense of camaraderie and morale among rural women. Images of fighting Vietnamese heroines of past centuries, like Ut Tich and Nguyen Dinh, were reincarnated to appeal to these women on a very personal level.<sup>17</sup> Emulation campaigns extolled the virtues of the good warrior, resulting in the emergence of a new behavioral code. The “Three Readinesses” served to reprioritize the lives of women, preparing them to fully assume all the responsibilities associated with farm production, sending their sons and husbands to war, and fighting when the time came.<sup>18</sup> In essence, the Three Preparednesses had replaced the Three Submissions. Now women were neither subject to the father, husband, or son, but to the needs of the nationalist cause, which brought women out of their traditional domestic roles to the public role of farming and fighting. The sudden change in women’s roles demonstrated the intentional manipulation of gendered symbols to support the nationalist struggle.

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New codes of conduct disseminated by the Communist Party included the Three Postponements, which eliminated the traditional maternal images delegated to women before the war. The Three Postponements first included the postponement of love. If this was too difficult to avoid, then the postponement of marriage was strongly recommended. And finally, if neither love nor marriage could be delayed, then the possibility of having children was to be postponed at all costs.<sup>19</sup> During this time, Ho Chi Minh introduced what was called the “New Way of Life,” or *Doi Song Moi*. Under this New Way of Life, the traditional “gallantry” men expressed toward women became forbidden. Women and men were to receive exactly the same treatment. If, for example, a man were to give his seat to a woman on a bus, a woman was to reply, “*doi song moi*, please” or “stop your imperialist gallantry.”<sup>20</sup> These measures were intended to severely restrict any deviation from the gender equalizing dictums of the

state. Propaganda literature further supplemented the mass mobilization efforts of the Party. So called “Art for Society” was to shape what the modern woman ought to be and what she must do.”<sup>21</sup> Chu Van’s *The Perfume of the Areca Palm*, a notable propaganda literary piece, “argued that traditional views despising female inability were wrong and advocated that women’s status in the family should be upgraded.”<sup>22</sup>

These efforts were legally sanctioned by the North Vietnamese government during the war against the French and Americans. The first constitution of North Vietnam, otherwise known as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, was officially introduced in 1949. It specifically made reference to women, advocating the equality of the sexes, and stipulated provisions for equal pay and paid maternity leave.<sup>23</sup> In 1959, a Marriage and Family Law sought to revamp the practice of marriage in order to guard women against prostitution, arranged marriages, and other traditional “denigrating” customs.<sup>24</sup> These laws intended to render the old “feudal” bourgeoisie traditions obsolete and emancipate women. Furthermore, these laws were designed to force women into the working and fighting force in order to accelerate the industrialization of the North and the defeat of the enemy in the South.

For many, these laws had met their objectives. Between 1958 and 1962, the number of forced marriages decreased by 60 percent in one northern province, signaling a significant change in traditional notions of women and marriage.<sup>25</sup> This change was not only brought about by state legislation, but also by state run propaganda that manipulated national symbols in art, politics, and daily life with “*Doi Song Moi*” and other codes of conduct. Yet, not everyone within the party circle was satisfied with the results, which were viewed as “insufficient” in the context of an increasingly bloody war with the Americans. The central government addressed these insufficiencies with strict legislation that introduced Resolution 153, a job quota requiring women to comprise as much as 35 percent of all jobs.<sup>26</sup>

Women’s empowerment during the war improved steadily from the mid 1960s until the early 1980s. About 1.5 million Vietnamese women fought in both the North and the South, and around 10 percent of villages had a female president. In 1974, approximately 3,000 women held local administrative positions in village committees nationally and women’s representation was at a record 32 percent in the National Assembly. In terms of jobs, many of the women were employed in healthcare, education, and production, and women eventually came to comprise over 35 percent of the general workforce by the end of the war.<sup>27</sup>

