



Nicaragua

by Linda Rapp

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With a long history of dominance by the Roman Catholic church and a tradition of *machismo*, Nicaragua has not been a place where glbtq culture could flourish. In the 1980s, however, activists began organizing to work for change. Despite severe laws against same-sex relations, their efforts continue, and the Nicaraguan glbtq community has a greater visibility and sense of identity than ever before.

When the Spanish, under Gil González de Ávila, arrived on the eastern shores of Nicaragua in 1522 they encountered the native Miskito people. Spanish settlers soon established towns and also undertook to convert the indigenous population to Roman Catholicism. Intermarriage between the two groups was common, and today most Nicaraguans are of mixed ethnic heritage. The overwhelming majority are Catholic.

Independence and Revolution

Nicaragua declared its independence from Spain in 1821 and for a few years was part of the Mexican Empire. In 1825 Nicaragua joined with other newly independent nations in the region to form the Central American Federation but seceded from that union in 1838 to become a fully independent republic.

Revolution broke out in 1909. Adolfo Díaz emerged as provisional president the following year. To support his fragile regime the United States sent in a contingent of Marines in 1912. The American military presence continued until 1933.

Somoza Dictatorship

The election of 1936 brought Anastasio Somoza to power and began a long period during which the Somoza family ran Nicaragua as their own fiefdom. When Somoza was assassinated in 1956 his son Luis Somoza Debayle succeeded him. Another son, Anastasio Somoza Debayle, became president in 1967.

The Sandinistas and the Contras

Opposition to the corrupt Somoza regime grew throughout the 1970s. Government forces clashed with opposition groups, the Sandinista National Liberation Front and the Democratic Liberation Union. The rebels overthrew Somoza in 1979, and the Sandinistas came to power.

The political situation remained turbulent as the Sandinistas fought with counter-revolutionary forces known as the contras, who had the support of the United States.

The Sandinistas attempted an ambitious program of reforms, including land redistribution and improvements in education and health care. Women, many of whom had been active participants in the revolution, called for equal rights. Some gains were made, but progress in effecting attitudinal change in a historically male-dominated society has been slow in coming.

Although gay men and lesbians had taken part in the revolution--some of them having had prominent roles--glbtq rights were not high on the agenda of the Sandinista government. Roger N. Lancaster suggests that the political risks of taking up such an issue, which was sure to meet with hostility from the Roman Catholic church, were seen as too dangerous. While some in the Sandinista movement decried homosexuality as decadent or bourgeois, a few voices were raised in support of equal rights. For the most part, glbtq people were simply ignored.

Glbtq Rights Movement

They did not, however, remain silent. In 1989, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the Sandinistas' accession to power, activists staged a march in Managua, launching the glbtq rights movement in Nicaragua. Community centers, which frequently advocated for both gay and lesbian rights and women's issues, began to form.

When Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, considered a political moderate, defeated the incumbent Sandinista president Daniel Ortega Saavedra in 1990, the United States lifted its economic embargo against Nicaragua. The absence of U. S. pressure made it easier for non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including those promoting glbtq rights and AIDS awareness, to operate in the country. Glbtq activists became more visible and with their supporters put on Nicaragua's first public gay pride festival in 1991.

Article 205

The following year brought a setback for the glbtq rights movement when Article 205 of the penal code was adopted. This provision, originally written as a bill to protect women from rape and sexual abuse, was changed by the Social Christians in the legislature into a harsh law that imposed a sentence of up to three years in prison for "anyone who induces, promotes, propagandizes, or practices sex among persons of the same sex in a scandalous manner."

Barrios de Chamorro's close confidant Miguel Cardinal Obando y Bravo, the leading Roman Catholic official in Nicaragua, preached in favor of the legislation, saying that "any sensible and responsible Christian ought to be in agreement" with it.

