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OPPOSING SYSTEMS

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Abstract

Costa Rica and Nicaragua, although situated close together in geography, historically and politically are worlds apart. Costa Rica has maintained a stable democracy since 1948, while Nicaragua, rocked by authoritarian rule and then revolution in 1979, is still in an unstable growth period. Each country represents an opposing government system that would have varying effects on the emphasis and influence placed on different social situations in each country. Through studying one social aspect, the women's movement, one is able to examine the positive and negative aspects of each system and prospects for future success of countries under each type of rule.

At the time of revolution in 1948, the Costa Rican government did not put equality of women as one of its main goals, but through time, a consciousness has spread about the need to fight for women's rights. Slowly women have organized to achieve greater equality in many political, economic and social aspects. In Nicaragua, women played an active role in the revolution and one of the objectives of the revolutionary forces, the Sandinistas, was to abolish the discrimination that women have faced for years. Shortly after the revolution, the women's movement was in full force and the effects of this movement are still prevalent throughout the country. In these two neighboring countries, significant advances have been made towards gender equity, but many times these accomplishments are only on the surface and women continue to face discrimination in many private and public social facets.

Throughout the long fight for gender equality in Latin America, women have encountered innumerable political, economic and social obstacles that have hindered the progress of the movement. Underlying these problems is the cultural practice of machismo that has been practiced for hundreds of years in Latin America, including the countries of Costa Rica and Nicaragua. This system, which places "extreme importance on a version of masculinity stressing exaggerated bravado, physical strength and sexual prowess," is a way of structuring power

relations between men and women that emphasizes male dominance and patriarchy (Close 60). Various women's movements in the two countries are working to combat the pervasive influence of machismo in order to establish gender equality within each respective society. Women's organizations often work with the government to combat gender prejudice. The goals and programs of a government are consequently very important determinants of success in achieving gender equality. In addition, political turmoil or stability within the political system can significantly shape how successful women's movement will be within each country.

Two neighboring countries in Central America, Costa Rica and Nicaragua, provide an excellent opportunity for comparison of different approaches to dealing with gender equity. Although situated closely geographically, these two nations are historically and politically worlds apart. Costa Rica has maintained a stable democracy since 1948, while Nicaragua, rocked by authoritarian rule and then revolution in 1979, is still politically turbulent. Through examining one social movement, the women's movement in these two very different countries, we can identify the impact of different forms of government on social development with regard to gender issues.

The institution of democracy after the Costa Rican civil war in 1948, included elements central to the beginnings of an organized women's movement in the country. The government did not establish an organization that had ties to the state but did encourage equalization in other facets. Women were granted the right to vote in the new constitution and the Legislative Assembly recognized women's rights to take part in political institutions. Throughout the next elections, women began to exercise this right to vote and ran in many federal and local elections. Slowly, women began to open doors for the movement, as they became more involved in the political realm.

The National Liberation Party (PLN) actually first began to cultivate the feminist movement by establishing the Secretary for Women's Affairs in order to encourage women voters. Later the PLN created the Women's Action of Social Evolution

(AFES) to incorporate women as a political force throughout different government organizations. Many women's groups emerged from other political parties to combat gender equality since the civil war, but, during the 1980s, the women's movement significantly expanded to reach all sectors of the country.

The main action that promoted gender equality was the introduction of the Bill for Women's True Equality in 1988, which was introduced by First Lady Magarita Penón de Arias and created with the help of the National Center for the Development of Women and Family (CMF). The bill addressed issues concerning political participation, education, violence, social rights, labor right and marriage rights. Many people opposed the passage of this legislation, but these critics only showed the relevance of the need for a change and the presence of discrimination in the country, which invoked a greater desire in the women's movement to fight for equality of women. Under the influence of the First Lady, the women were able to rally to fight the opposition and form more influential organizations within the government.

Other programs aimed at fighting equality were created in response to this movement in the late 1980s and overall, at the end of the decade, over 150 women's organizations were registered with the CMF. The groups all worked to combat the discrimination faced by all women through different facets of society. Through the work of the various organizations, women obtained a more significant influence on government issues to draw attention to the social development of women and respect for human rights in general. The work of these women helped to create a social identity for women to combat the gender inequality in society. Although women had begun to combat the problems through passing legislature and political participation, the organizations still had a long way to go in changing overall cultural attitudes regarding gender equality.

