
CHILD MARRIAGE IN NICARAGUA

CULTURAL ROOTS AND GIRL CENTRED SOLUTIONS



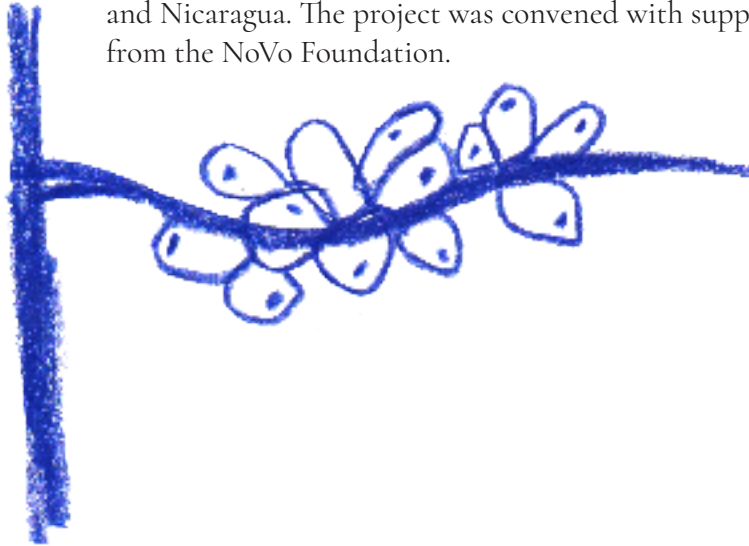
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This project is the result of collaboration between over 30 grassroots community organizations, researchers and local advocates in Indonesia, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Nicaragua. The project was convened with support from the NoVo Foundation.



INTRODUCTION



Child marriage exists across cultures, it is forced upon girls at different ages, in different places, by different people, and for different ends. It is a practice that exists irrespective of faith; the countries with the highest rates of child marriage are home to the world's three biggest religions.

It disproportionately affects poor girls, but is forced upon the girls of wealthy families too. Child marriage is intimately linked to poverty, and yet poverty reduction programs have not brought about its wholesale decline. Girls who are able to remain in school are more likely to marry later, and yet education has not been the golden solution many expected.

Child marriage occurs in countries where the political classes condemn it, and in countries where they endorse it. It is forced upon girls as young as two and as old as 17. It is bound up in a myriad of rituals.

Looked at this way, Child marriage is a complicated, confusing and amorphous issue that feels impossible to pin down.

And yet, in another sense, there is a strikingly simple explanation for the existence and persistence of Child marriage, and a singular factor that unites these competing forms.

Child marriage is bound up with, and is inseparable from, patriarchal oppression. It is merely one manifestation of sexual violence against girls, and it exists within a broader universe of cultural, structural, social, political and economic violence against women and girls. Child marriage exists because patriarchy exists.

More concretely, child marriage is a symbolic act that exists as part of society's toolkit for containing a girl's sexuality within confines that are deemed socially safe. As the most visible outward sign of a girl's sexuality, pregnancy has come to represent uncontained sexuality and has become the flashpoint for its associated social shame.

This is no doubt informed by the fact that in Nicaragua child marriage is in fact forced upon girls who are past the age of puberty.

This means that the link between child marriage and sexual control in these communities is deeply and fundamentally entrenched: it is foundationally a method of controlling girls' burgeoning sexuality and enforcing social and sexual norms of femininity, at a time when patriarchal institutions are most sensitive to the potential loss of control over a girl's sexuality. In the minds of parents and authority figures, the drive to child marriage is a negative one, based not on a positive articulation of what marriage is or can be, but on a fear of what lies outside it for teenage girls.

In the lived experience of girls, this socio-cultural need to control sexuality manifests in a lack of meaningful choices across many levels of life. The cultural norms of control affect the choices a girl is offered and, even more fundamentally, the choices she can imagine for herself.

Cultural narratives about control make it more appealing for families, parents and communities to close off options for girls, and more frightening for them to leave them open. They mean that structural opportunities – school in particular – merely reflect back the socially normative and do not always provide meaningful, genuine possibilities for girls.

And ultimately, they affect the choices girls can envisage for themselves, creating ambivalence and indeed often a fatalism about a lifetime of oppression, of which marriage is just one element.

Any attempts to end child marriage strategically and for the long-term must take into account and challenge the culturally normative nature of child marriage. This means undermining the very same patriarchal culture that drives and justifies it. And this in turn means focusing our attention not on existing sites of power but instead on increasing girls' power and choices.

In a context in which their voices have been systemically shut down, the aim of this work is to bring to the fore the lived experience of girls in Nicaragua.

Girls need their collective voices to be heard, loud and clear, at the community level, otherwise no system will give them equal access. And before a girl can speak, she needs to believe that her words are worth hearing.

THE SCALE OF THE PROBLEM: NICARAGUA A HUGE YET HIDDEN ISSUE



Despite widespread global efforts to end the practice of child marriage, the Latin American region highlights the uneven progress that has been made. Indeed, it is the only region in the world where there has been no marked decline in the prevalence of child marriage in the last three decades (UNICEF 2014).

Of the whole region, Nicaragua ranks highest, and 14th globally, with just over 43% of women between the ages of 20 and 24 married before they were 18 (UNFPA, 2015 – based on data from 2006/7), and almost 15% of these before the age of 15 (Anti-Slavery, 2013). Using more recent data, a 2015 UNFPA report estimates early age unions in Nicaragua to be far higher, and to have risen substantially over the 10-year period in which data has been available, affecting 59.6% of women in 2011.

Despite these alarming numbers, research remains superficial (ICRW, 2007). Whilst there has been a broad-brush focus on the legislative and public health dimensions of child marriage, the cultural and social roots of the issue remain uncovered. Although the legal age to marry is 18 (Nicaragua Civil Code, Title ii, Chapter I, Art. 100), poverty, discriminatory gender norms, lack of educational opportunities (UNICEF's State of the World's Children Report 2016) added to a weak legal system still influence parents to overrule the law.



The practice goes largely undocumented and the information that is available is dispersed and hidden within other issues or among other data. The practice of child marriage, though common in Latin America and Caribbean (LAC), has not received its due attention in the region. The bulk of energies with regard to documentation, research and intervention are directed toward global 'hotspots' for the practice in the regions of Asia and Africa, leaving the LAC region largely overlooked."

—POPULATION COUNCIL, 2013, MEXICO

The limited study of child marriage in Nicaragua to date has relied heavily on data from the 2006/7 National Demographic and Health Survey (ENDESA). The paucity of recent data pertaining to child marriage in Nicaragua, underpinned by nebulous, and largely inaccessible, government figures more generally, has helped to obscure the issue.

A PROBLEM OF LANGUAGE



Furthermore, there is an important definitional problem in Nicaragua, and in Latin America more widely, which would tend to depress the reported figures of underage unions: what counts as ‘marriage’? There is widespread practice of informal unions in this region (Population Council, 2013), rather than legal or religious marriages, and usually of adolescents (with other adolescents or men in their 20s), rather than children with much older men. This has seen the problem of ‘child marriage’ go largely unrecognized. Indeed, many Nicaraguans are uncomfortable with and/or unfamiliar with internationally recognized terminology on the problem. The issue thus goes largely unnoticed, despite acknowledgement of, and action around, the adjacent and pervasive problems of teenage pregnancy and gender-based violence.

Deepening work around child marriage does call for a rethinking of terminology in order to address the issue at a national level and avoid semantic confusion. This is not just the case for Nicaragua: in many countries where the practice persists, the phrase “child marriage” is at contrast with life on the ground. For the purpose of this report we will continue to use the wording “child marriage”, however the sector must collectively decide on a better, and ultimately more productive, way of speaking to the issue of chaotic and impermanent unions.

Hearteningly, the parallel issue of teenage pregnancy (which manifests as both a cause and consequence of child marriage), along with maternal health, has receive much more widespread attention in Nicaragua, with initiatives such as Casa Maternas (care homes for pregnant women) gathering momentum. Whilst services might not be directly targeting child marriage, these other initiatives provide a strong foundation from which to build.

THE LEGISLATIVE ENVIRONMENT



New legislation within 'the Family Code' defines the legal age of marriage as 18 years old, and 16 with parental consent. Previously girls of 14 and boys of 15 had been legally allowed to marry with consent (UNFPA, 2015). However, the persistence of child marriage across the globe in countries that have made similar legislative changes, underlines the largely superficial nature of addressing culturally rooted issues purely within a legal framework.

The widely talked about, and often lambasted, '779 law' – the “Comprehensive Law Against Violence Toward Women” (the first of its kind) - was also passed relatively recently (2012). It was meant to be “the fruit of the Nicaraguan women’s movement’s longest struggle” (Envio, 2013). However, it has since undergone reformation to include caveats such as mediation, despite women publicly rejecting mediation on the grounds that it is not aligned with “the realities in which crimes of violence against women are committed... Far from halting the violence, mediation caused it to intensify, leading to greater damage and, in the worst of cases, the woman’s death” (Envio, 2013).

The Nicaraguan government has an ambiguous position on sexual violence. Ortega’s 2006 election victory came after a “marked move to the right, which included a deal with the Catholic church to ban abortion in exchange for its support”, which had been legal for more than 100 years (Guardian, June 2016).

OUR APPROACH



Due to the lack of research on child marriage in Nicaragua and indeed the lack of understanding of the issue more broadly, our study was naturally exploratory by nature:



“Very rarely has there been analyses of the reality that girls and adolescents from rural areas face, taking into account their social reality and their emotional lives.”

—NGO PARTNER, EL CUÁ

We are not starting this research in a vacuum: much has been explored globally on the topic of child marriage, though research in Nicaragua is limited. What defines this work is an attempt to draw a line from cultural drivers, to their impact on girls, to girl-centered solutions. This philosophy informed a multi-phased research methodology – we sought to understand what child marriage represents in culture, as well as in lived experience.

I. CULTURAL THEORY



We started by using cultural theory and engaging experts in the field to generate global hypotheses for the persistence of child marriage. We facilitated a workshop of the preeminent NGOs working in the field in Sierra Leone and Guinea, Nicaragua and Indonesia to localize these hypotheses. Concurrently, we embarked upon a semiotic analysis of the codes of childhood and marriage. This type of analysis looks at the materials that culture makes, and so helps us to place people’s motivations, beliefs and decisions in a wider context, exposing the embedded cultural forces that drive behavior and yet which people may find it hard to articulate themselves. We ultimately cross-referenced this semiotic analysis with findings from our face-to-face research, helping us to paint a picture of how cultural practice plays out on the lived experiences of girls.

2. FACE TO FACE RESEARCH



A. WITH GIRLS

The global hypotheses acted as inputs to create prompts for face-to-face discussion, which took place in Nicaragua over three weeks in March/April 2016. Our full approach and sample is outlined in the appendix. The core of our methodology was a series of semi-structured discussion groups and individual ethnographic interviews with girls to hear in-depth about the reality of their lives. We heard from 150 girls in total – a series of informative and often heartbreaking conversations that drive the core of our findings.

B. WITH BOYS AND THE COMMUNITY

To understand the lived context in which child marriage persists, we needed to go broader. As such we spoke to 50 boys in group discussions; we convened eight community conversations; we held four intergenerational conversations with women; and we undertook a number of informal convenings with men. We were also able to hold a number of meetings with priests and other community leaders.

