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# **The Political and Social Economy of Care: Nicaragua Research Report 2**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

What do we know about how Nicaraguans use time and, in particular, their time devoted to care? If responding to this question is important under any welfare and care regime, it is especially important when there are market and State “failures” in meeting the basic needs of the population. In this context, one would expect a much larger role of the unpaid work carried out in households and communities.

From the very inception of economics as a discipline, the central corpus of its work has been developed with a view to understanding capitalist production (Hausman 1984 and Albelda 1997, cited in Carrasco 2006). Thus, “work” has been defined to include only those activities that are actual or potential objects of commerce. This concept of work has profoundly affected the recognition of women’s contribution to the economy and to the society.

Feminist economics regards this approach as incomplete, since a society’s survival depends not only on its pattern of economic production, but also on social reproduction<sup>1</sup> pattern, that includes unpaid service production for household’s consumption. Under prevailing theoretical approaches, the invisibility of reproductive work has also rendered reproductive work—and those who perform it—socially invisible. More specifically, what is obscured is the relationship between production and reproduction characteristics of the capitalist system (Picchio 1994).

For feminist economics, social reproduction requires a set of activities generally designated as work, most of which fall outside what is typically defined as being part of “the economy.” The most important of these activities, in terms of both content and time consumed, are (unpaid) domestic work and caregiving (Carrasco, 2006).

Historically, care work has been provided by women within the household on an unpaid basis. However, it may be supplemented by paid work performed in the home, paid work in the public or private service sectors, and volunteer work. According to Picchio (1999), however, the ultimate responsibility for reconciling these forms of work, and for dealing with their less-than-sufficient yield, continues to be borne by those who perform unpaid work within the family—especially women.

To address care work in Nicaragua, this chapter (a) categorises work-care regimes in Nicaragua according to the different ways in which households combine activity in the labour market with unpaid care work, and the manner in which they allocate these activities among their members; and (b) estimates the contribution to the national economy made by women’s unpaid care work, in order to reveal this hidden cost of economic production.

To this end, we have analysed data from the time-use section of the 1998 National Standard of Living Survey (Encuesta Nacional de Medición del Nivel de Vida, or

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<sup>1</sup> The term “social reproduction” is used to refer broadly to the reproduction of the ideological and material conditions that sustain a social system. “Reproduction of the work force” refers to the daily maintenance of workers and future workers, as well as to the process of educating and training them. “Care work” is a similar concept.

EMNV for its Spanish acronym) conducted by Nicaragua's National Institute of Statistics and Census (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos, or INEC).

The study sample<sup>2</sup>, which is representative of the national population, comprises 8,756 persons of at least 6 years of age who were regular residents of the 2,325 selected housing units surveyed between April and August for the time-use section of the 1998 EMNV. Each of these individuals was asked 25 questions, in order to establish whether he/she had carried out certain activities the *day prior* to the interview. The time spent in various daily activities was also checked, ensuring that they totalled 24 hours. The population's socio-demographic and economic characteristics were registered on other sections of the 1998 EMNV.

It should be noted that obtaining information on time use by asking about pre-defined activities is problematic, inasmuch as activities not addressed by the questions (e.g., care of older adults) may be inadvertently omitted. In addition, the reliance on respondents' memory increases the chance that responses will reflect what respondents "normally" do (or think they should do), rather than what they actually did on the reference day. Basing the reports on respondents' memory also affects the quality of the data on the time devoted to different activities, since respondents have a tendency to round off times.

Furthermore, the fact that the number of questions concerning different activities was not constant may have affected the final time-use data. For example, there were four questions on household work, but only one on childcare. (In the latter case, no details were solicited regarding the specific activities involved, or to determine whether the children cared for were members of the household, as opposed to members of other households.) Responses thus reflected only what the respondents themselves considered to be childcare and their subjective perceptions of time.

Despite these limitations, and as shown in the chapter more broadly, the data collected through the survey are valid and extremely useful, not only for assessing actual time use in Nicaragua, but for public policy making that would hopefully deal with the many tensions involved in balancing paid work and unpaid care work.

## **2. WHAT DO WE MEAN BY WORK AND CARE WORK?**

There are two basic definitions that are important for this study: work and care work. The definition of work used by the Nicaraguan government is based on the standards and guidelines of the System of National Accounts (SNA)<sup>3</sup>. The labour force statistics consider that work the persons doing productive activities within the SNA production boundary. The SNA defines productive activities as those carried out

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<sup>2</sup> The sample design involved a systematic selection with a probability proportional to size of the segment, conducted in two stages and independently in each domain of the study (total, urban and rural). The primary sampling unit of the sample was the census segment (average of 60 households) and the secondary unit was the specific household.

<sup>3</sup> The first version of this was published in 1953 by the United Nations Statistical Commission. New versions were approved in 1968 and 1993, based on studying the progress and obstacles countries experienced in implementing the system as well as conceptual breakthroughs. In 1994, the Nicaraguan government decided to adopt the 1993 recommendations.

for purposes of sale or barter in the marketplace, plus all goods and services provided free of charge to individual households, or provided collectively to the community by governmental entities or non-profit institutions serving households (NPISHs).

