

# The Keys to Empowerment

Ten Years of Experience of the Xochilt-Acalt Women's Center  
in Malpaisillo, Nicaragua

Sofia Montenegro  
Elvira Cuadra



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**Translation:** Donna Vukelich

**Design:** Carrie Hirsch

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P.O. Box 1534

Madison, WI 53701

(608) 257-7230

wccn@wccnica.org

www.wccnica.org

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**Centro de Orientación familiar y educación sexual -Xochilt-Acalt**

Del Arbolito media cuadra al sur

Malpaisillo, Nicaragua

xochiltni@yahoo.com

xochiltni@latinmail.com

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## Chapter 1 - Key Concepts

This study responds to a need to systematize the experience of empowerment of rural women that was carried out over the course of a decade (1991-2001) by the Xochilt Acalt Women's Center, located in Malpaisillo, county seat of the municipality of Larreynaga, in the department of León.

According to its own definition, Xochilt-Acalt is an organization, which is part of the women's movement in Nicaragua, and works to promote human development projects, with the aim of contributing to the elimination of the subordination of and discrimination against women. This is done through empowering women and increasing their role and presence in society. From that perspective, the programs that Xochilt-Acalt promotes are aimed at ensuring that women have the conditions necessary to make their own decisions, increase their household incomes, organize to fight for their rights and contribute to the elimination of gender oppression and discrimination. The strategy used is based on a Gender and Development Approach (GAD).

In order to understand the process carried out by this organization and understand what it has done, we will make use of key concepts derived from the fields of sociology, feminist anthropology and the sociology of development, which will allow us to understand the reasons behind the success of Xochilt-Acalt's programs in the countryside. We will also examine the degree of empowerment that the women who benefit from these programs have attained.

### 1. Empowerment

The concept of empowerment has its origins in the experiences of social movements in Latin America in their attempts to carry out social transformation. It has been constructed based on political practice, to the point where it has reached the status of a theoretical category and citizenship, and is seen as an important element in the debates and programs related to the issue of development. Empowerment refers to the process of critical reflection and achieving a base level of necessary consciousness, with the end of organizing political action and transforming unequal relations of power.

In general terms, there is an implicit notion that people can attain control over their own lives and define their own agendas. Generally, this is associated with the interests of those who do not have much power and it is presumed as an expression of desired change, without going into too much detail regarding the implications of such a change. Nevertheless, for feminists, empowerment implies "the radical alteration of the processes and structures that reproduce the subordinate position of woman as gender" (Young, 1997).

Empowerment takes place when there is a change in the traditional domination of women by men, whether with respect to control of their life options, their economic wealth, their opinions or their sexuality. Women begin to share responsibilities, which had previously corresponded exclusively to men and, freed from these gender stereotypes, the possibility of new emotional experiences is opened up. Thus the empowerment of women implies not only changes in their experiences, but also in that of their *compañeros* and their families.

Given that the subordination of women seems natural within the context of a patriarchal ideology, it's difficult for a change to emerge spontaneously out of the condition of their subordination. Empowerment has to be induced, after first having created a consciousness regarding gender discrimination. This demands that women change the images that they have of themselves and of their feelings of inferiority, as well as their beliefs having to do with their own rights and abilities.

Although there is no agreed-upon model of the empowerment of women, there is sufficient overlap that suggests it should be considered as a multidimensional process that is developed simultaneously at distinct levels and in different arenas. The different approaches coincide in that this process "begins in a subjective environment of people and extends to public space; it involves individual processes of coming to consciousness and greater self-esteem among women, as well as collective action for social and political transformations, it aims at women acquiring autonomy over their bodies and their sexuality, as well as greater access and control over their material resources; it also aims to resolve problems of survival and changing the relations of power that sustain society in its whole."<sup>1</sup>

## **2. Identity and feminine subjectivity**

Empowerment requires creating a consciousness in women regarding the discrimination which they are objects of. This implies promoting changes in their gender identity and in the evolution of their personal identity.

In the patriarchal system, sexuality is the center of feminine identity and is the base of the feminine condition. Within this system, the core characteristic of the condition of being a woman is that her sexuality is expropriated, having her body considered as belonging to others, whether it's to give it over to a man, or for procreation; all of which has impeded women from being considered as a historical-social subject, as that is seen as a fact of nature.