C. WITH COMMUNITY LED GIRL ACTIVISTS AND NGOS

Additionally, in each location we sought to understand the existing grassroots responses to child marriage, to identify how we could bolster and build on these, and – crucially – ensure girls would be positioned at the heart of solutions. We met with the key local NGO and often government actors in each location, to understand what work is being done for girls, and where those closest to the field believe the gaps are.

3. TOWARDS SOLUTIONS



This approach enabled us to develop a perspective on country-wide programming and what is needed to bolster work on the ground. We also used successful grassroots activity as the basis for further semiotic analysis, enabling us to create generalizable principles rooted in what we have already seen working.

BRIEF VIEW ON CURRENT LITERATURE: UNRAVELLING THE CAUSAL LINKS



The qualitative evidence on child marriage globally tends to retain a focus on structural child marriage drivers, predominantly a lack of education. And yet this sort of approach can be problematic, not least because it is particularly difficult to pull apart correlation and causation. The extent to which a given structural factor like education or family income is a cause or consequence of child marriage, or indeed the degree to which both are caused by some third factor, has not been well articulated. Secondly and relatedly, these kinds of analyses can often ignore or underplay the role of culture in which these structures are created.

CHILD MARRIAGE AND EDUCATION



International statistics from developing countries suggest that girls with primary education are twice as likely to marry or enter into union as those with secondary or higher education. Furthermore, those with no education are three times more likely to marry or enter into union before the age of 18 as those with a secondary or higher education (UNFPA, 2012). No or low educational status is therefore a risk factor for child marriage and teenage pregnancy, and higher educational status is protective (ICRW, 2007; Brown, 2012). Girls' education level has been identified as the most important factor associated with girls marrying before the age of 18 (ICRW, 2007).

There is certainly a strong association between reduced education and child marriage: in Nicaragua between 63-69% of women with no or only primary education married before age 18, compared to 25% of women with secondary education (Population Council, 2013).

Is indisputable that supporting girls to enter and remain in school leads to a range of positive outcomes for girls and their communities. And yet, the causal link between child marriage and education is not entirely neat. It should be clear at least that child marriage is a cause as well as a consequence of school dropout. Indeed, in Nicaragua, whilst the government has committed to providing universal primary school education, if girls become pregnant they are often advised to leave school.



“Due to the characteristics of early unions, discontinuation of education is one of the first events to occur, if it has not already.”

—POPULATION COUNCIL, 2013

“Everyone told me it would be dangerous for me to stay at school once I was pregnant because I could trip and fall, or something could happen to the baby. They said it was better for me to stay at home”

—MOTHER, 16, EL CUÁ



“As soon as people find out a girl is pregnant she has to leave school. I don’t really know why, but I had a few friends who got pregnant and I have hardly seen them since”

—13-YEAR-OLD GIRL, EL CUÁ

School is not a simple, singular solution to the problem, and too narrow a focus on education can blind us to the deeply embedded socio-cultural enablers to child marriage.



“There is a strong association between education on the one side and later marriage and pregnancy on the other. However, association is not the same as causation. The data do not indicate the direction of influence or the wider influences at play”

—BROWN, 2012

CHILD MARRIAGE AND POVERTY

International statistics from developing countries suggest that girls with primary As with education, there is a strong association between poverty and child marriage. Across developing countries, child marriage is most common among the poorest households (IRCW, 2007). Internationally, more than half (54%) of girls in the poorest 20% of households are child brides, compared to only 16% of girls in the richest 20% of households (UNFPA, 2012).

This certainly rings true in Nicaragua, with 55% of girls entering into early marriage in poor rural areas, compared to 36% in wealthier urban areas (Population Council, 2013). Again though, the relationship between poverty and child marriage is not a simple one.

To illuminate this with an example, Bolivia is a country with a GDP of \$33.54 billion and has seen rapid change in terms of political structure and urbanization. Despite having nearly half the country living under the poverty line, child marriage levels at 15 years of age are just 3% (and 22% by 18 years of age). Similarly, Djibouti is country with a GDP of \$1.743 billion (similar to that of Central African Republic or Cape Verde) but has just 2% married by 15 years of age (and only 5% by 18 years of age).

GENDERED POVERTY

Economies are not neutral structures. In Nicaragua, as with the rest of the world, the socio-cultural coping mechanisms associated with poverty play out very differently for girls and boys. Indeed, gendered poverty – that is, the very precise ways in which girls’ experience, adapt to, and attempt to survive within a context of patriarchal economic structures and institutions – requires further attention.



“Women experience structural exclusion in societies that perceive them as inferior and subordinate to men. In developing and developed countries alike, a disproportionate number of women experience relative poverty. Social exclusion of women in some societies is related to several factors, including their marital, health or employment status. The unequal possession of power and ownership of resources result in a greater risk of poverty among women”

– UN, 2010

Within the context of patriarchal structures, it is the very perception of a girls' bodily value that can lead families to marry their daughters as a way to earn income through a dowry, or used as a means for settling familial debts or disputes, or securing social, economic or political alliances (Lee-Rife et al, 2012; UNFPA, 2012; Plan International Australia, 2014). Marriage relieves parents of the economic responsibility for girls and allows them to extract value from their bodies (Lee-Rife et al, 2012; Brown 2012; CCLC, 2015).



“Poverty has long been articulated as the foremost reason for CEFM but if poverty is the reason, why are boys not marrying as early as girls? Sexuality and gender are central concerns of early and child marriage. Yet these issues have been sidelined”

—GREENWORKS, 2015

CHILD MARRIAGE AND THE LAW

Much of the international NGO activity on child marriage has taken place at the level of legal advocacy – specifically, it has concentrated on efforts to raise the legal age of marriage for girls. And recent research by Maswikwa, Richter and Nandi (2015) reports that the prevalence of child marriage is 40% lower in countries with consistent laws against child marriage than in countries without consistent laws against the practice.

Whilst we do not disagree with the importance of an enabling and encouraging legal environment, an overly discrete focus on the age of marriage ignores the way in which child marriage exists as a symptom of more widespread oppression of women and girls.

Delaying marriage until 18 if these remain harmful and imbalanced unions is not our desired outcome. What's more, this focuses us too narrowly on legal marriage, when in fact girls are being trapped in a range of damaging situations, often without any formal ratification.



“Nicaragua is a country rich in laws, but weak in application. They sell a pretty image, but it's the women who end up paying.”

—NGO MEETING – REFERRING TO 779 LAW



“We all know what the law says... that you can't have sex with a minor or you can go to prison. Anything under 14 is rape, but if she is older than 14 and says that she 'wants it' and she wants the relationship, then she is giving permission. Then there is no problem.”

—UNMARRIED FATHER, 20, EL VOLCÁN



“If there is a problem then the families will discuss it, and if it is difficult the community council will help the agreement. Only if it is very serious will we get the police involved. It's better that way.”

—COMMUNITY MEMBER, LIMBAIKAN

AN ALTERNATIVE READING

Child marriage is an outgrowth of a set of cultural anxieties and practices that center around controlling girls' fertility, sexuality and freedom. Whilst factors such as education and poverty both correlate and have complex (and reciprocal) causal relationships with child marriage, sexual control is the direct root of it.

Even if the raising of the age of marriage could be achieved without a more wholesale understanding of sexual control, tackling early marriage in isolation would not necessarily reduce the other ways that sexual control and violence impacts girls and women. Infant and maternal mortality would no doubt decrease, but that would not automatically mean girls are able to live in their full power.

Postponing marriage does not necessarily change the unequal and exploitative nature of marriage once it is entered into. Similarly, an unwed teenage mother is not necessarily in a better position than a married one, especially if the social stigmatization of girls' sexuality (when not sanctified through marriage) persists, and when mothers' ability to provide for themselves independently is limited.

It is therefore crucial to understand the specific manifestations of patriarchy in order not just to reduce the incidence of early marriage and associated public health problems, but to improve the lot of girls overall.

Such strategies will aim to create cultural conditions where early marriage is a less logical and appealing choice to girls and their families – but the real test of their success will be whether they improve, rather than just delay, girls' experience of desire, marriage, sex, and childbearing.

AND A REMINDER ON TERMINOLOGY

For the purposes of this project we continue to use the term 'child marriage'. However, it is worth noting that during the research we used the phrase 'unions a temprana edad' (early age unions), as does the 2015 UNFPA report we referenced earlier. As we consider what language to use moving forward, we should consider two key questions:

WHAT IS A CHILD?

Nicaraguan law does not define a person as an adult until the age of 21. The discussion of child rights is a complex and contested one that is beyond the scope of this report, but suffice it to say that during our research we encountered many and varied understandings of what constitutes the end of childhood. These include:

- The visible onset of puberty (breasts and hips development)
- The onset of menstruation
- Losing virginity
- Childbirth
- Belief that a girl is capable of taking on all household duties (fully 'primed')
- Living outside of the natal home

For men, the understanding of 'manhood' was more singular:

- The ability to earn money to support a family (rarely before 20 years of age)

In fact, rarely was age 21, or even 18, invoked as the end of childhood for either sex. And this means that 'child' marriage as per the law is at best understood conceptually but rarely aligns with what constitutes a child culturally.



“Once you have experienced the pain of childbirth, that’s when you become a woman. You can’t know what it is to be a woman until then.”

—GRANDMOTHER, LIMBAIKAN

WHAT IS A MARRIAGE?



Beyond this, there is a further definitional problem when it comes to 'marriage'. Throughout our research we uncovered a range of damaging situations for girls, some of which are referred to as marriage, but the majority of which were cohabiting unions as a response to pregnancy or sexuality, or hope of betterment/security. All of the forms 'marriage' can take can appear strikingly different.

Indeed, very few 'marriages' in rural Nicaragua are legalized or sanctified unions. This is partly because of the expense and hassle of weddings. But also, because few people believe in, or have seen, lasting relationships. Thus, many relationships are approached with a 'starter marriage' philosophy – "giving it a go", rather than committing forever. As such, a formal, legally binding union is simply a bureaucratic hassle, likely to be unraveled later.



OUR RESEARCH LOCATIONS



EL VOLCÁN, SAN LUCAS, MADRIZ



The prevalence of early unions in the departmento of Madriz is below the national average, at 39% - providing a useful control for the study.

Exact figures for the coffee-growing, mountainside community of El Volcán are unknown, however early unions are thought to be in decline.

It is a community with very limited economic opportunities, predominantly in subsistence farming. The main source of familial income is from seasonal migrant work – resulting in disrupted family structures, with many men, women and teenage boys leaving the community for months at a time. Children are often cared for by extended family.

Overall, education levels are high and community values can be felt strongly, with shared messages being spread through pillars of society (family, school, church).

EL GALOPE AND FRANK TIJERINO, EL CUÁ, JINOTEGA




With a 52% prevalence of early unions in Jinotega, the departamento surpasses the national average. The area of El Cuá in particular is recognized as having the highest numbers of both early unions and teenage pregnancies (UNFPA, 2015), with both on the rise.

The territory was scarred deeply by the Contra War throughout the 1980s, as it served as a battleground for the fighting, with many families having to give up their homes for militiamen. This has resulted in a tangible lack of trust amongst the population. It is set in a rural landscape of rolling hills, with some clusters of houses, but many more isolated fincas (small farms). It is lacking a community 'center'.