#### *Women’s Disempowerment*

Women served with heroic distinction in both the North and the South. Some women even held leadership positions, such as Mme. Nguyen Thi Dinh, deputy commander of the National Liberation Front, who published her personal memoirs on the war in 1968. However, there is little known about the 1.5 million Vietnamese female guerillas and North Vietnamese army combatants who were not remembered by an autobiography. Even among many Vietnamese, the physical and military hardships of enlisted female combatants in the North are rarely publicly acknowledged.<sup>28</sup> In the post-war decline of women’s status in contemporary Vietnam,

the government's version of the sacrifices made by women warriors mirrored this same pattern, thereby deleting the participation of 1.5 million women in the war. Brief official accounts of women's service in the war focus on the emotional aspects surrounding their contributions to the war effort, emphasizing their dedication and nationalist zeal, while offering little or no mention of their military successes. As a result, the position of women within the general war narrative has become subordinate to that of men, reflecting the greater societal relegation of women to the domestic sphere following the war.<sup>29</sup>

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This new auxiliary role for women in post-war Vietnam was supported even by the Communist Party's Women's Union, once a key organization within the party structure that promoted women's emancipation and empowerment. In 1982, the government's "New Culture Family" campaign to initiate a return to traditional family values with an emphasis on the duties of motherhood was communicated to the public in the Women's Union's official magazine.<sup>30</sup> The "Glorious Daughters of the Revolution" extolled the maternal responsibilities of women and suggested a welcome return to traditional gender roles. The apparent ideological shift within the Women's Union demonstrated the irony of the situation, in which an organization once dedicated to the empowerment of women was now relegating them back into the home to resume domestic life for the sake of national reconstruction.<sup>31</sup> Ensuring the strength of future generations of Vietnamese is the new role for women in post-war Vietnam, who are now symbolically positioned once again as biological producers and caregivers subservient to men.

The decline of women's empowerment progressed steadily throughout the fifteen years that followed the war's end. Despite the nominal pronouncements of equality, outlined once again in the 1980 Reunification Constitution, the number of women in positions of influence soon began to decline. At the village level, the amount of women in leadership positions fell consistently after the war from 3,000 in 1974 to 1,400 in 1976 and down to 800 by 1979. The same trend was also evident at the national level, as the number of female representatives in the National Assembly was at 32 percent in 1971 and continually declined to 27 percent in 1976, 22 percent in 1981, and 18 percent in 1987 and 1992.<sup>32</sup> Soon after, severe gender stratification was observed in levels of educational attainment and non-administrative occupations. As men returned home from the war, many women were forced out of managerial positions. Many of the women that remained in the workforce occupied the bulk of lower-end jobs, comprising 70 to 80 percent of the agricultural labor force and 46 percent of all industrial laborers in 1986.<sup>33</sup>

What is even more telling is the lack of enforcement required to uphold the

Marriage Law of 1959, as the levels of female human trafficking for prostitution increased annually at alarming rates. Furthermore, the government has been lax to enforce the 1949 constitutional mandate to give women equal pay. According to a Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1995:

*While there is no legal discrimination, women face deeply ingrained social discrimination. Despite extensive provisions in the Constitution, in legislation, and in regulations that mandate equal treatment, and although some women occupy high government posts, in general few women are able to compete effectively for high government posts. The government has not enforced the constitutional provision that women and men must receive equal pay for equal work.<sup>34</sup>*

Women's disempowerment is reinforced daily by Vietnamese popular culture, which is both sponsored and censored by the current socialist government. Whether it is television, literature, or daily news publications, the prevailing culture places women first and foremost as mothers, whose ultimate duty is to bear sons to its nation.<sup>35</sup> Currently, 1.4 million women in Vietnam are widows or unmarried without children as a result of the war, rendering them poverty-stricken since they are without male financial support. Women veterans, who had returned to village life physically and emotionally scarred by the war, were in many cases considered unable to marry. In effect, these women were considered deviants, moving away from reinstated post-war ideals of womanhood. Additionally, the possibility of improving the situation for these women is limited by the restrictions of credit agencies that preclude them from issuing loans to women without a male cosigner.<sup>36</sup> Thus, these women lack the financial resources to help lift them from poverty.

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In discussing the effects of popular culture in reestablishing gendered national symbols in post-war Vietnam that exalt the passive maternal woman, it is important to take note of a recent cultural trend depicted in Vietnamese television. *The Last Survivor of the Jungle of Laughter* was a popular sex-charged life drama of episodes based around the wartime experiences of five girls in a desolate jungle.<sup>37</sup> Instead of focusing on the refined fighting skills of the women warriors, themes of romance, lesbianism, and sexuality permeated the television series, in effect dismissing the learned skills of most female fighters. *The Last Survivor of the Jungle of Laughter* attempts to minimize the contributions and sacrifices of women in the war. It is a classic example of the manipulation of a venerated national symbol—the female warrior at war—presented as a sex-obsessed adolescent in the post-war context. This demonstrates the collective disempowerment of women on the societal level and illustrates the



transformed meaning of a gendered national symbol in the post-conflict state.