In Nicaragua, a personalistic dictatorship run by the Somoza family governed the country from 1934 until 1979 when, the guerilla group, the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), led a successful revolution to overthrow this regime. During the revolution many women from various backgrounds came together with the men to fight in combat against this oppressive regime and, in fact, a full 30% of the FSLN's fighting strength was made up of women (Black 324). Women's participation in combat and the importance that the FSLN leaders placed on gender equality served as a catalyst for the Nicaraguan women's movement. In setting up gender equality as a main goal of the revolution, the "Historic Program of the FSLN" states that the Sandinista people's revolution will "abolish the odious discrimination that women have been subjected to compared to man" and will "establish economic, political and cultural equality between woman and man."

Originally, the Association of Women Confronting the National Problem (AMPRONAC), was established, in 1977, to

encourage the participation of women in the resolution of the country's problems, to defend the rights of Nicaraguan women in all sectors and all aspects, and to defend human rights in general (Black 324). After the revolution, in September of 1979, AMPRONAC was transformed into a mass organization for women, the Luisa Espinosa Association of Nicaraguan Women (AMNLAE). AMNLAE was structured around the ideas of the FSLN and worked in close collaboration with the party. At its Constitutive Assembly, in 1981, AMNLAE defined its role as "giving women an organic instrument which would permit them to integrate themselves as a decisive force in the program of the revolution; and moreover, express in an organized manner, both their concerns and their social, economic and cultural aspirations" (Molyneux 147).

AMNLAE was able to play a role in passing various legislative reforms including a law requiring equal pay for men and women and a bill banning the exploitation of women as sex objects in the media. In addition, AMNLAE participated in social reform programs organized by the FSLN to combat illiteracy, health problems, and inadequate housing. The organization was able to demand rights and encourage laws in the economic and political roles of women in society, but many times harsh discrimination still remained at the center of a woman's daily life in the household.

During the fall 1984 presidential campaign, women began to express discontent about AMNLAE and the group's close connection with the FSLN. Even though the government passed many initiatives regarding various social and cultural issues, many outside groups accused the AMNLAE of not addressing the issues of domestic violence, machismo, rape, contraception, and abortion. The organization was able to change different laws to promote gender equality, but now the real struggle was in combating cultural practices that had been inherent in the communities and relationships for hundreds of years. Even though, on paper, in a proclamation or law, women appeared to have equality to men, discrimination and exploitation continued to exist in the work place, overall community and frequently the home and on a daily basis women remained "fundamentally in the same conditions as in the past" (Borge 474).

Both political and economic conditions in Costa Rica played a significant role in shaping progress toward gender equality since the country was able to enact more reforms than many other countries due to its more stable economy and political situation. The work of the First Lady helped to foster the women's movement and aided in provoking the government to take a stand to combat gender discrimination. Government-run programs have contributed to better living conditions and women's organizations, especially in the area of education, have been influential in changing gender stereotypes. However, women's participation in politics in the country remains low and has not been the focus of much government attention. In the social realm, though the Legislative Assembly has passed various

laws to eradicate gender inequality, women in Costa Rica continue to report violence and other problems within the home at alarming levels. Clearly machismo still exists within the country, and is reflected in inequality in the work place and the perpetuation of stereotypical career paths and domestic responsibilities. While overall Costa Rica provides better living conditions for women, the government has had a longer period of stability within which to realize this goal. Relative to the dramatic advances during the Sandinista regime, Costa Rica accomplished less during the time of this study, but the combined changes since 1948, have produced greater gender equality for women in Costa Rica than in neighboring Nicaragua.