And at the same time if it is held that women are an effect of nature and not of culture, the common elements of identity of woman are not taken into account in the formation of her subjectivity, nor does it facilitate the recognition of women among other women. The specific situation in which women live their

inequalities (class, ethnicity, race, language, etc.) or any other dimension of their identity is overvalued and tends to serve to differentiate among women and separate them from each other. Other vital references are given priority, distinct from the fact of being, such that women tend to live in ongoing processes of dis-identification.

Assigned feminine identity is constituted in a *demand of being or a prohibition of being*, such that the identities that are so constructed are generally of an obligatory (compulsive) fulfillment, and prevail over the identity itself.

The gender attributes assigned to women, as Marcela Lagarde has shown, are: affectivity, ignorance (understanding the world in a pragmatic fashion, based on what is formal and apparent); an acritical perspective, blaming oneself and others, preserving culture, preserving society, preserving the political order as well as the axiological order (good and bad, right and wrong), being “purifiers” of the world and taking charge of the lives of others.<sup>2</sup> Another mechanism that is also part of feminine identity is a lack of limits between self and others, which gives way to an experience of being all powerful for others, and a sense of powerlessness in terms of being for oneself, as separate beings. For all these reasons, a profound subjective feeling of women is that of “giving and giving and always feeling less than whole”. This feeling of emptiness has its origin in the dependency (social, erotic, affective, economic, political, legal and psychological) that is at the core of women’s condition.

For all the above reasons, the empowerment of women goes through a subjective change, a coming to consciousness of their condition and gender situation, which allows for the evolution of the personal self. Face to face with the “me” that is the *other* generalized and incorporated into one’s self, the person develops her “I”. While the “me” emerges as a reflection of others, the “I” emerges based on the person herself: the me is object, while the I is subject.

### 3. Subject and subjectivation

We understand the concept of Subject in the sense in which it is used by Touraine, as “the search, undertaken by the individual himself, for the conditions which allow him to be a protagonist of his own history”, a search motivated by the suffering caused by the loss of identity and individuation. Thus for an individual, being (a) Subject is, more than anything, a claim to his right to an individual existence, more than recognizing himself in the service of a larger cause.<sup>3</sup>

The Subject, according to Touraine, is the desire of the individual to be an actor, while the subjectivation is the desire for individuation. This is a gradual process of psychological maturation which takes place during each stage of

human development with the understanding of its limits—where one's self ends and the world begins—through which one begins to have a sensation of individual wholeness or identity (Branden, 1983). The term implies the development of the general to the specific. According to psychology, the first individuation begins when the child begins to differentiate himself from his mother, a process completed at about three years of age. The second process takes place beginning in adolescence (Blos, 1979) and is expressed as a break with, or a search for, an object of love outside the family, which depends on the rupture of infantile emotional links. This corresponds to a crisis of identity, in which a sense of personal identity, through interaction with others, is developed.

The deployment of the process of individuation, is the necessary condition for a well-developed sense of self-esteem, through which one begins to have a sense of individual wholeness or identity. A high level of self-esteem can be understood as *the sum of confidence in oneself and respect for oneself*). If the process of one's individuation is blocked, it is converted into a source of anxiety and psychological disorders, which in extreme form are expressed in feelings of powerlessness and a sense of alienation from reality.

The deployment of individuation implies a movement towards greater autonomy, which is the capacity of a person to develop power over herself and decide about her own life. This implies that she has made it to psychological adulthood, that is, to the maturation of the critical capacities of self, as well as the hegemony over other elements of being human.

The problem is that all the necessary qualities for adulthood are not only considered masculine attributes, but also qualities that are undesirable for females. Through socialization, women acquire a learned powerlessness and grow, marked by a huge deficit of self-esteem. In a coping mechanism against the anxiety provoked by a lack of confidence, pseudo-esteem is developed, through which women identify with gender roles, thus becoming "women" and "feminine" (Bleichmar, 1985).

Thus for women to develop as individuals, it is imperative for each and everyone of them to recognize and affirm themselves as Subject, as creator(s) of sense and change, as well as of social relations and political institutions.