However, many households—especially in developing countries—produce goods and services which, though used for themselves, could in fact be offered in the marketplace to others. The SNA includes such goods and some such services within its definition of production and the use of such goods can shift between the market and non-market. Here we can mention household agricultural production and warehousing for household consumption; gathering of non-cultivated products; firewood gathering and collection of water; processing of agricultural products and other types of processing, e.g., design and fabrication of clothing, furniture-making; and housing construction.

The SNA, however, excludes domestic and personal services performed by households for their own consumption, such as food preparation; care, education and training of children; care of the ill and the elderly; and cleaning, maintenance and repair of durable goods, etc. Work performed by paid domestic workers is not subject to the exclusion.

Though all of these activities are recognised as being productive in the economic sense (SNA, 1993: 1.21), they are excluded from the accounts, since the fact that they are consumed at the time they are produced makes their relationship to the market a weaker one.

The present study adopted a modified version of the SNA definition of work. Collection of water and wood, which in the SNA are part of work, are excluded here on account of the fact that they are not considered as such in the official statistics of Nicaragua. They are therefore included here as part of unpaid care work. In effect, SNA work covers the following categories:

- Paid work.
- Unpaid work in family or non-family firms or businesses<sup>4</sup>.

Care work, on the other hand, is defined as activities, whether paid or not, which are done for the household-family with the aim of assuring the daily reproduction of its members.

In regard to distinguishing the specific activities involved in care work from those not considered work, there is consensus on the *third person criterion*, which identifies activities carried out by and for household members that result in goods or services capable of being exchanged on the market, and that could be delegated to persons outside the household. Thus, individuals' recreational activities and self-provided personal care—which cannot be delegated—are excluded.

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<sup>4</sup> Although the time-use section of the 1998 EMNV included questions referring specifically to these categories, it also included two questions on family economic activity (both agricultural and non-agricultural), but without inquiring as to whether remuneration was received. To deal at least partially with this situation, we consulted the economic activity section of the survey and used its classification scheme to categorise activities as paid or unpaid.

In view of its objectives, the present study examines only *unpaid care work*. Based on the content of the time-use section of the 1998 EMNV, the activities included are classified in two categories:

- Domestic tasks, including cooking, housecleaning, dishwashing and laundry, ironing, house repairs, and household shopping.
- Care for persons, including childcare and care of the ill. (Adult care more generally is not under examination here). However, the way in which the questions in the time-use section of the 1998 EMNV were formulated makes it impossible to determine whether the persons being cared for did or did not belong to the interviewees' households.

We decided not to include community and related services on account of the fact that, because of the way in which the questions were asked, it is not possible to determine to which category of the SNA they correspond.

### **3. WHAT IS THE SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC AND ECONOMIC PROFILE OF THE STUDY POPULATION?**

To study the time use patterns of Nicaraguans, we use a combination of variables, among which sex is the central axis of the analysis given the importance of gender roles for time use. In this section we discuss how the surveyed population looks like according to these variables. Based on this depiction we can tell whether the sample is reliable to learn about the large population and helps make sense of primary results concerning time use.

Below we present the basic socio-demographic and economic profile of the population for which we have information on time use.

#### **3.1. Area of residence**

As Table 3.1 indicates, the sample is almost equally distributed between the sexes: 49.7% men and 50.3 women.

Just over half the sample (52.6%) lived in urban areas. However, disaggregation by sex shows the men almost equally distributed between urban and rural areas, while a significant majority of the women reside in urban areas (55.6%).

The greater propensity of rural women to migrate to cities reflects the greater job opportunities available in urban centres, where these women traditionally find work as domestic employees or, more recently, in *maquila* enterprises in free zones.

**Table 3.1**  
**Distribución de la Población de 6 años y más**  
**Entrevistada por Sexo y Área de Residencia**

*Por ciento*

Sexo	La República	Área de Residencia		
		Total	Urbana	Rural
Total	100.0	100.0	52.6	47.4
Hombres	49.7	100.0	49.6	50.4
Mujeres	50.3	100.0	55.6	44.4

Source: Author, based on data from time-use section of 1998 EMNV conducted by INEC.

### 3.2. Age groups

The age groups used to analyse the information appearing in Table 3.2 are based on the combination of official Nicaraguan definitions of childhood (0 to 17) and of women's reproductive age (15 to 49). Though the behaviour of the retirement-age population (65+) is also of interest, it was necessary to aggregate this group with the 50-64 group, since the number of observations in the 65+ population constituted less than 5% of the total population interviewed.

**Table 3.2**  
**Distribution of the population 6 years and older**  
**interviewed, by sex and age group**

*Per cent*

Sexo	Total	Age Group		
		6 a 17	18 a 49	50 +
Total	100.0	40.2	46.3	13.5
Men	100.0	41.3	45.1	13.6
Women	100.0	39.2	47.4	13.5

Source: Author, based on data from time-use section of 1998 EMNV conducted by INEC.

As Table 3.2 shows, the sample was concentrated in the first two age groups, with

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