



VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN: LESSONS FROM NICARAGUA

"In truth, the violence which we must eradicate in all its forms is violence against women - it destroys us, diminishes us, denigrates us, humiliates us all, not just women" – Rosario Murillo, Nicaraguan Vice-President, March 2021

Introduction

At a time when the issue of violence against women is being hotly debated in the UK, the UK government could learn some lessons from Nicaragua about how to tackle the problem. Nicaragua has the lowest rate of femicides in Central America (.7/100,000) according to the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLAC) and the Latin America and Caribbean Gender Equality Observatory and is testament to the Nicaraguan Government's commitment to eradicating violence against women. In addition to a legal framework, Nicaragua has seen an ongoing education drive to continue changing the culture of the country so that misogyny and attacks on women have no place in society. At the same time, women have been empowered through programmes which ensure financial independence and equality in terms of participation in all aspects of society and which recognise their contribution to the development of the country.

The Nicaraguan Model

The model developed by Nicaragua's government prioritises the prevention of and attention to gender-based violence with a focus on changing attitudes, behaviours and power relations and implementing laws and public policies that are based on the construction of new socio-cultural patterns for gender demands and the integral protection of women. Since 2007, the government has introduced a range of proactive policies including legally mandated equal representation, ensuring that at least 50% of public offices be held by women and a drive to change attitudes and practices across all areas of society.

In addition to legal measures, it is Government policy to guarantee the population a life free of violence which favours their development and wellbeing in accordance with the principles of equality and non-discrimination and at the same time to promote national campaigns aimed at the prevention of violence against women. There is an ongoing public education drive to continue changing the culture in the country; this has been extended also to schools and includes the principle of complementarity in terms of promoting the participation of men in caring and domestic tasks among others. Another element of the campaign is to work with family therapists to include 'more values of tolerance, respect and understanding' into women's lives.

The Nicaraguan government realises that the work it has started needs to continue in order to totally eradicate the macho culture which existed in the country for many years. However, the empowerment of women, ending economic and social dependence on men and breaking the cycles of violence are signs that this can be achieved.

Unite to End Violence against Women

Nicaragua has joined the UN Secretary-General's UNiTE to End Violence against Women campaign to end violence against women by 2030. As part of the campaign, the Nicaraguan government has made a commitment to take a series of political, legislative and administrative actions to eradicate violence against women and girls. In addition to ensuring that the legal framework is respected and that the relevant laws are implemented, specific steps taken by the Government will include implementing the public policy of State against violence against women; guaranteeing prompt and effective access to justice; creating the observatory of violence pursuant to the provisions of Act 779 and improving the statistical information system on violence against women. The Government will also broaden the coverage of specialised justice with new courts specialising in violence and recruiting auxiliary staff to carry out judicial activities. Capacity for the investigation and punishment of crimes will also be improved.

Women for Life – Women's Police Stations

In February last year, Nicaragua launched a 'Women for Life' campaign to defend women's rights. The campaign saw the re-launch of a network of police stations across the country run by and for women (these had existed previously, but most had to close some five or six years ago when international funding dried up). The aim of the police stations, of which there are currently 60 in the country with more planned, is to make it easier for women to file complaints for aggression, threats or attempts to undermine their dignity and their life. Government institutions – the Ministry of the Family, the Public Prosecutor's Office, the Ministry of Youth and the Ministry of Women's Affairs - are working hand in hand to strengthen women's rights, as well as to form a culture of peace and non-violence from the beginning

The Legal Framework

The Government has implemented a number of laws to counteract violence against women such as Law No. 779, the Integral Law against Violence against Women and Law No. 641, Penal Code.

On 20 January this year, Nicaragua's National Assembly approved the Reform and Addition to the Criminal Code of the Republic of Nicaragua and Law 779, Comprehensive Law against Violence against Women, which establishes a reviewable life sentence for those who commit crimes of extreme gravity and extreme danger, including rape and femicide. The sentence of life imprisonment is subject to review within a period of 30 years in which the degree of re-education of the prisoner can be assessed so that he can qualify for parole.

Sexual abuse in Nicaragua is taken very seriously. In a recent case involving a 13-year-old and her father, the police not only arrested the father but also set up a roadblock so that he was unable to escape. The child is receiving treatment from the Ministry of the Family, including planned psychological help. Immediately after the arrest, the police helped the child and her sister move out of the home where the abuse took place. There is a strong emphasis on treating the victim as credible, in contrast to – for example – countries such as Honduras where cases are not reported as they are not investigated or taken seriously. The prosecutor's office is asking for life imprisonment for the abuser, in part for sexual abuse and in part for physical violence.

In the labour sphere, the elimination of discrimination against women has been institutionalised through a strengthened legal framework which includes laws guaranteeing access to the labour market for women from the poorest sectors of society and their right to a decent job and a decent salary, through active labour market policies and skills training.