Agriculture (predominantly coffee) is the main labor source, drawing migrant workers from elsewhere to the region during coffee-cutting season. This influx correlates with a rise in teenage pregnancies each year.

It was previously very remote and relatively inaccessible as a region, however three years ago a paved 'highway' was constructed, connecting the area to main towns and to neighboring Honduras - becoming a trade route for lorries and more generally opening up economic opportunities. Inevitably, however, development has not come without its downsides - it has doubled up as a through-route for drug-trafficking, with an increase in instances of armed robberies and young men 'taking the wrong path'.

ALAMIKANGBAN AND LIMBAIKAN, PRINZAPOLKA, NORTHERN CARIBBEAN AUTONOMOUS REGION (RACN/RAAN)



With a prevalence rate of 60%, the autonomous region has the highest instance of child marriage in the country (UNFPA, 2013).

The population of Prinzapolka is 80% indigenous Miskito and 20% Mestizo, with three religious denominations: Morava, Evangelical and Catholic.

Miskito culture is embedded with gender inequalities, with infidelity by a woman punishable by death.

Autonomy (and the linguistic and cultural distinctiveness) of the region has meant that very few NGOs operate in the region, with limited international funding reaching the population.

Transport costs are incredibly high, with boats being the only form of transport between the river communities. There is currently no public transport to the nearest city, Siuna.

The river communities of Alamikangban and Limbaikan were selected as research locations - with Alamikangban being much more urbanized (connected by a dirt road to the city of Siuna and access to phone lines / signal), and Limbaikan being situated four hours down-river by longboat, and far more isolated. Both communities have their own governing structures, headed by the all-powerful Pastors of the Morava Church. These 'councils' are the first port of call for any community conflicts, before authorities are involved.

Nicaragua has struggled through decades of war, rapidly changing regimes, and multiple economic crises; all this gives rise to a pervasive sense of precariousness and fragility. This larger background of instability and chaos is reflected in family separation and fracturing on a micro level, with mass migration for work and the frequent disintegration of marriage partnerships both contributing to family breakdown. This is not new; societal disintegration on both a macro and micro level is not merely a feature of but the background to Nicaraguan experience.

- Many companies have left the country since the war, for example the Rosario mining company in Siuna, driving up unemployment
- In an anthropological study from the late 1980s men are frequently described by their ex-partners as having 'just left': "the line 'se fue' was always delivered with a shrug." (Stener Ekern, *Street Power: Culture and Politics in a Nicaraguan Neighbourhood*, 1987)
- In a 1990 survey, 45% of families were headed up by single women, and extended families are often a cluster of related matrilineal households (Tully, 2007)

Even the broader literature and culture of Nicaragua reflects this, with a pervasive sense, for example, that the trauma of Nicaragua's past is literally inscribed on the landscape (for an example see Maria Lopez Vigil, *Un Güegüie me Contó*).

In this political and social context, women, and especially girls, become contested sites of ideological struggle: objects of ideology deployed by each new regime, rather than agents in their own life; permanently destabilized; and the 'abandoned', left to pick up the pieces once stability has collapsed.

Which brings us to the present day - the political situation continues to be incredibly sensitive, with tensions running high in the run-up to the Presidential elections (including during the period of fieldwork). As disillusionment with the party grows, as a result of unfulfilled promises and a persistently low quality of life, the Sandinistas have ensured a one-party election (*The Guardian*, June 2016). The political situation has also impacted development work, with tight government control over and limitation of NGO programming by the government.

CHILD MARRIAGE AS CULTURAL PRACTICE



“Men look for girls who are 11, 12, 13, or 14... they are more docile. Those are the girls that they can mold to their way”

—SINGLE GIRL, 17, EL CUÁ

“My niece is 15 now. She is ripe and we don’t want her to get spoilt”

—UNCLE OF UNMARRIED 15-YEAR-OLD GIRL

Across the world, female sexuality has long been perceived as a threat to the social order. Entrenched patriarchy has rendered female sexuality feared and disdained. Girls and women are believed to have innate power when it comes to sex, based on a perceived imbalance of sexual desire between men and women. In a context where girls and women have been forcibly distanced from assets, anything seen as “innate” in this way represents a threat to the social order. Thus, female sexuality has emerged as a key battleground in social relations globally. And from this base, it has been deployed according to the needs of powers in particular historical contexts.

Specifically, in former colonized countries like Nicaragua, dominant male sexuality has been used as a tool of control. According to Brenner (1999), “Because those who would orchestrate the national narratives in the present are always concerned with securing control over the national future as well, reproduction and the family are especially sensitive political issues.” And in colonial regimes all over the world, “sexual violence was constitutive to the threat of colonial encounter” (Wieringa and Sivori, 2013).

This established the framework in which power was consolidated as countries moved into independence: “narratives of revolutionary takeovers invariably feature a plethora of male heroes whose conventional masculinity is a powerful symbol of a people’s will to self-government [and] the patriarchal family represents the promise of a civilized society” (Wieringa and Sivori).



“Nationalism frequently becomes the language through which sexual control and repression are justified and through which masculine prowess is expressed and strategically exercised”

—MAYER, 2000

Nicaragua's recent political history is further testament to this, with male revolutionary icons celebrated across the land, from Hugo Chavez to the prolific symbol of the Sandinista party, the silhouette of Augusto Nicolas Sandino: a revolutionary and 'Everyman' figure of national pride and nation-building.

Men are seen as pioneers of the economic, political, and social innovations associated with modernization. By contrast, women are considered to hold the moral fate of the nation in their hands. This places the weight of maintaining 'traditional values' on women's shoulders. Neloufer de Mel (2001) supports this, highlighting how nationalist discourses often frame the man as the author and subject of the nation, while the woman stands for the nation itself, which needs masculine protection. This protection can be found in the patriarchal family. And this means that the only legitimate expression of female sexuality should be within the family - for procreation. At its most basic therefore, the perceived tainting of the female body via sex outside of heterosexual marriage can imply impurity of the nation; on the other hand, female sexuality confined in such a marriage renders the nation safe and secure.



“Because women are so closely linked in public discourse with the family, their failures and indiscretions in the domestic sphere are often portrayed on a collective scale as menaces to the well-being of the pillars of the state. If the women are good, the state will also be good, but if the women are ruined, the state will be ruined as well”

—BRENNER, 1999

Today Nicaragua continues to have a tangled relationship between gender and politics. Many claim that the country has the strongest feminist movement in Latin America (Pulitzer Centre, 2013), whilst at the same time it ranks 125th of 188 countries in the UN's Gender Inequality Index.

Traditional gender roles are set up in binary opposition, with everyday gender relations reinforcing notions of the 'passive' female vs. the 'dominant' male – commonly referred to as machismo.



“The hegemonic pattern of masculinity in Nicaragua is machismo. Machismo is understood as the set of attitudes and behaviors that dictate how men interact with women and with other men. Machismo is based on the notion that men are superior to women and that men are tough, violent, domineering, and womanizers. Conversely, marianismo is a form of emphasized femininity that reinforces machismo. It promotes the ideal that ‘real women’ are docile and compliant to men’s patriarchal privileges.”

—GLOBAL HEALTH ACTION, 2012

“I want to be stronger when I grow up. I will work hard so I can earn money for my family... Girls are not strong.”

—BOY, 13, EL VOLCÁN

“There is no work for women, sometimes we can help pick coffee, but we can’t handle the tools. We look after the casita.”

—MOTHER, EL CUÁ

“When girls are unhappy, they are sad and they cry. When boys are unhappy they are angry and they shout.”

—GIRL, 11, EL VOLCÁN

The economic situation of Nicaragua, as a low-income country with high unemployment, combined with the shadow of the civil war, threatens traditional ideals of masculinity. In conversations with Nicaraguans, a common theme is the notion that men have lost their role as fighters and nation-builders in the years following the civil war. This is compounded by the typical experience of rural men where work is hard to find, (and when they do it is seasonal). The lack of work results in migration, meaning fathers are absent for long periods of time, thus upsetting the construction of the patriarchal family.

The disruption of traditional male gender roles - from the macro as nation builders, to the micro as heads of family and providers – heightens the perceived threat of female power.



“There was respect between couples then. There was much more respect between everyone then.”

—GRANDMOTHER, EVANGELICAL, EL CUÁ
[REFERRING TO THE PERIOD OF CIVIL WAR]

“Men should work and bring to the house what the family need, this is what the bible says.”

—FATHER, EL CUÁ

“A good husband is one who brings the family resources. That means you will have a good life.”

—GRANDMOTHER, LIMBAIKAN

“Before, when we had the foreigners here and the mine, there was work, there was transport, we could feed our family with 20 Córdoba. Now there is just misery.”

—MIDDLE-AGED MAN, LIMBAIKAN

“There is no work here. All of the men go to other places, usually for three or four months at a time. They wait for the truck at the entrance to the community. They don’t know when it will come, but they wait to hear something and then they all run.”

—GIRL, 17, EL VOLCÁN

As a result, other behaviors are exacerbated, with men leveraging control and brute force in order to assert their masculinity. And the figures correlate - according to Casa Alianza, Nicaragua has the second highest rate of domestic violence in Latin America, with one in three women reporting physical abuse (Pulitzer, 2013).



“My husband lost his job and he started drinking, he started to beat me. And he went with other women. He lives in a different community now.”

—SINGLE MOTHER, 23, LIMBAIKAN

Religious codes in culture further serve to entrench these norms, thereby providing justification for control over women and girls. In traditional Catholicism, which still holds sway in Nicaragua, the binary and contradictory image of womanhood based on biblical teaching and religious thought, remains powerful. Specifically, Eve the progenitor of original sin is set against Mary, the virgin mother. The fallen, against the divinely pure. This dichotomy is at the heart of the way Nicaraguan culture relates to the female sex:

- a) Intrinsic culpability provides justification for control
- b) The veneration of Motherhood holds up the ideal



“If God made himself man in Jesus Christ, he made himself flesh of love and abnegation in a woman: the mother”

—POPULAR RELIGIOUS QUOTE IN NICARAGUA

“Children have more trust in the mama, and that’s why it’s her who has to advise them.”

—GIRL, 14, EL CUÁ

“Eve was made from man’s rib. And it was Eve who ate the apple. That is something that every Nicaraguan child learns. Women are forever tied to original sin.”

—NGO WORKSHOP, MANAGUA

Indeed, from birth, women are seen as potentially culpable and sinful (even when men have more visible vices). A way of curbing this potential for sin is through marriage, her religious destiny, which demands that she serves her husband's needs and follows his orders.

However, it is misleading to view Christianity as the root cause of gender inequality, and by extension child marriage. Indeed, religion in Nicaragua is not fixed, with members of the same family choosing to change denominations, and others proclaiming to be agnostic. In El Cuá in particular, the married girls we spoke with were “not of any religion”. We also encountered religious leaders who spread strong positive messages about gender relations and delaying marriage. Furthermore, the extreme manifestations of gender inequality that we encountered within Miskito culture in Prinzapolka, including normative femicide, are evidence of the cultural rootedness of these norms. Whilst longstanding religious narratives play an indisputable role, over and above them the powerful non-denominated notion and practice of patriarchy persists.



“It [femicide] happens all the time. It’s part of our culture.”