A post-war literary piece that is indifferent to women's role in the Vietnamese War is the short story by Nguyen Huy Thiep, a well-respected Vietnamese author. His piece entitled *The General Retires* "is a literary milestone in Vietnamese culture in the sense that it confronts the Vietnam today with the Vietnam of yesteryear by creatively building upon the warped metaphor of the Retired General."<sup>38</sup> The story's main character, a retired female combatant, is a greedy old woman who uses aborted fetuses she picks up from a local hospital to feed the dogs she later sells for money.<sup>39</sup> This scathing portrayal of a female veteran is a testament to the social discrimination against women inherent in the general post-war society and culture. This symbol of woman presented by Thiep is a far cry from "latter day Trung Queens" that were models of emulation during the war effort.

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While a marked disempowerment of women in Vietnam had occurred in the fifteen years following the war, the Women's Union attempted to reverse this once it had become clear that women were becoming less visible at the political level. In 1986, shortly after the introduction of market socialism, the Women's Union succeeded in prompting the government to consult them and other female representatives in the National Assembly on all legislation relating to women.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, in 1994, the Central Committee of the Communist Party introduced an affirmative action plan at the behest of the firm lobbying the Women's Union to increase the number of women in public service and managerial positions. The plan soon led to the election of the first female member of the Politburo in 1996 and an increase to 27 percent of women in the National Assembly in 2002.<sup>41</sup>

Despite significant improvements over the past ten years in establishing a sense of formal equality on the political front, substantive equality is harder to come by in a Vietnam where an increase in patrilocal residence, prostitution, violence against women, and the feminization of agriculture are part of a reemerging male-oriented society laden with contradictions. Today's most recent government propaganda is a telling indication of the gender relations that exist in the new market-oriented Vietnam. It illustrates the country's key contributors to the economy: the male professional, the male technical worker, the male serving in the armed forces, and the peasant woman in the field.

What this analysis concludes is that despite the manipulation of national symbols that dictated different gender roles at various times, Vietnamese society never eliminated traditional notions of gender, but in fact carefully hid them away for the duration of the war.<sup>42</sup> This manipulation of symbol systems was a tactical means to a specific objective—national liberation. The temporary empowerment of women became a

way to facilitate the objective more efficiently. Despite attempts to level the differences between the sexes in legislation and in Communist propaganda that portrayed vivid national symbolism during the war, these strides no longer serve the purposes of the national cause of economic development and reconstruction in post-conflict Vietnam. The new national cause of post-war Vietnam for women is to repopulate Vietnam with many sons. Therefore, in the absence of war and of an immediate need for half of the population to take up arms and industrialize the country, a swift return to traditional pre-war Confucianism was signaled. In effect, Vietnamese nationalism reconfigured itself within the patriarchal structure from which it was derived.

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#### NICARAGUA

The Nicaragua case, while exhibiting similar symbolic patterns as observed in Vietnam, follows a slightly divergent path. The Nicaraguan case does not follow the same clear-cut time cycle seen in the Vietnam case of women's empowerment during the struggle and disempowerment in reconstruction. Sandinista women of the Frente Sandinista de Liberación (FSLN), fighting during the revolution against the Somoza regime over a period of eighteen years, experienced new freedoms during the war that continued several years after the war's end in 1979, reaching an "emancipatory peak" in 1982 that soon spiraled downward. This downward spiral was due in part to the FSLN's alienation of women and women's issues over the years following the fall of the Somoza dictatorship. The FSLN government not only became increasingly unpopular among those concerned with the women's movement early in the 1980s, but the contra war and economic austerity programs initiated by the party contributed to the general public's dissatisfaction with the FSLN in post-revolution Nicaragua, which led to its defeat at the polls in 1990.

Unlike the Vietnam case, in which women saw an immediate increase in gender inequality and a declining sense of empowerment, Nicaraguan women witnessed a gradual, yet significant decline that occurred over the first and only decade of rule under the FSLN. The following discussion will focus on the change in national symbol systems between the revolutionary period and the post-conflict/liberation period.