Subjectivation, which represents the will of individuation, acts based on the rearticulation of instrumentality and identity, when the individual is defined anew by what she does, by what she values and by the social relations in which she finds herself committed to such an extent.<sup>4</sup> The Subject is the principal with relation to that which is constituted by the relations of each with one's self and with others, and is a non-social principle that dominates social relations. The relations between Subjects are thus not ordinary social relations, but rather are based

on a principle of relationships that is not membership in the same culture or same society, but rather the common effort to constitute oneself as a Subject.

In this sense, the idea of the Subject is linked to that of social movement, and is based on two affirmations: the first is that the Subject is one's will, resistance and struggle; and not immediate experience in and of itself. The second is that there is no social movement possible without the will towards liberation on the part of the Subject.

#### 4. Personal Subject and Social Movement

Touraine points to the notion that social movement is only useful if it allows for the concrete expression of the existence of a very specific type of collective action, "that by which a social category, always very specific, calls into question a form of social domination, which is at once particular and general, and invokes against it values, general orientations of society which it shares with its adversaries, to deprive them of legitimacy".<sup>5</sup> Social movement, it is said, is much more than an interest group or an instrument of political pressure; it calls into question the mode of social utilization of cultural resources and models.

"Moral references and the consciousness of a conflict with a social adversary, these are the two faces, each inseparable from the other, of a social movement. These moral references cannot be confused with the discourse of social claims, because they are trying to modify the relationship between costs and benefits, while the moral discourse of social movement talks about freedom, life projects, respect for fundamental rights--all factors that cannot be reduced to material or political gain".<sup>6</sup>

Touraine points out that those who participate in a social movement want to put an end to what is intolerable, by taking part in collective action, but they also maintain a distance that is never overcome between conviction and action, an inexhaustible reserve of protest and hope; thus any action of a social movement is inconclusive. "It is in this double movement of commitment and lack of commitment, of struggle against outside threats and the call for the unity of the individual as actor, which defines collective action undertaken in the name of the Subject".<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, a social movement is defined as the action of a collectivity that presents sufficient continuity in order to promote (or oppose) a change in society. The task of social movements is the formation of a collective identity. This concept serves as a reference to recognize to what degree the projects and actions of Xochilt-Acalt are carried out in the interest of construction of the Subject and of social movements, and the type of "scaffolding"<sup>8</sup> which has been underway from the inception.

## **5. Civil Society**

The link between social movement and Subject leads us to the necessity of taking up the very notion of civil society, an expression which has been used in Nicaragua to designate a constellation of actors “who aren’t of the State”, but who in the theoretical arena have, over the last three decades referred to a group of social and political actors who simultaneously take on capitalist domination and the authoritarian State (Cohen and Arato, 1992) and who share the idea that the actors of civil society have autonomy as their objective.

The concept of civil society, then, is expressed in its relationship with the state and with democracy, where the state is the arena of the politics of force (domination) and civil society is the arena of the politics of consent (hegemony). The elements of civil society are those entrusted with reproducing the consensus of all social agents vis-à-vis the ideology of the dominant group or class. But civil society is also a space for dissent and disagreement, where divergent interests or ideological alternatives (to the dominant order) are expressed, and where the divisions of society as a whole are reflected. The right of any elite to exercise state power depends on popular acceptance, which is in turn elaborated by the institutions of civil society.

A broad definition of civil society (White, 1994) sees it as a question of “an associative intermediate space between the state and the family, populated by organizations which are separate from the state, have a certain autonomy from the state and are voluntarily formed by members of society to protect or extend their interests or values”.

If the state is public space, civil society is private space, such that all the organizations in this space are, by their very definition, “non-state” or “non-governmental” organizations. Nevertheless, the term is applied to certain non-profit organizations and services to differentiate them from private businesses, and to indicate that they are serving different purposes within civil society.

## **6. The NGO as a New Actor**

While it is not within the scope of this study to analyze the emergence of non-governmental organizations as new actors in civil society during the last three decades on both the national and international stages, a number of authors have noted a tendency to form associations reflects both social and technological changes as well as the impact of globalization. In the countries of the south, this is expressed in the process of impoverishment and the growing informal economy, as well as in the crisis of confidence in the capacity of the state to carry out a wide variety of tasks. The non-governmental organizations thus appear as a new

class of intermediaries of international assistance, gradually taking on functions that would normally be carried out by the public sector: education, generation of employment, affordable housing, etc.