—MISKITO NGO WORKER, ALAMIKANGBAN

Running through all of these narratives of nation, religion, motherhood and love, is a sense of girl's (and women's) passivity.

As we have understood, times of chaos and political struggle saw women become essentially objects of ideology rather than agents in their own life. The Nicaraguan context positions women, especially in love and marriage and most especially in motherhood, as the passive objects of men's desires, whims, and actions. Although women are recognized as performing matriarchal roles that hold families together, marriage in Nicaragua is a patriarchal institution that typically involves male infidelity and violence. Women are expected to be submissive and withstand any behavior from their male partner; and the onus on ‘staying together’ is put on women as opposed to men.

Culture sets up a paradigm where girls are not encouraged to recognize their own agency, whilst the roles in which culture most value them (motherhood and wifehood) and in which they are encouraged to most value themselves prioritize stoicism, receptiveness, sacrifice and docility. This is particularly informed by the religious context where Mary's role – her passivity, her sacrifice – is highly venerated and held up as a paradigm of motherhood; but is also more broadly informed by patriarchal narratives around love, desire and marriage.

The combination of normative female traits borne out of Nicaraguan culture (passivity, culpability, holiness, obedience, dutifulness) sets up girls for a life destined down an ‘ideal path’. And thus, choosing not to marry is extremely rare.



“We are destined to marry and have a family. You would feel empty and alone if you don’t”

—GIRL, 16, EL VOLCÁN

“Once you are married you have to have children”

—GIRL, 18, EL CUÁ

If a girl starts sexual relationships outside of wedlock, she is seen as straying from the path, and great shame will be brought upon her and her family. She has gone against the 'Virgin Mary' ideal, and upset the social order. The most evident manifestation of this is pregnancy - the ultimate public-facing symbol of unbridled female sexuality.



"Some girls just don't take advice. That's why they end up doing the wrong things. They don't listen."

—GIRL, 17, EL VOLCÁN

"It's girls' fault they get pregnant, they are the ones that come on to men."

—MOTHER, EL CUÁ

"She's worth less once she's pregnant."

—GIRL, 15, LIMBAIKAN

So, she must either remain the 'child', the 'virgin', the 'girl' OR become the 'wife and mother', lest she become the 'puta' ('whore'). In order to stabilize this continuum, a pregnant (or even sexually active) girl is 'safest' and most 'correct' in a relationship - given over to a man who will control her emergent sexuality and womanhood. In this sense, marriage becomes a damage limitation strategy.



"It's 'la vida ligera' (the fast life) to marry at an early age."

—GIRL, 17, ALAMIKANGBAN

"I knew she had a boyfriend, they started seeing each other when she was 12 and he was 18. I tried to stop it, but they kept on meeting up in secret. And I knew that if I banned her from seeing him and tried to keep her away, it wouldn't be long before she found another man. So we decided (with his family) that the best option was for her to move in with them. At least he is a hard-working man. Better him than lots of other men."

—MOTHER OF PREGNANT 13-YEAR-OLD, EL CUÁ

Nicaraguan culture is thus marked by a series of extremes: Mary and Eve, love and violence, passivity and domination, control and freedom. The boundaries between these states are fixed, gendered, and tightly controlled.

Our task now is to explore how these bounded spaces play out on the lived experience of girls, and ultimately to understand how we can support girls to transcend these fixed notions of femininity – of ‘mother’ or ‘whore’ - to open up new choices and new pathways.



LIFE FOR GIRLS

AN ABSENCE OF MEANINGFUL, POSITIVE CHOICE



*“A girl’s life is better...we are obedient, so we are safe...
A boy’s life is worse – there is danger, and they are free.”*

–15-YEAR-OLD GIRL, LIMBAIKAN

GIRLS, CONTROL, AND CHOICE

In the preceding sections, we brought to life the cultural forces that drive life for girls in Nicaragua, and focused the analysis around the social control of girls’ sexuality – playing out across multiple aspects of life, justified by religion and politics, and impacting understandings of gender, the propagation of the nation state, the social self, and the construction of perceived social judgment in girls’ and families’ minds.

We saw this social control meeting its ultimate apotheosis in pregnancy, the visible (and therefore social) manifestation of girls’ private sexuality.

While the control of sexuality manifests at the level of symbolic cultural life, it has direct consequences for girls’ lived experience. The cultural norms of control affect the choices a girl is offered and, even more foundationally, the choices she can imagine for herself.

Cultural narratives about control make it more appealing for families, parents and communities to close off options for girls, and more frightening for them to leave them open.

They encourage schools to stress the importance of traditional femininity even as they advocate high ambition, creating a cognitive dissonance that means that girls struggle to understand how they would access the options putatively being offered them.

And ultimately, they affect the choices a girl can envisage for herself: creating, as we will see in this section, not just ambivalence but fatalism about marriage.

In this context, cultural narratives of control affect the concrete choices that are on offer to girls in their lived experience. Our task now is to understand where they encounter these moments of control, and what forms they take. When they appear, how do they restrict and depreciate girls’ options, and how could we build in more, better, and healthier potential choices for girls.

1. WHERE IT ALL BEGINS: CHILDHOOD, SERVITUDE AND THE CYCLE OF VIOLENCE

A. CHILDREN AS SERVANTS

Children are widely perceived and treated as second-class citizens whose role is to serve the needs of the family, despite legislation in place to protect them (Law no. 287: Código de la Niñez y la Adolescencia) and substantial NGO work around children's rights on the ground.

Children assume household duties from as young as they are able to walk, with girls learning to cook, clean, and care for younger siblings from the age of 6 or 7. Indeed learning how to "pound the perfect tortilla" is very much a rite of passage for young girls. Ability to perform these household duties is seen as "preparation" for marriage, as they are groomed to become 'the perfect wife'. Young boys will begin with tasks such as fetching water as children, but will join their fathers and uncles for 'man's work' in the field typically in their early teens. The lag in physical aptitude for 'man's work' frees boys up for more time to play during their childhood, whilst girls are primed to comply from a very young age.



"Girls grow up playing with dolls, then they start looking after their siblings, and then they become a mother – it comes naturally to them."

–COMMUNITY MEETING, EL CUÁ



"My brothers are always out playing. Sometimes they go up to the fields with my father or grandfather. I have to finish with all of the household work before I can play."

–GIRL, 16, EL VOLCÁN

Girls' physical movements are controlled for the explicit reason of keeping them safe from the 'ills of society'. As children this is by their parents, and as girls/women it is by their partner – a natural transition from the confines of one home to another. This physical restriction often becomes more severe with marriage, with most women having to ask permission to leave the house, and many only leaving to attend Church on Sundays.



“When I want to leave the house, I ask permission from my husband. When he leaves, he tells me he is leaving. It’s different, but this is the commandment of the Bible. My husband knows what’s best for me. I am still learning, so I do what he tells me to do. We have a very good relationship.”

—MARRIED GIRL, 16,
WITH LOCAL TEACHER AGED 20
FOR FOUR YEARS, EL CUÁ

“It is he who orders me”

— TYPICAL EXPRESSION SAID BY NICARAGUAN WOMEN

B. TEACHING VIOLENCE YOUNG

Parents' view of children entails a certain paradox. On the one hand, they have value as an additional labor source, and a continuation of the family fold. On the other hand, they are additional mouths to feed, and bodies to clothe, and as such a burden of sorts. This makes the experience of motherhood/parenthood a mixed one for parents, and especially for single parents and those struggling to find work.

A consequence of the lack of recognition of children's rights, the stresses of parenthood, and negative role models across generation, is that violence towards children is rife. Violence from fathers and stepfathers is common, and typically alcohol-fueled, however a substantial portion also comes from mothers, many of who have been victims of violence themselves.



“Violence starts at home. To make me learn how to make tortillas, my mother would burn the palms of my hands on the stove. She kept burning them, until I could make a perfect tortilla.”

—SINGLE MOTHER, 43, EL CUÁ

“I have many scars, but the biggest scars, which you can see on my arms, are from my mother. She would hit me with a stick when I answered back to her. When I was 14 she got me to marry my first husband, even though he and his family were violent.”

—MOTHER, MARRIED FOR THE SECOND TIME, 17, ALAMIKANGBAN

The cycle of violence thus perpetuates: men who were treated violently as children are violent towards their wives and girlfriends, and women in turn take out violence on their children. And further, children are rarely protected from the sexual violence and promiscuity that permeates everyone's lives.



“My mother had a new boyfriend but she didn't trust him. She sent me out at night to spy on him because she knew he had a lover. She would make me go and check if it was happening and spy on it at night. One of these nights when I was walking home after I watched him I was raped. I was 8 years old”

—SINGLE 17-YEAR-OLD GIRL, ALAMAİKANGBAN

The prevalence of domestic violence, rape and femicide is further normalized as it is written into cultural narratives. Tales and nursery rhymes of sexual violence are told to children and passed around communities.



“Girls have to be careful of the ‘monkey’ at night, he comes out from the trees. That’s why they can’t walk alone.”

—POPULAR FOLKLORE, EL VOLCÁN

*“Chico Perico killed his wife
He chopped her into pieces and cooked her up
Everyone who passed by could smell the stench
But no one wanted her because she was a woman.”*

—NICARAGUAN NURSERY RHYME

“Everyone knows Chico Perico, children dance and sing to it.”

—PROJECT PARTNER, NICARAGUA

“In communities everywhere people talk about this ‘monkey’ – it’s a way of talking about the rape men do at night.”

—PROJECT PARTNER, NICARAGUA

C. MOTHER IS ALWAYS TO BLAME

The sheer size of most families combined with the prevalence of paternal abandonment and migration for work means that children rarely receive high levels of love and support from both of their parents. Many women are bringing up children on their own – and they are likely to have been teenage mothers themselves.



“I am the only one of us who has my father at home. You three have stepfathers, and the other three only have mothers.”

–GIRL, 13, ALAMIKANGBAN

“The men here always leave.”

–COMMUNITY MEETING, EL CUÁ

“Some mothers don’t love their daughters if their husband has left.”

–GIRL, 14, EL CUÁ

Girls’ waywardness is often attributed to this neglect, in particular the lack of a positive maternal role model. In blaming mothers for their daughters’ ‘transgression’, this reinforces the idea of women’s intrinsic culpability, which is brought into sharp relief against their failure as a ‘Holy Mother’.



“Parents have lost the old values – the way of our elders.”

–RELIGIOUS LEADER, CATHOLIC CHURCH, EL VOLCÁN

“Girls get pregnant because of the example they are given by their mothers. If the mother is like that, if she is ‘vaga’ (common insult meaning ‘layabout’, ‘waste of space’) because she works outside the house, the daughters will be the same.”

–COMMUNITY MEMBER, EL CUÁ

“Women’s integral development is limited in a society full of prejudice and culpability towards women.”

–NGO WORKER, EL CUÁ

D. MOLDING THE IDEAL GIRL



“The kind of girl that I want to marry when I am older is pretty, but she is also gentle, quiet, soft.”

—BOY, 14, EL VOLCÁN

“People won’t talk about a humble woman behind her back.”