#### *Nicaraguan Women's Empowerment*

Before the armed struggle against the Somoza regime, Nicaraguan culture was characterized by both machismo and "marianismo," which dictated the gender roles of society. Heavily entrenched machismo attitudes in Latin America require men to prove their masculinity to society by fathering many children. At the same time, machista culture does not tend to admonish its men for abandoning the families. This socially acceptable behavior has today become an outgrowth of the agricultural

economy, which for centuries has relied primarily upon the seasonal migration of farm workers.<sup>43</sup> The persistence of the machista culture over the years served to objectify women and render them subservient to men within the overall context of Catholicism. On the other hand, images of Nicaraguan women were deeply influenced by “marianismo.” According to Francie Chassen-Lopez, social constructs of motherhood in Nicaragua and other Latin American countries are overwhelmingly associated with images of the all-forgiving, self-sacrificing, peace-loving Virgin Mother Mary.<sup>44</sup>

Beginning in the early to mid 1960s, the FSLN encouraged Nicaraguan women to shed this image of “marianismo” for “combative motherhood”<sup>45</sup> and to participate in the armed revolutionary struggle. During the eighteen years of revolutionary struggle, women comprised 30 percent of those mobilized by the FSLN guerillas.<sup>46</sup> According to Babb, the Nicaraguan Revolution coincided with the popular worldwide women’s movement that was occurring in the latter part of the 1960s and 1970s, which may have in fact served to draw many women into the ranks of the Sandinistas since it too advocated equal rights for women.<sup>47</sup> This dramatic shift of women’s roles, facilitated and engineered by the FSLN to achieve a mass mobilization of Nicaraguan guerilla fighters, led to an increase in women’s political involvement.

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The FSLN Manifesto of 1969 explicitly includes the emancipation of women as part of the party program to liberate all Nicaraguans. Section VII of the Manifesto proclaims the end to all traditions that have favored men over women, advocating the equality of the sexes in all spheres of society.<sup>48</sup> Official FSLN ideology symbolically viewed underground women revolutionary fighters as “compañeras,” on the same level as men. Though women never gained high leadership positions in the FSLN directorate, there were in fact four female secretariats within four influential workers’ unions.<sup>49</sup>

Despite the claims and policies of the FSLN propaganda machine, the majority of women provided a largely supplementary role in the war. Women mostly worked in communications, revolutionary education, and medical care while a significant minority participated in the actual armed struggle. These new roles, being relatively different from traditional gender roles, were empowering for many women. Yet, Montenegro, ex-Sandinista feminist, maintains that in actuality women were unable to exercise any form of self-determination.

Of the fighting women who made up 30 percent of the mobilized guerilla force, there is little known since the few existing personal accounts, often found in the form of poetry or song, focus specifically on women’s heroism and offer no real insight into the rigors of daily military life. In honor of the unknown feats of countless Nicaraguan

women fighting a guerilla war, the FSLN's designated women's organization was named after the first woman to have been killed in combat, Luisa Amanda Espinosa, creating the Nicaraguan Women's Association, "Luisa Amanda Espinosa" or AMNLAE. This symbolic gesture on the part of the FSLN party suggests an attempt on their part to glorify the fighting character of the "new" Nicaraguan woman. This new association between women and war deviated away from traditional notions of "marianismo" that characterized the spiritually sanctioned role of women, thereby creating a space for women's empowerment and a new sense of motherhood or "combative motherhood."<sup>50</sup> Glorified images of "combative motherhood" that carried into the post-war years were produced and proliferated by the FSLN government. One popular image appeared throughout the country depicting a woman holding an AK-47 and a baby while happily smiling into the distance.<sup>51</sup>