Under the Sandinista government, women did enjoy increased educational opportunities, but they did so in the context of greatly declining wages. Also, even though women were able to increase their role in politics and even helped put forth legislation to combat discrimination, women never achieved one of their principal aims, which included a more stable family life. The strong ties binding AMNLAE to the FSLN hindered the development of social programs that directly addressed the domestic issues in gender equality. AMNLAE played a very influential role in the general reform process of the country, but was unable to address various key issues including domestic violence and true political equality. In only one decade, men and women cannot change their consciousness and behavior in the gender system simply through discussion groups, self-help groups or other organizations, but, given the time period, AMNLAE has made significant strides towards gender equality. A social structure rooted in concepts of machismo continued to define social responsibilities, but the role of women in the revolution did help to curb some extreme ideas and helped change gender relations in education, politics, work, and domestic life. The changes in the relationship between men and women were more accepted and more easily carried out since the whole country had been confronted by vast changes through the government.

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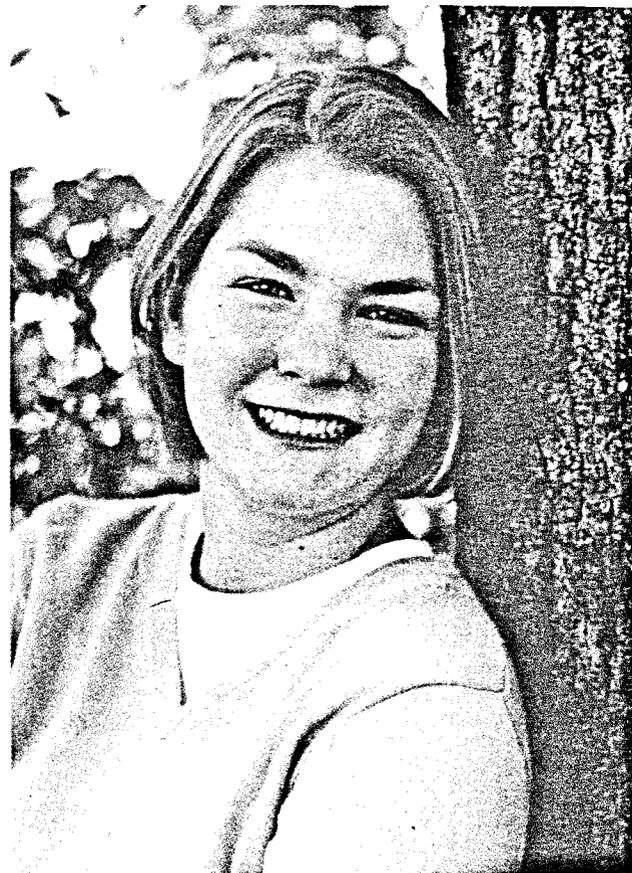
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Erin Stone

Faculty comments

Erin Stone received glowing praise for her work from her mentor, Jeffrey Ryan. Perhaps this is to be expected inasmuch as Ms. Stone received the University of Arkansas Alumni Association Award as the outstanding woman graduate of 2001. Professor Ryan comments on her work as follows:

Though I have only known Erin for about one year, I continue to be amazed by the combination of her academic abilities, work ethic, social responsibility and maturity. In my courses, her performance has been uniformly excellent. Our ongoing discussions regarding her academic career in general and various research projects in particular have given me an even clearer indication of her abilities and commitment. Conversations with my colleagues who have had Erin in their classes have further reinforced my very favorable impressions of her abilities. Her professors uniformly evaluate Erin as an outstanding student, with an excellent capacity to assimilate complex ideas and incorporate them into cogent and powerful arguments. Perhaps most impressive to me is her exceptional performance in a study abroad program at the Universidad Nacional in Heredia, Costa Rica. I am personally acquainted with a number of the faculty there and know the courses to be rigorous and

challenging. Erin's success in such a program, which is among the most highly respected in the region, is yet another indicator of academic excellence.

Her research project is both interesting and important. Though there has been considerable attention given to the status of women in Latin America, I am not familiar with any research that attempts to link regime type with success (or failure) in the area of gender equity. The basic question Erin is asking is whether women fare better under one type of government than another. Despite its apparent simplicity, the implications of this question are profound. If conditions of marginalization and gender inequality persist across alternative regime configurations, then the sources of discrimination may transcend the realm of politics and be more deeply embedded in the social structure. As a consequence, patterns of inequality would likely exhibit a disturbing resilience to the ameliorative efforts of policymakers and citizens alike.