In this way, a “private public sector” was formed in a number of poor countries, which, given the character of a majority of the NGOs which make up this sector, has an operational aim. That aim is one of implementing projects, to take charge of some of the basic needs of the informal and excluded sectors with greater efficiency than the governmental institutions.

Given that the object of our analysis is a women’s center, which falls within the category of an NGO, we feel that it is relevant to establish indicators, which differentiate this kind of organization from others. To this end, we use the indicator of *property* as set out by Kees Biekart to differentiate between NGOs and grassroots or popular organizations, with which they are sometimes confused.

In accordance with the above-stated, *a social or popular organization is the “property” of its members through existing membership and its leaders’ accountability to it, while a development NGO is not the property of its members. We are working with the definition of an NGO as that of “an independent, non-profit organization, which is not the property of its members, (and) which provides development services to the poor”.*<sup>9</sup> It is in this sense that we locate Xochilt-Acalt in the analysis.

## 7. Rural Development

In order to situate ourselves vis-à-vis the rural development projects that the NGO in this case is promoting, we take the perspective of the critical developmentists who have pointed out that development projects often constitute an instrument for intervention with the sole end of providing assistance and/or inducing development, even in the absence of any articulated theory of induced social development. They warn that both the macroeconomic, as well as the microeconomic, projects tend to be formulated from the perspective of a structural engineering point of view that designs the future without taking people into account. They show that the lack of interest in social dynamics has been an inherent and endemic factor in the technocratic models that serve as an orientation to the planned interventions, and which have done very little to incorporate cultural variables into the project models.

This critique is even more valid when it is a question of improving the living conditions of women, particularly if they are from the rural areas. For this reason, we agree with Michael Cernea that a “model adapted by the projects which doesn’t give primacy to people will enter into conflict with the model intrinsic to the authentic social processes of development, at whose core the protagonists are

found”.<sup>10</sup> It points out that this conflict seriously undermines the effectiveness of projects that aim to induce and accelerate development.

This strategy, typified as an “architectural model” is utilized by the majority of development organizations. The “learning process” model, by contrast, aims at achieving participation by the part of potential beneficiaries in all stages of the project’s cycle. People start up the project and assist in the planning of the changes that it will affect, and the implementation strategy is based on the flexibility of, and feedback from, project participants.

For Cernea, “giving primacy to people” is summed up in an adaptation of the design and implementation of the projects to the necessities and abilities of the people who are the project beneficiaries.

Nevertheless, the “orientation towards people” demands more than stimulating their direct participation in the design and implementation of project. The *ex post* studies carried out underscore that successful projects seem to avoid what is called “the fallacy of excessive innovation”—that is, drastic changes, and that in fact the evolution of a situation tends to take place within the context of partial increments.

In this sense, the study notes that the search for stability could be the principal force for change and although the majority of peasants desire some changes in their lifestyles, the motives which spark them to modify their behavior usually come from traditional culture and from the concerns brought about by daily life.<sup>11</sup> The successful projects also have social designs appropriate for innovation to the degree that they tended to incorporate cultural practices and local structures in their implementation stages. This perspective links grassroots mobilization with long-term success—that is, with achieving the project’s sustainability.

Another point is the task of *organizing* participation, which implies identifying and mobilizing specific protagonists whose participation is sought, and at the same time creating the practical means by which they will be able to participate in the design, implementation and monitoring of the projects. The analytical framework of the “learning process” clarifies three dimensions of participation: *who* participates; in *what* kind of participation? and *how?*, that is to say, which are the qualitative aspects of participation (voluntary or coercive, continuous or ad hoc). These elements will serve as indicators to analyze the projects promoted by Xochilt-Acalt and to what degree they respond to a different version of the “architectural model”.

## 8. Gender and Property

Promoting rural development projects for women from an approach of empowerment obliges us to take up the theme of land redistribution. In the first place, this is because property is absolutely fundamental to the transformation of gender relations and the subordination of women to men; and in the second place, because effective control over land includes the power to decide how to use and manage the benefits it produces.