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Post-war Nicaragua in 1979, under the firm control of the FSLN, saw more women than ever before becoming involved in the reconstruction process. AMNLAE, especially, worked diligently with the FSLN directorate to draft legislation that legally stipulated the equality of men and women. One of the first laws drafted by the FSLN government in 1979 was the Provisional Media Law that regulated "revolutionary media" in order to prevent the objectification and exploitation of women in the media. After all, the FSLN was fully aware of the capabilities of media in influencing public opinion after having launched its own series of successful communication campaigns using graffiti, mosaics, newsletters, and fliers, prompting party leaders to strictly control media content during the reconstruction period.<sup>52</sup> In addition, two more important laws were passed that attempted to dictate post-war gender relations. The Law Regulating Relations between Mothers, Fathers, and Children granted equal rights to both parents over their children<sup>53</sup> in an effort to erase remnants of machismo within the family structure. Furthermore, the 1982 Law of Nurturing was passed that "obliged men to contribute to their children's upkeep and to do their share of the household tasks, designed [specifically] to strengthen nuclear [family] bonds."<sup>54</sup>

National art in the form of colorful wall murals decorated cityscapes, depicting and honoring the "new" spirit of Nicaraguan fighting women; the "new" woman was made popular in the early 1980's as the FSLN commissioned various artists to portray these venerated national symbols. In 1980, *The Literacy Crusade* illustrated the spirit of new activism growing out of the traditional roles of women by juxtaposing a caring mother and a literacy crusade *brigadista* surrounded by a beautiful landscape.<sup>55</sup> Another mural that followed a similar theme, entitled the *Brigade of Italian and Nicaraguan Painters Constructing the New Woman*, depicted Nicaraguan women in different roles such as militia women, farmers, and mothers, while the accompanying text hails, "in

constructing a new country, we forge a new woman.”<sup>56</sup> Nicaraguan government-sponsored cinema also presented new national gender symbols in the 1987 domestically produced feature film, *Mujeres de La Frontera* (Mothers of the Front), which “depicted strong, independent, and resourceful women confronting age-old stereotypes and the sexism of their husbands and other menfolk.”<sup>57</sup> With the “emancipatory peak” generated by various state-funded propaganda extolling the virtuous “new” woman, women themselves were making empowering strides in daily life. At the local grassroots level, women attained representative positions on government boards, participated in the land reform process, gained employment in non-traditional sectors, and benefited from government-sponsored day care centers and family planning classes.<sup>58</sup>

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*Women’s Disempowerment*

The situation however began to change as the FSLN became significantly disinterested in women’s issues beginning in the mid 1980s. This, coupled with the contra war and a worsening economic situation in the country, made women’s issues the last priority. Ironically, at this time, the FSLN refused the calls of Sandinista women who rallied for the right to be mobilized for active duty to fight against the growing menace of the contra rebels, signaling perhaps a reemergence of pre-revolutionary machismo within the government machinery itself. After AMNLAE was unable to influence the party’s stance on the draft, the organization’s supposed autonomy within the FSLN ranks was seriously questioned as its founding party heads forced AMNLAE to provide support instead to the mothers of the male soldiers fighting against the contras. As a result, the women’s organization became increasingly detached from the preexisting women’s movement and submitted no legislative proposals to the FSLN from that point on.<sup>59</sup>

The decline in women’s influence and political and social empowerment marked a decline in women’s role in the public arena. There was an observed increase in violence against women in the late 1980s, as the revolutionary steam was losing its heat. A study conducted by an independent research group found that 44 percent of women between the ages of twenty-five to thirty-four had experienced physical violence. Simultaneously, FSLN Media Laws prohibiting the exploitation of women in the media became obsolete, as domestic content requirements for television were ignored with 70 percent of Nicaraguan TV and 90 percent of accessible films imported from the United States, Spain, and Brazil.<sup>60</sup> In the midst of a growing resurgence of machismo, the growing popularity of beauty contests, once illegal in post-war Nicaragua, signified a move away from the legally and politically sanctioned egalitarian gender system. The lack of will to enforce legislation the FSLN itself had created and

the subsequent reestablishment of machismo culture on a societal level indicated the power that gendered symbol systems had in reshaping gender roles in the post-revolutionary nationalist setting.

