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**Theme: The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty
and hunger eradication, development and current challenges**

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Construction of awareness of the power of rural women in Nicaragua

For generations in Nicaragua rural women had not been considered productive because the premise was that they are basically dependent housewives or mere help for the family, yet the agro-industries census of 2001 reflected that only 18 per cent of these women were in that category. As a result of this discrimination years of effort on the part of rural women in the productive sector – their active in community leadership, their natural business skills and their daily responsibilities in the administration of the home – had been invisible.

During the neo-liberal governments, Nicaraguan rural women's organizations did not waiver in their struggle for the equality and dignified development of rural women. They wanted to make visible this participation and to improve the social, economic political and cultural situation of rural women.

Under the National Reconciliation and Unity Government (GRUN, by its Spanish acronym), rural women are transforming their reality and creating a better life for themselves.

Since 2007, social marginalization, food insecurity and desolation in the rural sector are a thing of the neo-liberal past in which we developed. The first measure of the National Reconciliation and Unity Government's National Human Development Plan was to obtain food security and sovereignty in order to improve the economic conditions of rural and urban families. The GRUN's Food Security and Sovereignty Strategy was framed in the commitment to fulfill the first foal of the Millennium Development Goals: To eradicate extreme poverty and hunger by reducing, between 1990 and 2015, to one-half the percentage of persons with an income below one dollar. Five years ago, in our country 75 per cent of these poor households were in the rural sector.

Rural women were a group within the most unfortunate and vulnerable sectors of the population. This situation was the result of the historic gender discrimination prevalent in Nicaraguan society, in particular, in the rural areas.

The Government's signature program within its Food Security and Sovereignty Strategy, the Food Productivity Program (PPA, by its Spanish acronym), reinstated the rights of rural women by entitling the program's production means to the women.

This measure was consistent with the spirit of the Equal Opportunities Law of the Government of Nicaragua which indicates that in order to obtain equality between women and men, women must have access to property and power, and also develop awareness of power.

Besides the transfer of means and tools for their administration by women, the PPA provides technical assistance and training through courses that recognize the potential of rural women which had been rendered invisible. All these actions are oriented to satisfy the practical and strategic needs of these women.

The agro-industries census of 2001 reflected that women were the owners of 11.7 per cent of the cattle, 7.5 per cent of the cattle used for transport and 52.7 per cent of small farm animals such as pigs and fowl.

In order to satisfy the practical needs of impoverished rural women, between May 2007 and December 2011 the GRUN distributed among 100,000 women, more than 50,000 cows, 29,000 female pigs, 9,800 sheep, 4,000 female goats and 600,000 fowl, among other means.

With these means as their property and in their hands, women are becoming the protagonists of the transformation of a history of hunger, desolation and marginalization. To this date they have produced 25 million liters of milk, 140,000 shoulders of pork, more than two million dozens of eggs and more than 600,000 chicks. From their over-production they have been able to accumulate savings of 55 million córdovas.

The protagonists of the PPA: An example of Nicaragua's Model of Citizens Power with awareness of power.

The present female protagonists of the Food Productivity Program come from more than 5,500 dispersed communities throughout the country's 16 provinces.

Organization and sustainability are the cornerstones of all actions of the PPA's protagonists. All the future Program protagonists (who are women) begin by organizing themselves into groups of fifty women within their communities; these are the nuclei of the PPA. Once the nuclei are established, the women elect their governing board, they open a saving account in the bank of their choice and they establish links with the institutions of the Revolutionary Government within their territory that are in charge of this program.

The nuclei work with technicians from the training and technical assistance programs which are designed to develop their productive capabilities, their skills for managing their revolving fund, their environmental and gender consciousness and their negotiating power within the household and the community and with the State and the market.

The consciousness of power of these women protagonists is manifest in the selection of their leaders. Each nucleus elects four women for participation in a seven-part course lasting nine months and designed train them as mid-level technicians and leaders.

The first class of leaders which graduated in November 2009 was comprised of 528 PPA protagonists from four provinces. The second class, with 672 leaders, had protagonists from another six provinces. The responsibility of these leaders is to ensure continuity of the trainings and technical assistance in their communities.

The nuclei with leaders and savings are ready to continue with the development of their capabilities, thus they can invest in productive development with the objective of local production transformation and the establishment of cooperatives.

As of December 2011, on a national level 100,00 women protagonists of the PPA are organized in 1,750 nuclei and propose to move on to the establishment of cooperatives, having established 179 cooperatives to date.

Impact on the quality of life of impoverished rural families which had been excluded by former Government is one of the most outstanding accomplishments of the economic and productivity transformation measures promoted by the National Reconciliation and Unity Government in the rural sector.

The actions of the Food Productivity Program have developed leadership and developed autonomy among women. Their economic accomplishments help ensure satisfaction of women's strategic needs. Protagonists have witnessed changes in their family finances because they have improved their income possibilities. They have also improved their family's nutrition.

Their new position in the home has improved their self-esteem because they have become visible, they are valued and remunerated; they have recuperated their social leadership and the relationship with their husbands or partners has been consolidated. Relations within the home are in a process of transformation with more harmony and cooperation.

In the community, relationships of solidarity, self-help and commercial exchange have become stronger. The accomplishments of the Food Productivity Program's women protagonists are testimony that "we are now living in a different culture and reality" in a Nicaragua that is guided by Christian Principles, Socialist Ideals and Solidarity Practices.

