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**WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN SELF-HELP HOUSING:  
THE SAN JUDAS e EL**

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THE SAN JUDAS BARRIO PROJECT, MANAGUA,  
NICARAGUA**

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Prior to the revolution the majority of Nicaraguans lived in extreme poverty. The levels of poverty are reflected by a number of socioeconomic indicators - the high degree of malnutrition, high infant mortality, inadequate housing and sanitation, and the general

women have had no choice but to seek waged labour, outside the home, to support their children. The proportion of women wage earners rose from 14 per cent in 1950 to 21.9 per cent in 1970 and 28

domestic workers has been recognised, and through the formation of the Union of Domestics, they have won a ten-hour day, double pay for holiday work, and a minimum wage of 400 cordobas a month. Maternity leave and measures to improve safety standards at work have been introduced. Some effort has been made to socialise childcare to release women into the workfo

San Judas is a low-



## II. Community Mobilisation

### Women community mobilisation and the Church

Nicaragua is a devoutly Roman Catholic country with 90 per cent of the population belonging to the faith, and it was from their adherence to their faith that many Christians were drawn into the armed struggle against Somoza. Traditionally the Nicaraguan Catholic Church as throughout Latin America was firmly identified with the ruling class, maintaining stability and reinforcing cultural traditions such as male domination. However, a fundamental transformation of the relationship between the Church, society and politics began with the Second Vatican Council in 1962. Church activities were no longer to be confined to tending to the spiritual affairs of the congregation, as priests were encouraged to become



funds

I knew if we could get money our people could build their houses together. I took the idea of a housing collective to the priest and the nuns i



### III. Stages in the Preparation for the Housing Project

#### The beneficiaries

Eligibility criteria for most housing improvement schemes normally requires that a deposit or down payment is made. Other criteria can include proof of fixed employment as opposed to self-employment, and in some cases family composition is taken into account the nuclear family unit, of parents and children, is used to select the target group. Using these criteria can exclude the poorest sections of most Third World city dwellers, who are dependent on casual work, and who therefore lack a regular income (Lycette and Jaramillo 1984 Machado 1983). In the case of San Judas, the selection criteria were worked out by the CBS committee, MINVAH officials and Maria, who, as she put it: 'knew the people far better than any ministerial official'.

The criteria were overwhelmingly based on need, rather than on any proof of fixed economic status or family type. The criteria included families living in overcrowded or share accommodation, refugees, or families whose present accommodation was located precariously close to the storm drains. The census showed that there were at least 200 urgent cases. Since the donation could not cover all these needs, the final selection of beneficiaries was made by the barrio committee. An initial selection of 48 families was made, but under pressure from Maria and the M a efi

involved:

I filled in the forms in the

the site was directly on the main bus route, and the women were satisfied that it was next to the new





DIRECTOR  
**Maria Silva**

ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE

CO-ORDINATOR  
**Julio Perez**

SECRETARY  
**Juana Reyes**

ADVISOR  
**E du**

were equally unreal



This report, together with a proposal from the team leaders, recommending that women should send men to represent them on the building site, was





The team leaders also requested that an additional clause should be added which stated that ' no children could be accepted as adequate representation of a household on the building site.' The details

Adolfo and three other men together with the social worker from the ministry were absent from the project for three months due to their commitments to military training in the militia force. The men were not obliged to find replacements for the period they were absent, as the contract of work specified. Ernesto went into hospital and had a long period of convalescence. There were also cases such as those of Chico and Julio, who both found jobs which took them outside Managua for several months at a time. They came to an arrangement with the collective that they pay 400 cordobas a month for their absence and, although in theory this remunerative contribution would be sufficient to hire skilled labour, the rest of the beneficiaries were taking the responsibility of working for those males during their periods of absence. Thus the reformulation plans as set out in the contract of work were not adhered to and were seen by men and women alike to be an unrealistic set of rules within which to operate.

Gradually, women did gain recognition from the team leaders for their work. Several factors were responsible for this. At the inauguration of the first nine houses, the ministry presented certificates of merit for consistent good work. Several women, including Manuelita (mentioned above), received certificates. In addition, those women who had male relatives who could work on their behalf and who themselves had good work records were influential in improving the status of women on site. In particular Cristina, who was also pregnant during the project, worked alongside her brother who was a skilled mason, and from him she learned the basic skills of masonry. Likewise, Gladys worked with her sixteen-year-old son, and through him she gained the basic knowledge of the various tasks to be done. These women gradually acquired confidence and were accepted by the men, and this respect percolated through the site to improve the relationship between the team leaders and the female workforce.

## **Allocations**

The allocations of finished houses sparked off a further series of disputes between the men and women. Discussions dragged on for weeks and dominated many of the general meetings. In the planning and programming stages no firm decisions had been taken between the ministry and the collective members on who would allocate property. At the completion of the first stage, Maria as director of the collective drew up a list of families most in need of rehousing. The ministry objected on the grounds that they would be making the selection based on various criteria such as work record. Maria's insistence that the houses should be allocated by the collective and not by the ministry was expressed at meetings in numerous speeches:

Only the assembly of collective members has the right to allocate the houses. We know who has the greatest needs among us, we know which of the women live in the most miserable conditions, and only we know who has worked and struggled in this community. The people have won the right to decide these sorts of issues, it is not up to those in the offices to decide any more.

The collective members were united in their opposition to the ministry's taking the decisions, but they were divided as to how the allocations should be made. Maria, and a few of the women who had an irregular work record, stressed that the houses should be allocated on the basis of need. The regular attenders, both men and women, felt that they should draw up a set of criteria to include attendance at work, contribution to the collective fund, and the urgency to be rehoused. There was a third body of opinion held mainly by the skilled workers and the team leaders that each family should be able to select their own plots. Each had different reasons for holding opposing views. The men were dubious about the fairness with which a selection could be made by Maria or the collective members.





The individual requests made by the women were followed by a fl

In the general uproar, Jose Davila yelled at the top of his voice:

The problem with you 'big men' is that you want to choose exactly where you want to be, and you think that you are the only ones who work in this project. Everybody else is doing the best t

## **Divisions of labour**

At the outset of the project there had been

he already had commitments at his place of work several times a week. He was, however, furious at the suggestion that women should be isev



## **V. Conclusion**

Women's participation in the implementation phase of 'top-down' low-income housing projects has usually been limited mainly because they are thought to lack the relevant skills. Furthermore, even when women have participated in construction efforts in 'bottom-up' housing programmes, their contribution has rarely been acknowledged. This paper has attempted to identify the problems experienced by women who have been actively included in self-help housing construction, and to demonstrate that under certain conditions they prove to be successful self-builders.

This analysis of women's role in implementation in the San Judas project has shown,

The costs of differential labour contributions among beneficiaries were not taken into account to the extent that they might have been if the beneficiaries had had to purchase materials or if materials and other costs had had to be recouped by the state. Therefore, although many men resented the presence of women on the building site and complained that they were not contributing an equal amount of skills and labour, this conflict was probably resolved through the fact that altruism rather than rigid notion



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