Two notorious events in Nicaragua during the last years of the FSLN confirmed that the “new” woman had been conveniently and effectively forgotten in post-war Nicaragua. The first incident reflects the government’s lack of will to enforce the Provisional Media Law that was a crucial feature of the FSLN platform for women’s empowerment. In 1988, the magazine *Semena Comica* reprinted a photograph taken from an American pornographic magazine showing a woman shaving with the attached caption reading “women get ready! It looks like International Woman’s Day will be celebrated.”<sup>61</sup> The FSLN responded by reprimanding the weekly magazine with a short six-week suspension. Soon after, the magazine quickly resumed its satirical and sexually charged portrayal of women without further censorship on part of the government. As a result of this and many other incidents, the government’s commitment to enforcing the media law that intended to protect women was seriously questioned.<sup>62</sup>

The second incident was the handling of the 1988 “Dira Case,” which heralded yet another break with the image of the “new” woman. Dira, a woman on trial for the murder of her husband’s mistress, was the object of intense misogynistic criticism that reflected a complete transformation from earlier socially accepted notions of heroic self-sacrificing women, which was held together by government propaganda machinery. The machista lens through which the story was reported branded Dira as an insanely villainous woman that deserved punishment. The lack of public will to critically comment upon the biased portrayal of Dira was indicative of a society’s passive return to the social norms associated with machismo.<sup>63</sup>

Clearly, women’s empowerment within the society experienced a decline in post-conflict Nicaragua as a result of increasingly negative symbolic portrayals of women sanctioned by the FSLN, a party once dedicated to women’s empowerment. According to Connell, the Sandinistas began a movement they ultimately attempted to reverse.<sup>64</sup> Climactic nationalism during the revolutionary conflict affected the relative emancipation and empowerment of women by suspending traditional gender roles and supporting new ones that vindicated the nationalist cause. From 1979 to 1990, post-conflict Nicaragua gradually witnessed a reconfiguration of previous gender stratification levels once the strategic objectives of the nationalist cause had been achieved.

The electoral defeat of the FSLN in the beginning of the 1990s ushered in an even more unfavorable political environment for women with the election of conservative female president Chamorro, a devout anti-feminist Catholic and an embodiment of traditional “marianismo.” Despite the cessation of civil war, which came into effect at the beginning of her presidency, government cuts in programs relating to women, such as basic health care and day care, weakened the women’s cause even further and led to severe dissatisfaction. A sense of discontent swept the

growing number of unhappy women, especially the large number of female ex-soldiers. It culminated in the Frente Nora Astorga incident wherein a group of 500 women, which included trained ex-soldiers, lawyers, and secretaries, took the northern capital of Ocotol hostage, overtaking the city hall, the police station, and all communication posts in 1992.<sup>65</sup> The military expertise of the women and the reluctance of the police to use brutal force led to a week of serious negotiations with the government. The women's group walked away from Ocotol having secured 165 building lots and a number of sewing machines from the government, yet most importantly, the Chamorro administration made a promise to open a constructive dialogue with women taking into account all their social concerns.<sup>66</sup>

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In response to Frente Nora Astorga, Chamorro helped to establish a new government body for women that would replace AMNLAE, now associated with the defeated FSLN. The new Institute for Research on Women revived a weakened women's movement by uniting NGOs, collectives, neighborhood groups, and specialized clinics. While this collective effort succeeded in amending some laws, in particular making violence against women a punishable crime, a formal sense of growing equality overshadowed the substantive inequalities that still existed within a society that was more concerned with material demands. A brief reprieve was soon followed by a complete reversal in the small gains women had made when conservative reactionary president Aleman was elected. His refusal to acknowledge discrimination against women and begin a meaningful dialogue with important women's groups has signaled a return to a situation similar to before the Sandinista war. Most symbolically, the Aleman administration effectively replaced the newly established Institute for Research on Women with the Ministry of the Family; the ministry's mission is to restore the traditional family and it has been described as an organization that serves to reconfigure the role of women as domesticated dutiful mothers.<sup>67</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The malleability of nationalism and nationalist values that dictate the codes of society is evident in the Nicaragua and Vietnam case studies. While nationalism changes over time and appears in various forms, the case studies suggest that established nationalism, in the absence of a national crisis, is a gendered experience often reserved for men, creating a situation that is not conducive to promoting women's empowerment. Climactic nationalism, which surfaces during nationalist revolutionary wars, temporarily suspends traditional gender roles to achieve national objectives on a massive scale. Unlike the case of the United States and Europe, wherein women's

political and economic activism following WWII was relatively sustainable,<sup>68</sup> women's participation in the war effort does not always provide a permanent reversal of traditional gender roles at war's end. Instead, women are manipulated as instrumental tools in meeting the immediate tactical goals of war, unaware that their future leaders are unable to fulfill their stated promises of equality to them. The case of Nicaragua and Vietnam illustrate that during the post-conflict period, women and women's issues are formally acknowledged to a limited degree at the government level; in reality, however, these pronouncements rarely affect substantive equality, as cultural factors from the pre-war era come into play and as the limited resources of developing countries' governments reduce their ability to legally enforce equality. Therefore, it is important for women to understand the distinction between formal and substantive equality in order to be more equipped to demand substantive changes.