—GIRL, 16, EL CUÁ

As previously explored, the patriarchal forces in Nicaraguan culture set out a clear image of a ‘good girl’. She is gentle, selfless, diligent, quiet, pure, submissive, protected, innocent. Her role is one of service to others – helping her mother, serving the family. Her role is not to question or disrupt. This is posited in direct opposition to boys’ susceptibility to ‘vices’, creating an even greater sense of pressure and control over young girls as they grow into adolescents.



“My daughter knows that she must finish school before she can think about boys. It is up to the parent to give these values, to make sure our children know the importance of going to school. Then they will have a good life.”

—MOTHER OF SIX, EL VOLCÁN

“Boys take a bad path, they get in trouble and they have vices.”

—GIRL, 14, EL CUÁ

Even very young girls that are more spirited, adventurous or experimental become quickly categorized as the ‘fallen’, or preparing to ‘fall’. This is a scary label for girls to carry, and it teaches them from a young age to stay silent and not exhibit any visible signs of autonomy. Young girls are also taught to be wary of friends with too much freedom; for fear that they will lead them astray. This makes modelling solidarity and friendship extremely difficult:



“My mother told me I shouldn’t have friends, they will take you down a bad path. They will tell you to come to parties or go on the street and search for men.”

—PREGNANT 15-YEAR-OLD GIRL, MARRIED AT 14, ALAMIKANGBAN

“In my life I don’t know what a friend is. My mother always advised me don’t look for friends because they are going to corrupt you.”

—PREGNANT GIRL, MARRIED AT 14, NOW 15, MORAVA, ALAMIKANGBAN

School should be a place where girls can access social solidarity, but there is a pervasive sense of judgment that makes it a complex offering for girls to navigate:



“It’s the girls who are bad at school who get pregnant.”

—GIRL, 14, EL CUÁ

“None of the girls who are married come to school. They either leave or they never went.”

—GIRL, 17, EL CUÁ

Attention is often focused on children who show aptitude and intelligence, whilst those who do not excel academically or do not fit the mold of the ‘virtuous girl’ are left behind or made to feel that they do not belong. Many of the most vulnerable girls self-isolate and retreat from education, which in turn increases their vulnerability.

Neither home nor school provides girls with a place where they feel safe and understood. And so the stage is set for what comes next, as they mature into adolescent girls.



“Love is a necessity”

—GIRL, 14, LIMBAIKAN

2. PRIMED FOR LOVE

These chaotic family structures make girls more vulnerable to the seduction of love, and make it more enticing for parents to push girls into marriage to relieve the financial and emotional burden of too many children in the home. In a context where girls are perceived as having little value – marriage, or at least sexual relationships, are often seen as the only route to a better life.



“When I think about why some of the girls in my class got married and pregnant so young I think it’s about the love of the family. My family always made me feel cared for, and supported, and they always said to me that school was important in order to get ahead in life. I think there are other girls who don’t feel loved by their families. They feel unloved, and so they are ready to fall in love with the first man that pays them any attention, even if in the end, that man is deceiving them.”

—UNMARRIED GIRL, 16, EL CUÁ

A. GIRLS, 'LOVE' AND SOCIO-CULTURAL COERCION

The path to marriage is fueled by cultural narratives of love, which inculcate romantic ideals in girls from a young age. Reinforced by popular music and telenovelas – and pumped into communities constantly – these narratives of passion and romance put men firmly in the driving seat.



*“My heart is fighting for your love...
Don’t tell anyone
How much I love you...
Don’t tell the town.
Don’t tell anyone.
That your life is my life.”*

—LYRICS TO POPULAR BACHATA SONG ‘TU CORAZONCITO’, AVENTURA

“People see each other and there is desire”

—GIRL, 16, LIMBAIKAN



“The girls that marry early... they are the ones that love too much. They can’t see the reality of things.”

—UNMARRIED GIRL, 16, EL CUÁ

“If they are in love, the age doesn’t matter.”

—GIRL, 14, ALAMIKANGBAN

“Love knows no age”

—COMMUNITY MEETING, EL CUÁ

On top of this, in the absence of leisure activities and when movement is tightly controlled, many girls report being extremely bored and frustrated. Relationships with men can begin to seem like an obvious solution.



“My boyfriend started visiting me as he was working at the nearby coffee plantations. I was bored and I liked it when he came and paid me attention. I moved in with his parents when I was 12. I’m 13 now and expecting his baby. He brought me to the Casa Materna so they could look after me. I think he is coming to visit me next week. He hasn’t replied to my messages, but I think he loves me.”

—PREGNANT GIRL, 13, EL CUÁ

“Young people have nothing to do, so they start smoking marijuana and they start relationships. They take a bad path.”

—PARENT, LIMBAIKAN

“Lots of girls get pregnant during the coffee cutting season. They all sleep in shared accommodation, with the men who come here for work. What else is there for them to do? They have sex.”

—HEAD OF CASA MATERNA, EL CUÁ

Relationships between two young people typically start as a 'sweaty hand' relationship - characterized by a sweetness and romance.



“Our relationship is just a sweaty hand relationship, we just talk”

—GIRL, 16, EL VOLCÁN

These relationships often happen between members from the same community, with romance developing through subtle public interactions at or on the way home from church or school, or while performing chores outside of the home, such as collecting water or grinding maize. Relationships were typically described as starting by “catching each other’s eyes”, or “with a few words”.

But the behavior of adolescent boys and young men, with whom these relationships typically start, is often driven by sexual motives, under the guise of romance. Indeed, while girls are taught to chase love, men are taught to chase passion and conquest. The phrase ‘engañar’ (‘to deceive’) is commonly used to describe men’s interactions with women:



“Men always make promises. They make us believe the fairytale romance, they say ‘we will be together forever’. They try to make us fall for them.”

—SINGLE GIRL, 18, EL CUÁ

“She was deceived. That’s why she is alone with her child.”

—MOTHER, ALAMIKANGBAN

“Give me the test and we will be together.”

—COMMON PHRASE USED BY BOYS TO GET GIRLS TO SLEEP WITH THEM, EL VOLCÁN

“There are older men who convince young girls by offering them money, or to take them to the city, even to Panama. But they only take them to a guest house – ‘they do them the favor’ – and then they leave them.”

—COMMUNITY MEETING, EL CUÁ

There is another strand of popular culture, particularly prevalent in reggaeton music, which feeds a further dimension of love and relationships: extreme sexuality and violence.



*“On the dance floor I’m going
to whip you and spank you!
Punish her!
Give her a whipping!
... Don’t heat up the food
If you’re not going to eat it
You’re not a little girl anymore,
‘Mami’, you are already a woman”*

– LYRICS TO POPULAR SONG, ‘LATIGAZO’, DADDY YANKEE

It is common to hear the strains of a girl singing ‘My Heart Will Go On’ from one house, and the strains of reggaeton music blaring from another. Thus, the culturally constructed image of the ‘ideal’ submissive girl exists in parallel with narratives of sex and violence. This is a confusing environment in which to become a teenage girl. These two competing and concurrent narratives are extremely difficult to reconcile with each other. Of course, violence and domination almost always trump love. But girls rarely realize this until it is too late.

*“It always starts well when there is romance.
But soon you realize”*

– 25-YEAR-OLD MARRIED WOMAN, EL VOLCAN

An increasingly growing phenomenon that we heard of was that of men ‘robbing’ women from their families and communities – a loaded euphemism for elopement. Indeed, in instances when the girl’s family frowns upon the relationship and attempts to tighten control, or if couples are not from the same community, it is usual for the couple to move to the man’s hometown. The phrase “he robbed her” is commonplace, and is often said with a giggle. This results in girls being separated from their natal family, moving in with the man’s family, or sometimes ‘disappearing’ to try to make it on their own.



*“So many young people fall in love and run
off together, especially if the man is from
somewhere else. You always hear of girls who
don’t turn up to school, daughters who have
been robbed. They take them away and we
don’t hear from them again.”*

– MOTHER, 43, EL VOLCÁN



“My friend went off with her boyfriend. I think they went to his community, but I haven’t spoken to her.”

—GIRL, 16, EL VOLCÁN

Girls are whipped up into a frenzy of love – by popular culture, by the low-level sense of frustration and boredom that comes from a life of poverty, and from the instinctive human need for love and attention

And thus responses to love can be extreme. We heard numerous references to lovers taking the ‘pastilla de amor’ (‘the love pill’) to commit suicide, and stories of girls committing self-harm in the name of their ‘prince’.



“Craziness does not have a cure”

—TEACHER, LIMBAIKAN – REFERRING TO GIRLS FALLING IN LOVE

“It’s very common to see girls here who have cut the name of their boyfriend or ex-boyfriend into their arm.”

—NGO WORKER – EL CUÁ

“My sister died with her husband under that tree. They made a suicide pact to die together, and he got a bomb. The mango tree marks the spot. So that’s why we have all raised my two nephews together. They are like my own sons.”

—MOTHER, EL VOLCÁN

The image of the 'crazy in love' girl further fuels justification for her control. In this cultural trope, she is young, stupid, and bewitched, unable to make rational decisions for herself. It is the job of society – and especially the man – to contain her madness.



“There are witches here who will cast a spell on girls to make them fall in love.”

–17-YEAR-OLD SINGLE GIRL, ALAMIKANGBAN

“The girls who fall in love, they are the stupid ones”

–15-YEAR-OLD SINGLE GIRL, EL CUÁ

“Love is a madness”

–GIRL, 15, LIMBAIKAN

In summary, girls fall in 'love' against a backdrop of social isolation, abandonment, violence and more. They are fed the idea that love liberates – but are then judged, and ultimately dominated in its name.

B. TRANSACTIONAL MARRIAGE AND EXPLICIT COERCION

Though generally less prevalent, many girls face explicit coercion into marriage.

She may not want to continue or intensify a relationship with a current boyfriend, or at the more extreme, have no previous relationship with the man at all. This explicit coercion can be seen as a way to more explicitly release value from her body - marriage is seen as a way to facilitate the movement of resources and social capital between two families.



“I left school when I was 10. I didn't like being around the other children, the boys would always lift up the girls' skirts and fight and mess around. I didn't like it. I told the teacher I wanted to leave, and she didn't say anything. So I stayed at home. I didn't go out on the street. I have never been like the other girls who are out looking for men, thanks to God. I liked being at home, helping my mum cook the food and clean the house. I never gave my mum problems with boyfriends and things (...)

I met him one 31st of December, but he always made jokes before then to my family saying 'I will marry your daughter / your granddaughter'. My aunt was having a party on the 31st and he came. When I entered the house he hugged me and I said 'what are you doing! I don't know you!' And he said 'But your mother and your grandmother have already told me that you are going to be my wife! I love you'. Then all the family said to me 'go with him. He is hard working and he is responsible. We want you to go with him.'





After the party I didn't want to talk to him. He went to work in a place where the men go to plant seeds. He came back a month later and brought money – he said was giving 100 Córdobas (3.5 USD) to me. I didn't want it, but he demanded I take it. I didn't speak to him much. A week later I was sleeping in my aunt's house and he came. He spoke with my aunt and my aunt told him to go in and sleep with me. That's when our life as a couple started. The bigger forces meant that I went with him. But I didn't want it. We have been together for a year. I don't love him. I told my family that I couldn't live with him because I am a girl and I don't know anything about men. But they got into my head, saying 'Get married! Get married! He's going to provide for you.' And he started telling me all the time 'I love you. I'm never going to abandon you, I am going to marry you.' I told him 'I don't want a man. Men are liars.' He said 'I am not one of these men. I will be your husband and I will never leave you.' It might be that it's true, but it might be that it's not. I see it all as strange. What he said about never leaving me is true. But I don't want it.

