

“And the Enemy Was in Us”

By Rubén Reyes Jirón



This article is the third of the six articles to be published by the Women Peacemakers Program (WPP) during the six week *Gender & Militarism Campaign*. The Gender & Militarism Campaign advocates for awareness and action around the multi-layered connections between gender and militarism, and highlights gender-sensitive nonviolent action (people power) as a powerful alternative to address conflict.

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About Rubén Reyes Jirón

Rubén Reyes Jirón lives and works in Nicaragua. He has a BS in Psychology from Iowa State University (US) and a Master’s degree in Violence and Mental Health from the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) in Nicaragua. In Puntos de Encuentro, he is the Coordinator of a program for strengthening the organizing capabilities of youth groups. He has a great deal of experience as a trainer with young people, involving dialogue across differences in gender, age, ethnicity, sexual identities, etc. Reyes Jirón is also one of the founders of the Association of Men against Violence in Nicaragua, and has about 20 years of experience in gender work with men. As part of his work with Puntos de Encuentro, he is currently a member of the Masculinity Network for Gender Equality, a coalition of more than 20 organizations working in the field of gender and masculinity in Nicaragua. He is an alumnus of the 2009-2010 WPP Training of Trainers cycle “Overcoming Violence: Exploring Masculinities, Violence, and Peace”.

“And the enemy was in us” is a quote I remember from the film *Platoon* by Oliver Stone. It is what the main character says when he realizes that the US soldiers have killed and brutalized unarmed civilians during the Vietnam War. I have used it as the title of this article because it seems to capture what I feel about my experience in the war between the Sandinistas and the Contras in Nicaragua.

Sometimes I wonder, did it really happen or did I dream it all? Did she really tell me that one of our surgeons would only save her husband’s leg if she would consent to have sex with him? I kept a journal of that specific mission so that I could remember, but I guess I didn’t really want to remember it, because I have lost that journal.



It is hard for me to believe that people sharing my own political views could be able to abuse women’s rights. What I remember is that when I was an auxiliary nurse in the Apanas Hospital (a war-zone military hospital), a surgeon told a young woman that he only would save her husband’s leg if she would have sex with him. The young woman told me that herself, because she had been my friend already since elementary school. Did I believe her? Did I think that what the surgeon was doing was wrong? Yes, I did, but I was unable to help my friend to deal with the situation. I guess I used to think that this was a burden that women had to put up with, especially during armed conflict, because men could not help lusting for sex. Unfortunately, many men shared this view; one of my friends, who had been a combatant in the mandatory military service, told me that most of the female cooks of the troops had been raped or sexually abused by the commanders of the troops.

These events all happened between 1980 and 1989, within the context of an armed conflict in Nicaragua between the Sandinista government and the Contras, a militia organized by former members of the Somoza National Guard who opposed the Sandinista government. The Contras were politically and financially supported by the US government, which regarded the Sandinista government as a socialist threat, given its connections with Cuba and the Soviet Union.

I joined the army not because I wanted a military profession for my life, but because I was forced to by law. The Sandinista government had passed a law stipulating mandatory military service for men. I opted to be trained as a military nurse, since I didn’t want to become a fighter. I didn’t want to shoot people, but even more important for me: I didn’t want to get shot dead. In those days, many young men were joining the army as nurses. There had never been so many male nurses before. Young men seemed to realize it was a way to avoid the battlefield.

I myself was afraid to go to battle. I was a supporter and sympathizer of the Sandinista Revolution, but not to the point that I would risk my life for them. I thought the Revolution was a good thing, but not the war, killing people and getting killed. I was struggling with my feelings, because as a young man you were supposed to be willing to defend your country. Becoming a combatant was a “manly” thing to do. I used to hear that by joining the “Patriotic Military Service” you could become a real man. I wanted to be a real man, but I didn’t want to die. Serving as a nurse was not considered manly at all, as nursing was stereotyped as a female profession. This left me feeling ashamed and guilty for the fact that I didn’t become a combatant. And the Sandinista army exploited this rhetoric to recruit young men for the military service.

Only men were forced by the Sandinista government to serve the military. Some women were volunteering to join the army, but they were





not obliged to do so. In my view, it is good that not too many women had the direct experience of fighting in that war, because war is a dehumanizing experience.

I used to think that the Sandinista government were the “good guys”, since they helped the Nicaraguan people to kick out the Somoza dictatorship. In addition, former members of the Somoza National Guard had founded the Contras militia, which was politically and financially supported by the US.