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**[W]omen's participation in the war effort does not always provide a permanent reversal of traditional gender roles at war's end.**

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If, however, women are not included in the fight for national liberation, will women serve to become even more invisible and irrelevant in the post-conflict state? What can women do then? It is important that women's action groups understand this distinction between substantive and formal equality and push for both at a democratic level, specifically after war. Women comprise almost half of any given nation and should therefore be a significant constituency to any national agenda—democratic or undemocratic. Most importantly, women and women's interest groups need to understand the importance of time. Reconstruction in war torn nation-states does not suggest that addressing gender inequities should come later or that development issues are more pressing to the nation. Women must be an integral part of an inclusive model of development that acknowledges women's ability to contribute fairly to economic growth at all levels, not only in positions that are limited to factory assembly lines. As the first indication of a decline in women's rights will automatically lead to a further decrease, women's issues should be immediately addressed. Women's groups need to take advantage of the potential for change in post-war societies before the reconfiguration of traditional gender roles becomes overwhelmingly solidified, making it difficult to affect cultural customs and beliefs.

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Furthermore, governments in transition from war to peace should carry out consistent practices in order to create legitimacy. Wavering policies is unhealthy for



any government. The FSLN is a prime example of a party that has failed to secure reelection due to the diverging policies it simultaneously supported. Moreover, it is in the political interest of governments to continue to uphold the importance of women's issues, thereby eliminating the potential social costs associated with women who are the objects of sexual abuse, violence, abandonment, prostitution, and severe discrimination. In addition, gendered national symbols should offer different models of gender roles. Gender roles, like nationalism, are not static constructs, but constantly changing. Gender symbols should therefore reflect this and illustrate that there are different gender roles to emulate for diverse national purposes. And lastly, the application of positive discrimination policies<sup>69</sup> that adhere to political and managerial quotas can serve to mitigate the cultural effects of reemerging patriarchal tendencies that discriminate against women. As the cases demonstrated, the power of gendered national symbols should not be underestimated and be viewed, therefore, as a useful tool in reconstruction.

Nationalism is a phenomenon that affects the daily lives of men and women during and after conflict. It is a powerful social and political force that needs to be conceptualized in cross-gender terms. Otherwise, it will consistently render women as invisible players in the national project, as unexamined national symbols reinforce their marginalization. In other words, "if nationalism is not transformed by an analysis of gender power, the nation-state will remain a repository of male hopes, male aspirations, and male privilege."<sup>70</sup>

### Notes

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<sup>2</sup> Julie Mostov, "Sexing the Nation/De-Sexing the Body: Politics of National Identity in the Former Yugoslavia," in Tamar Mayer, ed., *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Nation* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 89.

<sup>3</sup> McClintock, "No Longer a Future Heaven," p. 274.

<sup>4</sup> Karen Turner Gottschang, *Even the Women Must Fight: Memories of War from North Vietnam* (New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc., 1998), p. 186.

<sup>5</sup> Karen Kampwirth, *Women and Guerilla Movements: Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chipas, and Cuba* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), p. 22.; Norma Stoltz Chinchilla, "Nationalism, Feminism, and Revolution in Central America," in Lois A. West, ed., *Feminist Nationalism* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 205.

<sup>6</sup> Gottschang, *Even the Women Must Fight: Memories of War from North Vietnam*, p. 22.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Goodkind, "Rising Gender Inequalities in Vietnam since Reunification," *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 68, no. 3, 1995, p. 342.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 358.

<sup>10</sup> Esta Ungar, "Regendering Vietnam from Militant to Market Socialism," in Louise Edwards and Mina Roces, eds., *Women in Asia: Tradition, Modernity, and Globalization* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2000), p. 293.

<sup>11</sup> Gottschang, *Even the Women Must Fight: Memories of War from North Vietnam*, p. 25.