I wanted to marry when I was 20. I wanted to be with a man that I fell in love with and marry him so that I could follow the path of God and convert into a Christian. But because I don't love him I can't marry him. He is pressuring me to marry him. I don't know what to do. You can only marry if you love. And you can only become a Christian if you marry.”

—PREGNANT GIRL, 15, MARRIED AT 14 TO NEPHEW
OF CHIEF NARCO-TRAFFICKER, ALAMIKANGBAN

This girl was desperate to hang on to the role, and indeed the label, the life, of ‘the girl’, ‘the virgin’, ‘the virtuous daughter’ that her family had made her prize as a child.

Whilst the coercive nature of her marriage is deeply troubling – so too is her pre-marriage state. Friendless, isolated, removed from community in order to maintain her virtue – she has been taught to fear the girl that she is then forced to become. There is no greater an example of leaving one prison for another.

At its most sinister, marriage can also be utilized as ‘compensation’ and a way to minimize shame as a result of rape or sexual violation. Indeed, marriage relieves the economic burden of a girl who is no longer as ‘valuable’ as she was in her virgin state. In this case, it is a form of agreement between two families, or parents and perpetrator.



“The Pastor here had a sickly wife so they paid a young girl to care for her, and she did all of the house work, the cooking, the cleaning. Then we heard that the Pastor and the girl were having sex, but she was only 12 years old. His wife died and the relationship with the girl continued. The community didn’t want him to stay, we knew it was wrong. So the girl’s parents agreed that he would leave and take the girl with him and marry her. They now live up river in another community and we have a new Pastor.”

—COMMUNITY MEMBER, LIMBAIKAN

Whilst these explicitly coercive relationships were much rarer, they are a stark reminder of the powerless state in which many girls find themselves – and the deep trauma that comes from being forced from one conceptual framing of the ideal girl to another.

3. SEX: PREGNANCY, CONTRACEPTION AND PLEASURE



A. PREGNANCY = MARRIAGE

Regardless of the degree of coercion, we see pregnancy, or fear of it, as a catalyst for marriage. And whilst reliable quantitative data isn't available, it is certainly clear that the teenagers we met are having sex.



“Teenagers have sex in the hills, outside, we always find places.”

—BOY, 17, EL CUÁ

“Some girls and boys have sex in the latrines at school. Of course their parents don't let them at home. They worry about it happening at school.”

—TEACHER, ALAMIKANGBAN

“There are some parents who will let the boyfriend come around once a week, they prefer the girls to be with him in their house, so they are not having sex outside. But it can only be once a week or every two weeks. They have to ask permission.”

—GIRL, 15, EL CUÁ

“Girls have sex when they are in love.”

—MARRIED GIRL, 18, EL VOLCÁN

B. PREGNANCY AND CONTRACEPTION

The fear and reality of pregnancy is driven by a lack of contraception use.

Inconsistent usage combined with limited availability means that whatever the relationship – ‘love’, ‘coercion’ or anything in between - it is inevitable that adolescent girls will become pregnant at some point.

Overall there are low levels of knowledge around sexual health and contraception, and a huge number of myths and holes in girls’ understanding of how and when conception can take place:



“We had been having sex for a while and I hadn’t got pregnant, so I thought I wasn’t ready yet, I didn’t worry about using contraception. But then I got pregnant. I don’t want to have another child straight away so I will go and get the injection after I give birth. It’s better that way, then my child can help me care for the baby.”

—MARRIED PREGNANT GIRL, 16, ALAMIKANGBAN

Male partners often take responsibility for acquiring contraceptives, but this tends not to be reliable or consistent:



“When we started having sex my boyfriend told me I should take the injection. So he started going to pick it up for me from the clinic in the main town, and a woman in the community did it for me. But once he didn’t bring it. But he still wanted sex.”

—PREGNANT GIRL, 13, EL CUÁ

Whilst the contraceptive injection was the most commonly cited method, condom usage was rarely referred to, and for Miskito men there is a strong ‘cultural’ resistance:



“Miskito men don’t wear condoms, it’s not our way of life.”

—MIDDLE-AGED MAN, LIMBAIKAN

All of this is compounded by the lack of structural availability of contraception:



“The issue for us is that we live down the river, and since the mining companies left, there hasn’t been a decent road for us to get around. Alamikangban is the closest village with a health center and it is 100 Córdobas (3.5 USD) each way on the longboat, it takes 4 hours to get there. We can’t just quickly go there to pick up what we need. If we don’t have contraceptives, we will ask the other girls, maybe someone will give us one contraceptive pill. We give birth to our babies at home. If anything goes wrong, it’s a risky and expensive journey to the hospital.”

—UNMARRIED GIRL, 16, LIMBAIKAN

Health care centers are often difficult to reach. Where they are accessed, healthcare advice and availability of medications is limited. This is a particular issue for reproductive health - and the contraceptive injection is not always available even when girls have travelled long distances to get it. Thus, even if a girl has the knowledge, intention, and courage to take control of her reproductive rights, infrastructural limitations make things close to impossible.

Limited education and training for teachers and healthcare professionals also means that there is not always an empathetic, understanding and trustworthy ear on hand, and many girls report feeling too embarrassed to go to clinics that are so clearly designed with older women in mind.



“Lots of the girls don’t like to go to the hospital when they want contraception or they are pregnant because they are scared of the nurses gossiping. Most of the nurses are from the town.”

—NGO WORKER, ALAMIKANGBAN

The result is that many girls try to give themselves illegal abortions – using methods derived from old wives’ tales that rarely work, to more dangerous bootleg pills and injections.



“They say if you drink coconut water it will get rid of it.”

–GIRL, 14, EL CUÁ

“I have been shocked to hear about so many girls performing abortions. I had no idea it was happening this much.”

–NGO PARTNER, EL CUÁ

There is a growing recognition that girls who are ‘too young’ struggle to give birth, but the response is always a quick fix i.e. caesarean, rather than a more critical look at how to prevent these girls from becoming pregnant in the first place.



“She will probably have to have a caesarean because her body is not ready, her hips are too small”

–HEAD OF CASA MATERNA, REFERRING TO A PREGNANT 13-YEAR-OLD, EL CUÁ

C. MEN'S 'RIGHT' TO PROCREATE

Increasingly, women do not want more than two or three children because of the physical and economic demands of caring for them. However, many men actively resist the idea of artificially limiting conception. Indeed, for many men, procreating is a sign of strength and virility, thus an affirmation of their social role - enhanced in the context of the crisis of masculinity.



“Miskito men must have lots of children.”

—FATHER, LIMBAIKAN

“There are lots of women who don’t want to have more children. I am hearing it more and more. They have already had four or five, and they speak to me about getting the operation (hysterectomy). But it is up to the husband to allow her, and they almost never do. There was one doctor who performed the operation on a woman and the husband attacked him. The police were involved.”

—HEAD OF CASA MATERNA, EL CUÁ

D. SEX AND PLEASURE

As we have seen, there is a pervasive fear of girls’ sexuality - in culture, society, and religion. As with much of the world, as new technology and the Internet open up and the possibility of accessing explicit imagery online increases, a sense of moral panic is evoked.



“Parents give their children money for lunch and they spend it on porn. They download it in Alamikangban, where there is Internet, and bring it back on their cell phones and watch it together.”

—COMMUNITY MEETING, LIMBAIKAN

“Once they watch porn the disk starts to whir”

—COMMUNITY MEETING, EL CUÁ



“I work on the spiritual education of children. Human malice has got worse. Education needs to come from parents. They are less strict now. The Internet has destroyed youth. They watch porn and they put it into practice.”

—PASTOR SPEAKING AT COMMUNITY MEETING, LIMBAIKAN

“Before children didn’t know cell-phones, the radio, television. Technology damages the mind and interferes with natural education.”

—RELIGIOUS LEADER, CATHOLIC CHURCH, EL VOLCÁN

Conversely – or perhaps even because of this moral panic - the idea of sexual pleasure for women is not culturally permissible. Sex is sanctified in society when it is positioned as a route to procreation and to fulfil the role as dutiful wife, but it becomes dangerous when female pleasure is involved – lest sex makes her become the feared ‘whore’. Thus, we see the inherent tension that sits at the heart of Nicaraguan femininity play out explicitly in girls/women’s sexual lives:

- A) Intrinsic culpability provides justification for control
- B) The veneration of Motherhood holds up the ideal



“I don’t have pleasure when my husband has sex with me. I do it because he wants it, it is my duty.”

—MOTHER DURING INTER-GENERATIONAL GROUP, CATHOLIC FAMILY, EL CUÁ

“I don’t like sex. I have never enjoyed it. I feel scared inside every time he wants it. But if I say I don’t want to, he accuses me of being with other men and gets angry. I can’t deny him it.”

—MARRIED PREGNANT GIRL, 13, EL CUÁ

“I have sex with him because he asks me. Sometimes I say no, now that I’m pregnant I can say no more often. But I usually have to do it once a week.”

—MARRIED PREGNANT GIRL, 15, ALAMIKANGBAN



“We cannot ask them that here. Miskito people will not speak openly about sex or pleasure. But of course we like it, it feels good.”

—MISKITO PROJECT PARTNER, MOTHER OF TWO, ALAMIKANGBAN

This is not to say that women and girls don't ever enjoy sex – but rather that the public narrative is that sex is 'for the man', and never her. In cultural and social life, she is a functional vessel, a passive recipient, rather than an active participant.

4. LIVING WITH A MAN



Pregnancy, or evidence of sexual relations, results in social pressure to formalize a relationship through cohabitation. This is most notable on the part of the girls' family, for fear of shame and the economic burden that will come from having another child in the home.

Male possessiveness and jealousy (i.e. dominance) also serve to propel relationships into cohabiting unions – allowing men to tighten control over their partner. As we saw both machista culture and popular culture inculcate male dominance over women as the norm, with extreme forms of domination socially sanctioned in the name of passion.



“Women can't work or study if their husband is too jealous, he won't let her.”

—GIRL, 13, LIMBAIKAN

“They always think that they love them. It's very common here. Most men hit their women. I am lucky that my husband has never hit me. It's usually because they get angry at them for looking at other men, or not doing as they have asked.”

—MARRIED GIRL, 16, EL CUÁ

“I am usually in the house, we are usually here together. My family live about an hour walk away, but I don't really see them. He doesn't want to come and he doesn't like me to go alone”

—MARRIED GIRL, 17, ALAMIKANGB

Dominance becomes a demonstration of love and devotion, meaning that women tend not only to tolerate these behaviors, but can also feel unloved or unwanted if these behaviors aren't present.

Moving in with a partner's family increases girls' vulnerability. Often, if there was romance it fades, and partners' families are not particularly accepting or loving. Furthermore, at least initially, the perceived transience of relationships means that she is not considered a permanent addition to the family, but rather as a form of temporary lodger. She is usually expected to 'earn her keep' through domestic chores.



"I'm living with his family now, but I don't like them, they are violent. But I'm no longer welcome at my parents' house. Once he had sex with another woman, a prostitute, and then I got a disease. I felt sad when he did that, I thought he loved just me. I didn't speak to him for a day, but what else can I do?"