We agree with Deere and Leon that land ownership is crucial to the empowerment of women, particularly when one takes into account the relationship between ownership of goods and the capacity for negotiation in both the household and the community. In a pioneering study concerning 12 countries in Latin America, including Nicaragua,<sup>12</sup> the authors point out that the unequal distribution of land between men and women in Latin America has to do with family, the community, the state and the market and that the principal means by which to acquire property are inheritance, the adjudication of the state and purchase on the open market. They argue that the inequality is due to: preference for men in inheritance, male privileges in marriage, the male slant in state programs of land distribution and gender biases in participation in the land market, where it is less likely that women will participate as buyers.

In order to assess the policies of the evolution of empowerment through access to resources on the part of the Xochilt-Acalt center, we will make use of the distinction that the authors used, based on the study carried out by Bina Agarwal (1994), between land rights and access to land. Land rights are understood as “the ownership, or usufruct (that is, rights to use), associated with different degrees of freedom to lease out, mortgage, bequeath or sell” land. At the same time, access to land includes not only the right to land per se, but also to the informal means by which to obtain land, such as using it on informal loan (from a family member or neighbor) during a planting season. The rights to land, in contrast with access to land, imply a certain measure of security as part of a reclaiming of what might be legally complied with.<sup>13</sup>

Deere and Leon show that there is a consensus in terms of the fact that an owner should have the right to control at least three elements of the overall set of possible rights: (i) utilizing it as a resource; (ii) impeding that others do so without their permission; (iii) transferring the control of their totality of their titles or deeds to others. With this, the definition of land rights is parallel to the current definition of property rights.

In the same way, Agarwal defines the effective rights to land as legal rights, but also discusses them in terms of social recognition (or legitimation) of those rights and effective control over the land. “Effective control over the land” refers

to the control to decide how to utilize and how to manage the benefits that are produced. This includes control over decisions related to whether or not the land should be directly cultivated or rented through a tenure contract; whether it will be productive, and how; and any arrangements regarding the harvested products, or the income generated by rent.

This specification is important because although women can inherit and possess land in their own names in Latin America, this does not necessarily mean that they have effective control over that land. For example, if the land inherited by a woman is incorporated into the family patrimony, it is usually administered by a male head of household.

Deere and Leon point out that one of the key mechanisms of women's exclusion from the right to own land has been that this is ceded by the communities and the state mainly to heads of household, the large majority of who are men. Additionally, during the period of agrarian reform in Latin America, it was taken for granted that by benefiting men with land titles, all the members of his family would benefit. They add that this practice was based on the civil codes in which the male spouse represented the family in all its external affairs and was also the administrator of the household's common patrimony. This is also based in the division of labor by gender, according to which men are recognized as agricultural workers and women are seen exclusively as their "assistants", or secondary family workers, independently of the quantity of time they may be dedicating to agricultural tasks.

"Further", they say, "an objective of the agrarian reforms was to change the structure of land tenancy in favor of the creation of family farms. In this context, it was inconceivable to reform planners—as well as to the leadership of the peasant organizations who led the struggle for agrarian reform in Latin America—that women might want either joint or independent rights to land".<sup>14</sup>

They show that in the case of Nicaragua, during the Sandinista agrarian reform that attempted to benefit women whatever their civil status, women represented only 10% of the direct beneficiaries between 1979 and 1989. Nevertheless, when inclusion methods were figured in (joint titling and priority to heads of household), which began at the beginning of 1993, this number increased to 31% (1994-1998).<sup>15</sup>

## **9. Independent Rights to Land**

Agarwal<sup>16</sup> defines the independent right to land as "that which is not formally tied to a property or male controls" (which excludes joint titling along with men). This is relevant as a starting point for analyzing the increase in women's power of negotiation at both the household and community levels, as well as the exer-

cise of economic autonomy. While it's true that joint titling with a husband can be and often is a mechanism of inclusion for women, the independent ownership of land is preferable for a number of reasons, according to Agarwal:

- if there are joint titles, it is difficult for the woman to obtain control over her share in the event that the marriage ends
- women can also end up in a less favorable position to escape from marital conflict or violence
- it is possible that the women have different priorities for how to use the land than their husbands and could better defend those priorities if they were in full possession of the land
- women with independent rights to land are in a better position to control production
- ongoing land inheritance can become quite complicated with joint titles

Recent advances in feminist economic theory have questioned the idea that those households where the male head is in charge of administering the patrimony, supposedly to the benefit of all family members, are governed by altruism and not by self-interest, or the search to conserve power. This ideology of *familism* has permeated the vision of the neoclassical economists and political theories regarding the household and the family and has been translated into public policies that presume that, simply by benefiting the male heads of households, all other members of the family will also benefit. A feminist analysis has questioned these suppositions, demonstrating that hierarchy and inequality characterize the households more, noting that elements that benefit male heads of household do not necessarily favor women and children.