Nicaraguan activists and their allies protested both at home and at embassies abroad, but the president signed the bill into law in July 1992. A legal challenge was mounted, but the Nicaraguan Supreme Court upheld the law in 1994, and although rarely enforced, it remains on the books.

At the same time the mayor of Managua, Arnaldo Alemán--who would succeed Barrios de Chamorro as president in 1996--undertook an effort to "clean up" the capital. He barred the doors of the ruined cathedral that had been a popular gay cruising spot and allowed police to harass gay men in city parks.

Work for Change and a Search for Identity

Despite this official sanction of homophobia, glbtq people in Nicaragua have continued to work for change, often by establishing ties with international NGOs, which can provide some much-needed funds. The alliances with foreign groups and the competition for their financial support have, however, tended to impede the development of a unified Nicaraguan glbtq rights movement.

Like many other Latin American cultures Nicaragua has a tradition of *machismo*, the valuing of "manliness" in men. Establishing and retaining an image as an "*hombre-hombre*" (a manly man) has always been of extreme importance to Nicaraguan males. The behavior of an *hombre-hombre* may include having sex with other men, but only as the active partner. Passive partners, known as *cochones*, are severely stigmatized.

Because this cultural system is different from that in North America and Europe, it may be inappropriate to label as gay *hombre-hombres* who have sex with other men. As Hekma points out, they have "no strong feeling of identity or community," and many eventually marry and stop seeking male partners. Pressure on young women to remain virgins until marriage has been and continues to be very strong in Nicaragua, which has contributed to the situational homosexuality practiced by young men.

As communications with gay groups in other countries, particularly the United States, improve, some men are developing a "western style" gay consciousness and sense of community. The gay and lesbian organization Fundación Xochiquetzal provides opportunities for political expression, and there is a modest gay social scene in Managua for middle- and upper-class men whose incomes allow them to go out for entertainment.

For lesbians the situation is somewhat different. In Nicaraguan society gender roles have been characterized by the "*la casa y la calle*" (the house and the street) tradition, with men enjoying the freedom of the latter while women stay behind to tend the former. Lesbians are generally less visible in public spaces than are gay men. Their socializing often occurs in private venues such as potluck dinner parties.

Lesbians frequently shoulder greater family obligations than gay men and have less disposable income. They are, however, very active in NGOs. The gay and lesbian rights movement in Nicaragua grew largely out of the women's movement. In addition to Xochiquetzal, Nicaraguan lesbians founded and play an important role in Puntos de Encuentro, "a Nicaraguan feminist and youth center for communication, research, and education, dedicated to social change."

Women have also been among the leaders at the Fundación Nimehuatzin, an NGO that provides AIDS education and care. In 2000 the foundation's president and founder, Rita Arauz, won an award from the United Nations Development Program for her work combating the disease.

The differences in the situations of gay men and lesbians has sometimes led to friction between the groups. Some men believe that women have too much power in the NGOs, while some women think that men are reaping most of the socio-economic benefits that have been won.

Despite the occasional complaints, the glbtq community of Nicaragua is largely united in the goal of creating an identity, campaigning for equal rights, and working for the prevention and treatment of AIDS. For some years there has been an annual Gay Pride celebration in Managua, held around June 28 to commemorate the Stonewall uprising.

One of Nicaragua's most popular television programs is *Sexto Sentido* ("Sixth Sense"), a "social soap opera" whose principal characters include a gay man and a lesbian. In a 2002 interview co-executive producer Virginia Lacayo, who is also co-director of Puntos de Encuentro with the show's co-creator Amy Bank, pointed out that *Sexto Sentido* was watched by 70 percent of the country's potential television viewers and by 80 percent of those 13 to 17 years old. She stated that it is "reaffirming" for gay men and lesbians to see characters like themselves on television and expressed the hope that the program would help "demystify gay life and gay people," leading to greater acceptance and equal rights.

Progress for glbtq Nicaraguans has been slow, but through the efforts of dedicated and hard-working people, strides are being made.

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