—MARRIED PREGNANT GIRL, 16, EL CUÁ

Critically, she does not feel like she has the choice to demand respect, and so either must tolerate his behavior or face the social upheaval of leaving him. And of course, being a jilted woman, or worse a single mother, comes with its own social stigmas and host of risks.

Intimate partner violence is prolific in Nicaragua. Women's attitudes range from total acceptance, even support of femicide, to optimism around the enforcement of the 779 Law. There was, however, a worrying current of fear amongst women who felt threatened and unprotected by the law.



"Once they (husbands) start to drink, war starts."

—SINGLE MOTHER, LIMBAIKAN

"They have lost credibility in the application of laws, especially the 779 law. It depends on the judge, the type of man who is implicated in the crime. So far this year (2016) they have freed 8,000 men who were detained for things like alimentation demands, which is not considered a serious crime."

—LA CUCULMECA, NGO PARTNER, EL CUÁ

“My cousin was killed by her husband. They were separated, because he was with other women. They had a baby, but he didn’t support them. She lived with the baby alone, and went to work in the streets at night to make some money. He found out that she left the baby alone, and so he came to the house and killed her with his machete. Some people in the community heard and called the police, and I think he had to spend some time in jail. But the family tried to resolve it, they thought what he had done was right. I don’t know what I think, a mother cannot leave her child”

—MARRIED PREGNANT GIRL, 16, ALAMIKANGBAN



“My sister was killed by her husband. The family fought for him to be put in jail, and after two years, with the help of the Commission of Women and Children, we finally succeeded. He threatened to kill me once he completes his sentence, for having done that to him. And I am scared because I have heard he is getting out. The government is releasing criminals so they get more votes. There’s nothing I can do.”

—43-YEAR-OLD MOTHER, MARRIED AT 15,
NOW WITH SECOND HUSBAND 22 YEARS HER SENIOR, EL CUÁ

Marriage often puts strict limitations on girls’ freedom, and this control becomes even more intensified after childbearing, when it is common to hear of husbands wanting to “make his wife look ugly” or “look old” in order to divert attention from other men. Meanwhile, the transition into motherhood often sees husbands’ eyes begin to wander.

B. THE INEVITABILITY OF ABANDONMENT

The cultural history of women and children in Nicaragua is one of passivity, and this plays out in the experiences of women and girls as a pervasive risk of abandonment, especially by romantic partners.



“To be left like the bride from Tola”

—NICARAGUAN IDIOM MEANING TO BE LEFT ‘HOLDING THE BAG’ – DERIVES FROM A NICARAGUAN MYTH OF A WOMAN WHO WENT INSANE AFTER BEING LEFT AT THE ALTAR

Women “stay” where men “leave”; girls learn that they are at the mercy of others’ actions:



“Men don’t stay. Everywhere you hear women say ‘se fue’ (‘he left’)”

—MOTHER, EL CUÁ

Despite men’s desire to bear children, it is important to stress that many mothers are abandoned by their partners, as they fear the responsibility of fatherhood. Many men will still boast that they have procreated, although they do not contribute emotionally or financially to the care of the child.



“Young men just want sexual satisfaction. Once the girls get pregnant, the men leave. It’s the parents who always have to pick up the pieces.”

—COMMUNITY MEETING, LIMBAIKAN

“Six of the fifteen girls we have here now are under 16. The families can’t care for them, and the boyfriends don’t want them.”

—HEAD OF CASA MATERNA, EL CUÁ

“The teenage boys say ‘if you get a girl pregnant, get out of there running, because they’ll lock you up’. This results in many men leaving the region, and often the country, in order to avoid their legal economic obligation to their children.”

—LA CULCULMECA, NGO PARTNER, EL CUÁ

“Women have power now with the 779 law. Before the men could just say ‘watch out’ and the women would behave and do what we say. And now we have wives who are hitting their husbands, because the law is unfair and favors women.”



—FATHER, LIMBAIKAN

Thus, we see how the transitory nature of unions creates a state of permanent impermanence – girls love, become pregnant, experience violence, and then are left. This cycle can repeat itself many, many times over the course of a lifetime.



“You either put up with abuse or you leave. But leaving is very hard. For women in the countryside, once you have had a man or have had children and you are alone, you are harassed by men; people think you are desperate for a man. They think that women, when we are in this situation, we are easy. So that’s why I married my second husband. I was 20 and he was 42. I wanted protection for me and my daughter who was 3 then. But because he was much older than me he was jealous and he beat me, he threatened to kill me. So after six years I separated from him.”

—SINGLE MOTHER, 43, EL CUÁ

Although many relationships are physically and emotionally abusive, being abandoned is not necessarily a better fate for pregnant young girls.

From this stand point we can see that the core goal, rather than putting an end to certain types of arrangements for girls, should be to improve the nature of relationships. We need to ensure respect, equality, friendship, and a suite of meaningful, positive choices for girls and women in union, and those who are beginning to explore the world of relationships.

SEEDS OF HOPE



Slowly, narratives about marriage, and ideas around relationships are changing, particularly amongst the younger generation. Most notably, there is a small but emerging focus on the benefits of healthy relationships and experience before marriage, and a desire for more permanent relationships, which shifts the focus to 'getting it right'. While this hasn't wholly converted to new behaviors, there is some potential to work with these narrative shifts.

There were teenagers who spoke about sex in a more open-minded and empowered way, recognizing that they were entitled to explore their sexuality without the pressure of marriage or cohabitation. There was also acknowledgement on a community level of teenagers' sexuality, not confining it to the dichotomy of 'whore' or 'wife', and recognizing the importance of contraception in increasing the choices sexually active girls might be able to access.



"I use contraception with my boyfriend. I'm not ashamed of it, because I know it would be stupid not to and I don't want to get pregnant, but there is nothing wrong with sex!"

—GIRL IN A 6-MONTH RELATIONSHIP, 18, ALAMIKANGBAN

"Girls do use contraception here. We have to go to Alamikangban to get it, but girls do get the injection."

—GIRL, 18, SPEAKING UP AT COMMUNITY MEETING, LIMBAIKAN

"Teenagers are always going to have sex, it's natural"

—COMMUNITY MEETING, EL CUÁ

Despite this, the issue of contraception continues to be very reliant on the structural, and there is still a huge knowledge gap that needs to be addressed:



“Let me ask you a question... what can you advise us to do? Because you can’t tell me that teenagers aren’t going to have sex. It’s natural, you start puberty and you want to have sex. What are they called... hormones? We just need information. Please, please, come back here and bring us information so we know what we can do.”

—MARRIED FATHER, 19, EL CUÁ

Amongst young woman, across communities, having seen the situation of so many of their mothers and sisters, the idea of ‘knowing’ your partner before entering into a relationship or committing to them was a common theme. However most found it hard to articulate a deeper conception of what ‘knowing’ a partner meant.



“You should know a man first before living with him. You need to know what sort of man he is.”

—GIRL, 16, LIMBAIKAN

In El Volcán, where relationships are generally a more positive experience and shared values are widely felt, the route to ‘knowing’ was through the community. The idea being that a girl can vet her future partner – his history, his background – and embed in the relationship from the beginning a sense of collective history and mutual support structures. Conversely, in Prinzapolka and El Cuá, where positive role models are overwhelmingly lacking, girls dream of finding ‘good’ husbands beyond the pool of men in their own communities:



“I want a professional, respectable husband. I will have to look elsewhere.”

—GIRL, 16, LIMBAIKAN

“I wouldn’t marry any man from here.”

—GIRL, 14, EL CUÁ

There is also an encouraging narrative taking shape amongst boys and young men, recognizing the benefits of both boys and girls delaying marriage – allowing for greater economic security, and, crucially, emotional maturity.

Particularly in discussions with boys and young men in El Volcán we heard articulations of the importance of “Being prepared before marriage, and before you have children” and “Having experience before you marry, and for the girl to have experience too” (insinuating both emotional and sexual).

We also heard many positive views on education across society, with a prevailing belief in the importance of girls having a full education. And indeed, for those girls who had stronger sense of own voice, it was so often built through success at school, underpinned by familial support and encouragement. These girls were less passive – more actively making choices over the future. However, education is not a definite route to securing a future that is full of choice and opportunity – and rather a delaying tactic to hold off the duties of ‘wife’ for a little while longer.



After I finish my course here, I will have to travel to the main town to complete my training. And once you become a teacher, you can be sent anywhere. I'm not sure what will happen then. My husband does not want me to travel alone, he is very protective of me. And he needs me here to tend the home. Whenever I am away studying, his mother looks after him.”

—MARRIED GIRL, 16, EL CUÁ

There is also a positive current running through society - girls articulating dreams beyond finishing education and alongside marriage, and boys supporting this.



“I want to learn beauty and hairdressing so I can move to Siuna and start a beauty salon. Then I will think about a husband. He can live with me there.”

—MISKITO GIRL, 14, ALAMIKANGBAN

“I am studying to be a Doctor. I could work in the hospital here or go to another city.”

—MISKITO GIRL, 18, ALAMIKANGBAN



“I want to marry a girl who is educated, who has a job. A girl who has friends and can think for herself.”

—BOY, 14, EL VOLCÁN

According to one of our partners, these hopes and dreams are particularly pronounced amongst Miskito girls.



“The Mestizo mothers, the Catholic mothers, are very protective over their daughters. They don’t like them to travel to other places, or to find work. They like them to stay with them at home. Miskito woman are much more independent. I can use myself as an example – I have left my two teenage daughters in Puerto Cabezas so that I can work with CAPRI. We encourage our daughters to have aspirations, and we don’t worry about them leaving home. It’s part of our indigenous culture. And it’s especially important as Miskito men are so often ‘viciados’ (‘corrupted, addicted to substances, esp. alcohol and marijuana’), which makes them lazy and unable to support the family.”

—MISKITO PROJECT PARTNER, ALAMIKANGBAN



Whilst the reality is that we ultimately saw little difference between the lived experience of Mestizo and Miskito girls, this narrative of freedom and permissiveness is a fruitful one from which to build.

MOVING FORWARD



The task ahead might look challenging, but in light of small shifts amongst Nicaraguan young people, and against a backdrop of an active women's movement, change is possible.

What has previously been a vicious cycle has the capacity to be turned on its head, to create a groundswell of girls who can advocate for themselves. We believe the road to transformation is twofold:

- Increase girls' access to choices
- Support girls to imagine alternatives

Moreover, the two elements work to complement each other, where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Girls who have assets can think long-term about their futures; girls who have access to social networks can draw inspiration from other girls as to their choices; and girls who have alternative hopes for themselves are more motivated to ask for access to assets.

Our goal is to unite these two girl-focused strategies to amplify the voice and power of girls in their communities, and ultimately to build a movement of girls to demand change for themselves.

Cultural authorities do not give up their power unprompted; change must be demanded from below. When girls believe that change is possible, and when we support the spaces in which their voices can be heard, united and amplified, we create the possibility of a civil rights movement of and for girls. A movement that can advocate for itself, agitate for change and, in the end, provide a cultural example in itself of female solidarity, power and choice.

The opportunity to act is here, not just to end child marriage and teen pregnancy, but to create better marriages and better families, and more fundamentally to foster meaningful choices so that girls can live in their full power.