The authors point to the logic of reproduction of peasant households follows a reasoning similar to familism, but one that is based on the perceived need of maintaining family patrimony represented in the land from generation to generation through patrilineality (and generally, also through patrilocality or virilocality), with the end of guaranteeing continuity both in the family as well as in the basic unit of production. There is a similar logic regarding the maintenance of the collective property in community struggles.

What makes the demand for the recognition for the rights of women to land so radical is that it questions patriarchy at two levels: (i) its material base: ownership of goods, and (ii) its ideological order or representation: that the subordination of women is natural and serves the most elevated principles, such as unity and cohesion of the family, the continuation of the peasant family farm and/or the reproduction of the peasant and indigenous communities.

Arguing against familism, Deere and Leon note that they have brought together a considerable quantity of empirical evidence of various cultures that demonstrate the following:

<p>i) Not all income generated by family members is shared.</p>	<p>It has been found that it is more probable that income earned by women contributes directly to the food security of the household and the well being of children than the income controlled by men.</p>
<p>ii) Women and men spend their income in different ways.</p>	<p>It is more likely that women share whatever individual income they have for the benefit of the entire family. It is more likely that men spend part of their income on individual matters, only contributing a portion to the family as a whole.</p>
<p>iii) The income brought together doesn't necessarily result in shared consumption or in portions of equal consumption for all family members.</p>	<p>Unequal distribution of benefits among the members of the family, and women and children. Men are often served their food first, and receive larger portions.</p>

From all this evidence, we can derive the importance of having women control their own property in order to reduce their economic vulnerability. "From a theoretical point of view, the ability of a woman to confront adversity should correspond directly to the level of property that she has under her control, and only indirectly to that which she shares with her husband. The independent economic wealth that a woman controls should greatly reduce her risk of poverty and destitution, as well as that of her children. In addition, if it is more likely that women share with their children the income derived from their property, the construction of any strategy to diminish poverty should take into account the autonomous control of women over property and its income."<sup>17</sup>

## 10. The Indicators

In sum, the concepts laid out in these pages indicate to us that proposals aimed at overcoming subordination should be directed towards changing economic conditions, at the same time as they transform private arrangements, since it is only based on both that they will be able to contribute to the transformation of the relationships between men and women.

For the purposes of this analysis, then, the question is to verify how women's access and control over the use of material, economic, political, information and educational resources has increased, as well as extracting the methodology for action and transformative practice used by the Women's Center, and how the participants in these actions become *subjects*. It is on the foundation of empowerment that we locate the changes in the subjectivity of the project's beneficiaries. The indicators for both processes would be the following:

	<b>Process Indicators</b>
Subjectivity	Changes in gender identity and the development of the "I"; a sense of one's own existence and body, autonomy in decision-making; advancement in socio-moral development.
Empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Changes in economic conditions: property and access to land, sexual division of labor, access to productive resources, economic evolution of production.</li> <li>• Changes in private arrangements: changes in relations between men and women, changes in the rates of abuse and violence, participation of men and children in domestic tasks, changes in the levels of communication, changes in relations with daughters, changes in participation outside household.</li> <li>• Changes in public arrangements: organization of women, creation of leadership; emergence of collective identity, recognition and legitimacy within the community and municipality, political participation; degree of political influence and local power.</li> </ul>

## Chapter 2- The Locale and the Center

### 1. Characteristics of the Territory

The Xochilt-Acalt project is located in Malpaisillo, the seat of the municipality of Larreynaga, in the Department of León in the country's northwestern region. The municipality has an area of 888 square kilometers and some 37,000 inhabitants dispersed throughout 63 communities, four of which are considered urban, while the rest are categorized as rural. The Economically Active Population represents 47.44% of the total population, and is primarily dedicated to farming (basic grains), while the rest is involved in mining (gold and silver).