<sup>12</sup> "A Barren Victory for the Married to War," *Los Angeles Times*, January 25, 2003, final edition.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Klein, *The Vietnam Ear: Media and Popular Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), pp. 186–198.

<sup>14</sup> Hy V. Luong, "Gender Relations: Ideologies, Kinship Practices, and Political Economy," in Hy V. Luong, ed., *Post-War Vietnam: Dynamics of a Transforming Society* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Roman and Littlefield Pub., 2003), p. 202.

- <sup>15</sup> Ibid., pg. 203.
- <sup>16</sup> Gottschang, *The Women Must Fight: Memories of War from North Vietnam*, p. 29.
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- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Goodkind, "Rising Gender Inequality in Vietnam Since Reunification," p. 345.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 345.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 345.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 345.
- <sup>27</sup> Daniel Goodkind, "Rising Gender Inequalities in Vietnam since Reunification." *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 68, no. 3, 1995, p. 352.
- <sup>28</sup> Gottschang, *Even the Women Must Fight: Memories of War from North Vietnam*, p. 11.
- <sup>29</sup> Goodkind, "Rising Gender Inequality in Vietnam since Reunification," p. 346.
- <sup>30</sup> Ungar, "Regendering Vietnam: From Militant to Market Socialism," p. 303.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 150.
- <sup>32</sup> Goodkind, "Rising Gender Inequality in Vietnam since Reunification," p. 346.
- <sup>33</sup> Ungar, "Regendering Vietnam: From Militant to Market Socialism," p. 296.
- <sup>34</sup> U.S. Department of State. "Domestic Violence is Believed to be on the Rise; Women Face Deeply Ingrained Social Discrimination; Trafficking of Women has Increased," *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1995* (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 1996). Available online at [http://dosfan.lib.uic.edu/ERC/democracy/1995\\_hrp\\_report/95hrp\\_report\\_toc.html](http://dosfan.lib.uic.edu/ERC/democracy/1995_hrp_report/95hrp_report_toc.html).
- <sup>35</sup> Gottschang, *Even the Women Must Fight: Memories of War from North Vietnam*, p. 152.
- <sup>36</sup> Goodkind, "Rising Gender Inequality in Vietnam Since Reunification," p. 352.
- <sup>37</sup> Gottschang, *Even the Women Must Fight: Memories of War from North Vietnam*, pp. 174–176.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 173.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 173.
- <sup>40</sup> Ungar, "Regendering Vietnam: From Militant to Market Socialism," p. 309.
- <sup>41</sup> Luong, "Gender Relations: Ideologies, Kinship Practices, and Political Economy," p. 210.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 135.
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- <sup>50</sup> Maxine Molyneux, "Mobilization without Emancipation? Women's Interests, the State, and Revolution in Nicaragua," *Feminist Studies*, vol. 11, 1985, p. 228.
- <sup>51</sup> Helen Collinson, *Women and Revolution in Nicaragua*, p. 120.

<sup>52</sup> Norma Stoltz Chinchilla, "Nationalism, Feminism, and Revolution in Central America," in Lois A. West, ed., *Feminist Nationalism* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 201.

<sup>53</sup> Rodriguez Clemencia, *Fissures in the Media Scape: An International Study of Citizen's Media* (New Jersey: Hampton Press, 2001), p. 67.

<sup>54</sup> Collinson, *Women and Revolution in Nicaragua*, p. 14.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>56</sup> Craven, *The New Concept of Art and Popular Culture in Nicaragua since the Revolution in 1979: An Analytical Essay and Compendium of Illustrations*, p. 189.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 221.

<sup>58</sup> Collinson, *Women and Revolution in Nicaragua*, p. 172.

<sup>59</sup> Connell, *Rethinking Revolution*, p. 159.

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<sup>61</sup> Collinson, *Women and Revolution in Nicaragua*, p. 171.

<sup>62</sup> Collinson, *Women and Revolution in Nicaragua*, p. 168.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 169.

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<sup>66</sup> Katherine Isbester, *Still Fighting: The Nicaraguan Women's Movement, 1977-2000* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), p. 10.

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<sup>68</sup> Lorraine Bayard de Volo, *Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs: Gender Identity Politics in Nicaragua, 1979-1999* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 9.

<sup>69</sup> Ilja Luciak, *After the Revolution: Gender and Democracy in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 228.

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