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS



The remainder of this report shines a spotlight on some of the ways in which grassroots programming and movement-building could support girls to access more choices and imagine new possibilities. Our recommendations are by no means exhaustive – instead we should think of them as thought starters to fuel further discussion and planning.

Whilst many claim that Ortega has betrayed the key tenets of the 1979 revolution, with an increasingly hardline approach to women's rights, this is galvanizing activists. In fact, many claim that Nicaragua has the strongest feminist movement in Latin America, and it is clear that there are extraordinary efforts at the policy and advocacy level, particularly related to abortion rights. Further, women's organizations have a particular and growing focus on gender-based violence and maternal health, two critical barriers to transformation.

Considering the way we can leverage the collective power, expertise and resources of the women's movement for girls will be key in affecting systemic change. As such, the following recommendations attempt to draw on, and build from, the critical work already happening in communities to support women.

The first step in the design of programmatic interventions would be to map the full universe of women's programming and advocacy to understand how these could be expanded or adapted in the service of girls.

SECURE LIVELIHOODS AND LEARNING NEW SKILLS

As we have seen, girls need access to income-generating activity to help open up tangible activities outside of the home – to transcend the fixed role of wife and mother. There are some examples of small-scale technical courses for women in Nicaragua. These include training around new skills like sewing, jam-making and baking, sometimes supported by micro-finance credit loans.



"Since then (one year on) I have been making the cookies and cakes we learnt to bake. I make them twice a week and sell them. All I have to do is walk down the mountain through the community and usually I have sold them all before I get to the bottom of the mountain, where the community ends. If I need to I can walk to San Lucas, the nearest town and sell the rest."

—46-YEAR-OLD WOMAN, MOTHER OF FIVE, MARRIED AT 15, EL VOLCÁN

Intentionality around teenage girls could make a huge impact - either to supplement formal schooling, or for girls who have dropped out of education.

We should also consider the balance between gendered labor skills – should we always be teaching skills associated with ‘wife/mother’ or can we push the boundaries between gendered labor?

Technical training has the potential to support girls beyond income generation activities, forming networks and a sense of support and social solidarity with tougher girls in the program, and providing support to increase confidence, self-esteem, and the ability to imagine new things.

When designing this kind of intervention, safe spaces principles could be borrowed from effective programming in other parts of the world to ensure an enabling, supportive environment is embedded in the initiative from the start.

BRINGING GIRLS TOGETHER

Safe spaces for girls to form networks have been highly effective in creating an environment where they can build stable and long-lasting relationships (outside of motherhood structures), and where ‘private’ concerns of the home – otherwise expected to be passively endured - can be aired.

These spaces could take many forms - critical though is that they are safe, girl-only spaces. Such safe spaces are proving highly effective ways of enabling girls to support and inspire each other all over the world, supporting married girls and those vulnerable to child marriage to seek support from each other.

For example, the BALIKA program (Bangladesh – The Population Council) focuses on Education, Gender-Rights Awareness and Livelihood Skills using safe spaces principles. All participating girls meet weekly with mentors and peers in safe, girl-only locations called BALIKA centers, which help them to develop friendships as well as receive training on new technologies, borrow books, and acquire the skills they need to navigate the transition from girlhood to adulthood. Evidence has found this to be highly effective in delaying child marriage – girls who started the program single were 25% less likely to be married than they otherwise would have been by the end of the program.

EXPANDING POSSIBILITIES BEYOND THE HOME MORE BROADLY

Girls' inability to access choice in Nicaragua operates not only on the macro level, in terms of life paths, but on the day-to-day level, creating a low-level sense of antipathy and frustration about life. This is fueled in no small way but a grinding sense of boredom. There is so little for girls to do in their communities.

Straightforwardly, girls need more activities and possibilities to give their everyday lives a sense of meaning and purpose (so that meaning and purpose is not sought in their relationships with men). Whilst safe spaces could offer the container for these activities, where there are funding and infrastructural limitations girl-focused leisure activities could be an effective interim step.

To this end, NGOs could provide a range of leisure activities for girls – this might be football or another sport, art, music or more. Indeed, this is not for us to prescribe, but should flow naturally from asking girls what they might be interested in, and listening to their answers.

There is already precedence for this in Nicaragua, and it is clearly working. In Alamikangban there was a very positive response to projects that involved art and sports. These types of 'non-academic' activities work on many levels – they enable friendship/solidarity, and are confidence, leadership, and imagination-building.



“There was a program here a couple of years ago, but I think they lost their funding. It was great though – we had an art group where we did painting and made things. We would chat about our lives, we had friends there.”

—GIRL IN A RELATIONSHIP, 17, ALAMIKANGBAN

“I would love to come to a group and do an activity. I have never heard about any.”

—PREGNANT AND MARRIED GIRL, 15, ALAMIKANGBAN

MODELLING ALTERNATIVES



As we have seen, supporting girls to imagine new possibilities and different paths is a critical step in overturning a culture of control. In order to do this, girls need practical examples of what life could look like beyond motherhood and girlhood. Role models which girls can relate to and aspire to are critical in this process of re-imagining.

COMMUNITY LEVEL ROLE MODELS

Safe spaces need to be supported by mentors from the community: other girls or young women who attendees can draw inspiration from, but critically also identify with. In Sierra Leone, a tool called the Girl Roster helps NGOs to identify mentors relevant to different groups of girls. Girls are given a mentor who is slightly less vulnerable than them – perhaps she is slightly older – but otherwise who is from very similar circumstances. For example, a group of unmarried out-of-school girls aged 14-16 living with neither parent may be allocated a mentor who is 19, similarly unmarried and who left school early – a model of positive deviance to which they can aspire. It is critical that mentors are not seen as teachers, but instead as catalysts to harness existing strength and solidarity amongst girls.

ROLE MODELS IN CULTURE

Popular culture in Nicaragua reinforces the dichotomy between masculine/feminine/dominant and passive ideals. There is little progressive influence to draw on in cultural life – the romantic hysteria of the telenovela, or the explicit sexual violence of reggaeton. Girls need access to a healthy cultural world that explores ‘the space in between’ these binaries, giving her inspiring content and figures to help her imagine and navigate new paths. There are a number of ways practitioners could support the construction of this new cultural world – radio or magazine content, partnerships with progressive TV producers, or even commissioning of popular music that explores more progressive ideals.

AMPLIFYING ORGANIC RESISTANCE

Even in the most culturally entrenched communities, there are stories of organic girls’ resistance. These are girls who have somehow managed to beat the profound odds stacked against them, and transform their situations from within. These are not necessarily the girls who have remained in school and attained good grades, but the girls who became pregnant as young teenagers and now fight for their daughters, or who left abusive relationships and managed to survive and thrive, or who act as advocates for other girls with no training or resources. These girls represent the most powerful, radical, and fundamentally transformative type of role model - and their experiences need to be shared more widely.

TACKLING GENERATIONAL VIOLENCE

As we have seen, there is a pervasive, entrenched and systemic culture of violence in Nicaragua. With this issue in particular, women's rights organizations have a strong set of programming activities at the community level.



'We used to have some problems in our relationship: my husband had some vices, although we always loved each other very much. But INPRHU has been coming to the community to do workshops on gender equality, which have really changed things. The men know that they have to treat us as equals now. They know that we have the same rights as them.'

For one workshop they gathered the community together here at our house and we had a tortilla-making competition, where all of the men had to compete to see who could make the best tortilla. Usually that's the women's work, so it was really funny to see our husbands trying to 'palmear' (pat them into shape). They weren't very good at it!"

—INPRHU, EL VOLCÁN

There are a number of ways we could support the expansion of these initiatives. The first would be to intentionally focus on the ways in which violence – actual and feared – specifically affects young girls. How does the nature of the violence shift her experience depending on age, education status etc., and how does the experience difference according to the age and status of the perpetrator, e.g. girl/boy, girl/man?

Further, whilst much of the work in this space focuses on the dynamic between older married men and women, there is a strong case to make to look at inter-generational violence, and in particular the support that young mothers would need to break the cycle and foster more supportive, safe home environments for their daughters.

FOCUSING ON SEX AND RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION

Understanding of and access to contraception is vital. But we also need to help girls navigate relationships with men more healthily, and to speak up for their own sexual and reproductive rights. This means we should focus on promoting reproductive rights education from both physiological and psychological perspectives.

COMPREHENSIVE TRAINING

Safe space initiative could include a reproductive health component, and we think it would also be worth considering how new initiatives or spaces at the community level could become part of a distribution channel for contraception – especially in communities where access is profoundly limited.

FUNDING CONTRACEPTION ACCESS

Creating an enabling environment in which girls can access contraception means a focus on the availability of contraception in existing clinics, and thinking smartly about how we can get contraception to her in the most remote of places. But it also means building healthcare clinics with girls in mind – which could include basic training for nurses and health workers.



AMPLIFYING COMMUNITY ALLIES



Community allies are vital, but for genuine change, girls need advocates who sit outside of patriarchal structures. Put simply, we need to harness the power of women for girls. Remembering that women's and girls' needs and motivations are not perfectly aligned, how can we nevertheless capitalize on solidarity amongst women and support what they are already doing to improve life for the next generation?

HARNESSING A MOVEMENT OF WOMEN FOR GIRLS

As we know, there is deep and transformational work taking place amongst women's organizations in Nicaragua, often with a feminist perspective. These existing structures are a potentially interesting way of harnessing a movement of women for girls. Where women are already organizing organically, how can we take this to the next level, so that they become advocates, role models and allies for the next generation?

SUPPORTING ORGANIC ALLIES

Outside of formal structures, we heard a number of stories about women and older girls who had transformed the experience of control and violence - from grandmothers who fought their sons to keep their granddaughters in school, to neighbors and sisters who provided safe havens from violence. These stories are both moving and inspiring, but their power is so often overlooked in formalized development structures fixated on measurement and scalability. In this context, how can we support, reward and amplify these allies, to help normalize and model positive deviance more broadly?



APPENDIX



RESEARCH SAMPLE AND LOCATIONS

Locations:

San Lucas, Madriz:

- El Volcán

Prinzapolka, Northern Caribbean Autonomous Region:

- Alamikangban
- Limbaikan

El Cuá, Jinotega:

- El Galope
- Frank Tijerino

Sample per location:

- 1 x group of school girls 10-13 years old
- 1 x group of school girls 14-16 years old
- 1 x group of out of school girls 17-20 years old
- 1 x group of school girls 17-20
- 1 x female inter-generational group
- Several informal ethnographies with married girls

- 1 x group of school boys 10-13 years old
- 1 x group of school boys 14-16 years old
- 1 x group of out of school boys 17-20 years old
- 1 x group of school boys 17-20
- 1 x male inter-generational group

- 1 x community meeting

In each location, we were also privileged to access a number of informal conversations, with – for example – community leaders, religious leaders, teachers, government representatives, young married couples and other community members

NGO PARTNERS

San Lucas - INPRHU

El Cuá – La Cuculmeca

Prinzapolka - CAPRI

MANAGUA WORKSHOP

Local NGOs

- Cesesma
- CAPRI
- INPRHU
- La Cuculmeca
- CODENI
- NAKAWI
- Grupo Venancia
- Fundación Nakawé
- Fundación Entre Mujeres (FEM)

INGOs

- Plan Nicaragua

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