Education

As part of its violence prevention strategies, the Government guarantees free, equitable and quality education. It implements programmes to strengthen the practice of values, such as Education Community Counselling and incorporates into the curriculum subjects such as Growing in Values. Government Ministries promote new models of raising children, based on the values of respect, love and protection from any form of discrimination and exploitation, in line with the best interests of the child. Meetings of citizen security assemblies address the prevention of violence against women, aimed at reducing risk factors and vulnerabilities of women in the family and in the community, as well as promoting rights, dignity and respect.

The Ministry of the Family, Mifamilia, also carries out house-to-house visits to raise awareness of the importance of preventing violence against women and the sexual abuse of children.

Political Participation

The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, also known as UN Women, has released a list of countries with the best gender balance in political participation, highlighting that Nicaragua ranks first worldwide in women heading government ministries and fourth in parliamentary positions.

According to a new [Inter-Parliamentary Union](#) report, Nicaragua has the world's highest percentage (56.25%) of women in Ministerial positions in Latin America and the fourth highest in Parliament (46%). Women also lead top state institutions including the Nicaraguan Institute of Agricultural Technology INTA, the National Technology Institute INATEC and the National Forestry Institute INAFOR.

Highest Participation of Women in the Workforce

The United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) presented its Special Report COVID-19 No. 9: "The Economic Autonomy of Women in Sustainable Recovery with Equality" on Feb. 10. The report states that 55.7% of women in Nicaragua participate in the job market or carry out some form of paid work, placing it as the country in Latin America and the Caribbean with the highest participation of women in the work force, followed by Jamaica (54.5%) and Bolivia (53.3%).

Seventy-three per cent of those working in education are women. In the health sector, the figure is 64%.

Economic Empowerment

In a move to enhance the financial independence of women, the government has given low-interest loans to over 900,000 women over the last 14 years to enable them to start small businesses in urban areas. This programme, known as Zero Usury, serves not only to empower women but is also a key factor in combatting poverty, unlocking previously untapped pools of talent and driving inclusive, diverse and sustainable growth. Many of the women who have received loans are now turning their businesses into co-operatives in order to give jobs to more women.

In rural communities, of the more than 447,000 property titles delivered by the Sandinista government to families, women have been a priority, with around 1 million women benefitting, in addition to government support for women-led agricultural co-operatives.

The Rural Development Programme is also providing loans to women to improve production with equipment, water pumps, corrals, wells, improved pastures, installation of fences, and more. So far this year the National Technological Institute (INATEC) has assisted 52,000 women with technical courses and careers in trade schools. Women make up 62% of enrolment. Since 2007, 3.5 million women, 69% of the total served, have taken courses, internships, workshops, and seminars to strengthen work skills through INATEC.

Health

Efforts made by the Sandinista government to eliminate the gender gap in health are also a contributing factor to preventing violence against women helping as they do to break the cycle of deprivation which is often a trigger for violence.

High priority is given to women's health. For example, since 2007 there has been a constant and programmatic effort to make changes and improvements in the health system, and train health staff to drastically lower maternal mortality. The government has made significant investments in infrastructure and other means to improve the care of cancer patients and reduce the cervical cancer mortality rate, which has decreased by 34% since 2007. Among these actions is the creation of the National Cytology Centre to guarantee early diagnosis of cervical cancer. The number of women who receive Pap smears has increased from 181,491 in 2007 to 880,907 in 2020 and mammograms have increased from 151 in 2010 to 27,415 in 2020.

Nicaragua has been recognized for actions promoted by the Sandinista government in the health sector for women, children and adolescents. The award was granted by the Regional Interagency Coordination Movement EVERY WOMAN EVERY CHILD in Latin America and the Caribbean (EWEC-LAC), composed of a number of different organisations including UNICEF, UN Women and the PAHO/WHO. These organisations value the strategy of reducing maternal and perinatal mortality. Since 2007, the number of maternity wait homes (casas maternas) has increased from 50 in 2007 to 178 in 2020. Maternal mortality has been reduced from 93 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2007 to 37 deaths in 2020. Neonatal mortality has also been reduced by more than half.

Conclusion

According to the World Economic Forum, Nicaragua is the world's [fifth most gender equal country](#), the highest non-Nordic country and the only country in the Western Hemisphere in the top 10.

The Nicaraguan government continues its drive for full gender equity across all sectors, with the liberation of women a fundamental pillar of Sandinismo. This has been listed by the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) as one of the drivers of Nicaragua's economic growth and resilience, with the country achieving 8% export growth in 2020, the highest in Latin America, compared to a regional average of -13%, and projected to grow 3.5% this year.

As in many areas, Nicaragua continues to be a good example. Alongside the implementation of tougher laws, Nicaragua sees education, empowerment, participation and the eradication of poverty as key tools to eliminate violence against women. This is surely a model worth following.