Malpaisillo is located in a zone of volcanic and seismic risks, including its exposure to the Cerro Negro volcano, whose gas and ash emissions periodically affect both people and crops. In addition to the volcano, the area deals with regular droughts and floods. It was one of the municipalities hit hardest by Hurricane Mitch in 1998.

The mono cropping of cotton had as a consequence the disarticulation of a peasant culture based on food self-sufficiency, and converted this sector into landless agricultural workers. The abuse of agrochemicals used in cotton production had a very destructive impact on the area's soil, which, combined with ongoing droughts, made agricultural development without irrigation impossible. With the crisis in cotton in the 1970s-80s, the privatization of the mines and the restrictive credit policies that have affected some 25 cooperatives, the municipality is mired in a severe socioeconomic crisis that is part of the general panorama of this region (León-Chinandega), one which is expressed in widespread poverty and unemployment.

In spite of the municipality's agricultural vocation (it is the fourth most productive area in livestock production, according to AMUNIC), the producers currently face serious problems, including bank debts, instability in terms of land tenure and a lack of financing.

The industrial sector in this area is poorly developed and thus there is little chance for adding much value to agricultural production, particularly rice, which is a significant crop in the area.

The mineral deposits at El Limón are being exploited the small 'industry' of the so-called *guiriseros* (*prospectors*). Nevertheless, the transnational that mines precious metals in the region does not pay taxes to the municipality. The economy is moving toward commerce, including a growing informal sector. Public and social services are not sufficiently developed to satisfy the needs of the population and spark economic development.

The deficit of basic services and development, as well as regular access to transportation, reflects the insufficient level of development in the rural communities:

- Only 6 communities have potable water, while the other 52 communities depend on private wells with poor hygienic conditions.
- There is no system of wastewater treatment, or sewers, in any community in the municipality.
- Only 12 communities have health equipment, while the rest (some 80%) have no equipment.
- Only 35 of the communities have primary schools, 17 of which do not offer all grade levels. Only 24 communities (34%) offer the three years of high school known as general studies.
- Twenty-one communities have collective transport services for the community, while the others (66%) do not offer this service.
- The municipality has a housing deficit of 1,414 units. Currently, the construction of 277 houses is underway, with many of those replacing homes lost to Hurricane Mitch.
- 21,217 people were directly affected by the hurricane, which destroyed 215 homes and damaged 915, as well as severely damaging many wells and latrines.

The municipality's difficult situation has caused many people to leave the area, and there is significant migration to Costa Rica and the United States. Within this context of worsening poverty, the situation for women has grown worse.

## 2. Local Power and Community Organization

The municipality has a development plan, a legal instrument that allows for administration at the local level. Nevertheless, the scope and efficiency of this plan depends not only on the political will of the municipal authorities, but also on the political capacity and organizational force of the social actors in the locality. The situation in the municipality reflects the following characteristics:

- There is a top-down and party-based political culture, with decision-making power centered in the municipal governments, parties and NGOs, with the communities playing the role of demanding services.
- The mayor's office has shown little initiative in promoting efforts of coordination or working with all actors at the municipal level.
- The *comunidades comarcales* (rural communities) have scant representation and seem, overall, to respond to party-based interests, they do not

stimulate participation on the part of the population, nor do they establish better coordination with other community organizations.

- The strong parties are the FSLN and the PLC, with the mayor's office currently in the hands of the FSLN.
- There are currently 20 non-governmental organizations, seven of which are implementing different projects to assist the rural population.
- There are 50 Rural Community Committees, and one Municipal Development Committee, composed of the coordinators of the rural community committees and 900 women organized by the Xochilt-Acalt center in 20 different communities.

In the case of the non-governmental organizations, it should be pointed out that the Xochilt-Acalt center is the only one that has its roots in the community itself. The others are based in Managua and come to the region to carry out their projects, but do not have an ongoing presence in the community.