I used to call them the beasts—that’s how officers and commanders in the Sandinista Army used to refer to the Contras—because they caused many atrocities and human-rights violations such as killing women, children, and other unarmed civilians. I thought they would look like big animals or monsters. But when I met a Contra soldier for the first time, I noticed that he was just a *campesino* (a rural worker). He didn’t look like a beast at all. I later became aware that the Contras militia was formed mostly out of farmers and rural workers from the northern region of Nicaragua. Many of them had joined the Contras after having suffered human-rights violations at the hands of Sandinista soldiers.

Whenever I heard or read about human-rights violations by the Sandinista Army, I considered it just propaganda from the opposition, which was trying to demoralize us. There were contradictions that I did not want to see at that time. For example, everyone had to deal with scarcity; there was no toothpaste, no toilet paper, and we could barely find rice, beans and sugar to eat. However, ministers and other officials of the Sandinista government were able to get a variety of food and luxury products from a special store—they used to call it *la diplotienda* (the diplomatic store). Regular folks like myself were not allowed in such a place; only diplomatic officials, government officials and *cheles* (white-skinned foreigners) were allowed. Even so, I used to justify this kind of class privilege, thinking our leaders deserved a better life because they had fought against the dictatorship, and they were also challenging the US for being an imperial power. So, when I heard that the Sandinista Army was also killing unarmed civilians, I didn’t believe that was really happening.

I later learned that some of the top Sandinista leaders had been accused of physically or sexually abusing women, or both. One accusation concerned Daniel Ortega, one of the main leaders of the Sandinista Revolution and our current president, for sexually abusing his stepdaughter for many years. However, he never had to face any charges.

What I learned from feminist leaders—who initially supported the Sandinista Revolution—is that the Sandinista government did not support them when they accused any one of the Sandinista leaders of physically or sexually abusing a woman. Back in those days, women were not supported in their attempts to get laws against domestic violence passed either. Women were often told to wait for more peaceful times to have their rights acknowledged.

Another gender aspect prevalent during the war was that all men in the army were supposed to be heterosexual. There was no place for homosexuals in the Sandinista Army, as they were not considered to be real men. Homosexuals were portrayed as sick people who could corrupt the troops. In the army hospital I was working in, I had to spy on a guy whom they suspected of being both a homosexual and a traitor. When I confirmed with my superiors that he was critical of the Revolutionary government and that he was showing his affection and sexual attraction to men, he was expelled from the army. I have heard stories of similar things happening in other military units.

“When you were trained as a soldier,” my friend Jorge explained to me, “you are expected to be tough, brave and non-emotional. Anyone who stayed behind or anyone who seemed to be weaker than the others would be publically humiliated. Those who were not good for fighting would be assigned to do the cooking and other domestic activities and were also humiliated as homosexuals”.

Many young people from both sides were killed in that war. We do not know the exact figures, as the Sandinista government has never disclosed these. There are many people who continue to cry for the loss of their loved ones, as well as for the loss of the Revolution. Many of us still wonder what they gave their lives for. Was it worth the pain that their families and friends suffered? Within the current political system, the ruling elites are getting wealthier and wealthier, while the majority of the people continue to be poor.

Many of the former Sandinista and Contras combatants are impoverished. They also suffer from physical and/or mental disabilities. Some of them have organized to demand their fair rights to a piece of land, to have jobs and to get special social services from the government. But the current government is not paying much attention to them.





In Nicaragua, the president is currently in full control of the army and the police. Neither of these armed forces falls under the constitutional law, but rather directly under the personal power of the president. Several reports have accused the police of partisan behavior and of failing to protect people who are demonstrating against the official politics from attacks by armed and organized gangs.*

Despite this repressive situation, the women's movement is well organized and has managed to get a law against gender-based violence passed. However, due to the corrupt and politically controlled justice system, many men are not being prosecuted for gender-based violence. As a result, human-rights violations of women, both by individual men and by the Nicaraguan state, continue to be very frequent. No improvements are expected, given that the ruling elite will make sure that political opposition and voices for change are silenced.

So we are struggling against a patriarchal, authoritarian and totalitarian power again; the days of dictatorship are not over yet. I can only say that our struggle must continue. But this time our struggle must also include overcoming the patriarchal dictator that is in all of us. Most men learn that dominating women and other men is a manly thing to do. From my war experience, I have learned that acting according to the hegemonic standards of "manly" is dehumanizing. It means learning to do violence to others and to ourselves. We have to stop pretending to be "manly" men. Learning to be men of peace will help us to be creative in non-violent methods to continue our struggle.

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