

## Book Reviews

### **Review of *From the Revolution to the Maquiladores: Gender, Labor, and Globalization in Nicaragua* by Jennifer Bickham-Mendez. Duke University Press.**

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In 1994, a small group of women in post-revolutionary Nicaragua founded an organization called Maria Elena Cuadra (MEC), dedicated to improving the lives of Nicaraguan working class women. Jennifer Bickham-Mendez, the author, documents the organization's political evolution from 1994 to 2000. Bickham-Mendez was able to trace the history and tactics of this organization through the adoption of the participant-observer method, yet she is careful to justify this approach. Bickham-Mendez appropriately points out that despite her close ties to the organization, MEC, she was still considered an outsider because of her status as a foreigner and researcher. The majority of her data was collected in Nicaragua from 1996 to 1997. The objective of this study was to provide a view of globalization from the bottom up. Thus the Bickham-Mendez seeks to emphasize how female workers reacted to globalization and transformed its impact in a small and relatively powerless country. The author arrived in Nicaragua at a particularly challenging time for labor organizations.

As Bickham-Mendez points out, the Left, in both the world at large and Nicaragua, had lost much of its prestige and legitimacy. A changed national and international context, which included the electoral defeat of the *Sandinistas* and the collapse of the Soviet Union, compelled the MEC to elaborate new political strategies. The new economy that emerged in the mid-1990s reflected these political changes. Workers that were previously employed by state-owned or national companies were now working for multinational corporations. Indeed, many of the women that the MEC sought to empower were employed by multinationals in the newly established free trade zone. Thus labor and grassroots tactics that were effective in placing pressure on national companies no longer functioned in this new transnational environment. However, this new transnational political and economic environment also presented new political opportunities in that funding from NGOs in Canada and Europe became available to Nicaraguan activist organizations. Many of these NGOs were especially sympathetic to the plight of women workers and to a discourse about women's rights. This placed the MEC in a favorable position to solicit funds for their cause.

Bickham-Mendez shows how the MEC's leadership chose to abandon past political tactics of protests and strikes and instead placed pressure on international corporations through media campaigns and a human rights discourse. Thus, the MEC pushed for better working conditions for Nicaraguan women based on a language of human rights for women and mothers. The author argues that while a discourse based on class identity was discarded, the women's organization, MEC, has maintained its ties to the working class. Bickham-Mendez points out that, unlike many of the other women's organizations in Nicaragua, MEC's membership is almost entirely working class. Furthermore, many of the political skills that the MEC members possess derive from their past political experience in the *Sandinista* unions.

The larger point that Bickham-Mendez seeks to make is that the distinction between organizations that seek to make structural changes and those that are seemingly more interested in reform within established structures is artificial. In other words, while the MEC is working within the new parameters of a transnational economy that does not use a class-based discourse, the MEC does have a profound transformative power for Nicaraguan working class women. This study allows scholars of social movements to move beyond the established categories of analysis and is a must read for those interested in the empowerment of the subalterns. *From the Revolution to the Maquiladoras* also provides an excellent example of how to use oral history interviews in an effective and sensitive manner. Graduate students who are ready to embark on their fieldwork will find this book particularly helpful.