In terms of focus, Erin has chosen two cases in which many variables are held more or less constant (e.g., region, cultural heritage, level of development, etc.) while the key one, regime time, is different. Costa Rica has enjoyed more than fifty years of uninterrupted

democratic government, with an active civil society, progressive social policy and remarkable political stability. Neighboring Nicaragua, by contrast, has suffered calamitous political upheaval and violence over the same time frame, marked most dramatically by the 1979 Sandinista-led revolution, which ended the brutal dictatorship of the Somoza family.

There have been a number of important efforts to explore the struggle for gender equity during and after the Sandinista administration (1979-1990), some of which seek to compare performance on women's rights across various 'revolutionary' contexts (e.g., Nicaragua vs. Cuba). To my knowledge, though, no one has yet developed a comparative framework for examining the issue across 'revolutionary' vs. 'nonrevolutionary' situations. Erin's project is designed to fill this gap, and addresses questions that are not only important in terms of theoretical development, but in social policy terms as well. Are greater gains made in securing women's fights through the incrementalist approach (as in liberal-democratic Costa Rica) or the radical approach (as in revolutionary Nicaragua)? Has more gender equity resulted from a gradual accretion of rights by women or do long-standing patterns of discrimination require some sort of rapid, fundamental break with the past? Or has the marginalization of women in the political, social and economic realms remained largely immune from these alternative approaches to solving the problem?

I think it is indicative of the quality of her project that she was awarded a SILO/SURF undergraduate research fellowship. Another indicator of her intellectual potential is the fact that she has already been accepted for graduate study at both the Bush School of Public Policy and at the University of Texas-Austin with full funding. Personally, I would rate Erin as very much on par with recent students of mine who are currently performing very well in graduate programs at Stanford, Berkeley and Rice.

Impressive as her academic achievements are, what makes Erin truly shine as an individual is her extraordinary commitment to, for lack of a better phrase, 'doing good.' She has served our university, helping to recruit, mentor, and retain fellow students. She has served our community and state, raising funds for breast cancer research and the children's hospital. And she has served our international community both here and abroad. In Northwest Arkansas, she uses her language skills and cultural sensitivity to provide critical assistance to the vulnerable immigrant community in our area. In a remote, impoverished area of rural Peru, Erin helped to build a church, set up an outreach program for local children, and put in place a curriculum allowing the church to offer college-level education. If you want to know the true value of service, ask the frightened Hispanic mother from Springdale how much it meant

to her when Erin helped find health care for her child. Or picture the faces of the humble farmers of Huancayo, when they gather for worship each Sunday in the sanctuary Erin helped build. For Erin, service is not a line on a résumé; it is an obligation and a calling.

Spanish Professor Jason Summers is also extremely complimentary of Ms. Stone's work. In his letter of recommendation he states:

Ms. Stone's research on women's political and social power in Central America is not only a historical study, but can also serve as an excellent predictor of a society's relative success in providing equal opportunities and protections to its members. This research deals with how government and society deal with women in both democratic and revolutionary systems. Particularly interesting is Ms. Stone's point in her thesis proposal that American-style democracy may not provide the best protections for women, nor may purely revolutionary societies, either. The effects of women taking part in social and governmental control of their societies is a benchmark that literary scholars have been considering in the latter part of the 20th century, but without historical studies such as this one, we literary types would have a much more difficult time connecting the texts that we work with to the social realities in which they were produced.

I think that Erin's project will not only serve to document how women were treated in the 20th century, but will also point toward how organized women's movements will continue to have an influence into the 21st century. Democratization, gender roles, and social equity are all aspects that can be linked to this particular study, making it a worthwhile and socially relevant topic in Latin American studies that deserves your support.

As a scholar dealing with gender roles as well as racial issues in Latin America, this research connects with my own work, and I think it is important and should be disseminated. The obvious social concerns relating to Erin's scholarly work are also reflected in her activities outside of the university. She works as an assistant at the Multicultural Center of Northwest Arkansas. Her goals are to work in a non-profit organization that serves the Hispanic community, which again reflects her academic goal of strengthening interest in women's movements in Latin America. Supporting Ms. Stone's work will help establish her as a beginning scholar who I hope can be convinced to continue as a graduate student, because I believe that she would make an excellent addition to the academe.