### **3. Background of the Xochilt-Acalt Center**

The Xochilt Acalt Center emerged in the context of the 1990 elections, when the women who had been elected to the city council in Malpaisillo demanded that the municipal program include the creation of a center which would offer sex education, gynecological care and family planning, given that some of the key problems affecting women in the area included mortality due to cervical-uterine cancer and malnutrition. The initiative taken by these three Sandinista women received much support from international solidarity groups, and a clinic opened its doors in 1991.

The objectives of the clinic were threefold: (a) offering health care services; (b) raising consciousness throughout the community about women's situation; and, (c) promoting the organization of women to search for solutions to their problems.

The initial project was a clinic, open two days a week in Malpaisillo, and out in the communities the rest of the week. The mobile clinic was set up in the house of a community resident, who offered the space to install equipment and see patients. By its second year, the clinic had offered 7,225 consultations to a total of 2,103 women.

Based on the attention offered by the mobile clinic, the organization of women throughout the area was better articulated. The clinic, with a governing body of three women, was linked to the communities through the *women's councils*. These took shape with the election of five women in each community, and served as an organizing base for the clinic, the promotion of consultations and the provision of logistical support.

With the 12 councils thus formed, a *Municipal Women's Council* was constituted, made up of the community coordinators, along with the clinic's executive council, whose principal role was to act as the counterpart for international aid and cooperation. This Council's key role was the administrative and financial supervision of the project.

#### **a. The Struggle for Self-Definition**

This organizational form suffered a crisis in the center's second year of operation (1992), basically due to problems with the junta's democratic administration, the absence of an organizational grassroots base in the Center, the lack of minimal criteria for autonomy from the funding agencies, and the sense of appropriation with which the Sandinista party viewed the project. A solution was sought to the problem with the election and broadening of the executive council and the expansion of the Municipal Women's Council. This experience led the Center's directors to review the role of international cooperation in the project, along with the significance of financial autonomy, and the decision was made to diversify the sources of outside aid and not depend exclusively on any one source.

#### **b. The identification of the project**

In the wake of these organizational changes, and based on the accumulation of experiences in the work around health care and education, in mid-1993, the Center decided to carry out a participatory investigation. The goal was to gain more in-depth knowledge of the particularities of each community and the problematic of the women in each of those communities, as well as to consolidate the organization of the Municipal Council through its participation in the evaluative process.

To this end, 13 rural communities and 6 *barrios* from the urban area were chosen, and three surveys were conducted, with 500 people surveyed in each of the following surveys, for a total of 1,500 :<sup>18</sup>

- a survey on the social condition of women (May and June, 1993)
- a survey on women's health (September 1993)
- a survey on the project's future prospects (February, 1994)

The fieldwork was carried out by 83 members of the community councils, and directed by the Xochilt-Acalt team. The results allowed, among other things, for a characterization of the situation of women with relation to land tenure and their individual and family situation, confirming the following:

- high percentage of land tenure
- easy access to water (through wells)
- many prejudices regarding land use
- a collective dream of gardens
- a suffocating economic situation
- a high level of malnutrition among women and children
- illiteracy in the rural communities and urban barrios
- a demand for trained midwives
- taboos and prejudices about women's roles
- a large majority of women would have preferred not to marry or have children
- a high rate of male migration out of the communities, as well as of intrafamily violence and alcoholism when men are present in the household.

### **c. Drawing up of the Project and Organizational Changes**

The results of the assessment led the Center to define future strategies and lines of work that are coherent with women's priorities, take place in a gradual manner and with pilot projects, in accordance with the specific conditions of each community and the municipality as a whole. Thus they decided to implement the following programs:

- reproductive health services
- training for midwives and survival training
- productive projects—gardens, small livestock and sustainable agriculture
- training in sustainable technology, reforestation, literacy
- gender training based on reflection on women's own lives and the transformation into subject of their own lives
- promoting cooperation among women.

The assessment also prompted the formulation of changes in the Center's organizational model, which led to the disappearance of the Municipal Women's Council, given its inefficiency and due as well to the carrying out of the assessment itself. The decision was made to group the women beneficiaries of the Center by territory. The municipality was divided into four territories (each one bringing together three to five communities), which resulted in four groups of 20-30 women leaders who were promoting the different programs.

The new organizational formula sought to promote meetings among all the leaders of a given territory so that they could meet with the Center's coordinators once a month with the aim of following up on project implementation in the different communities. This was how the *Territorial Leaders' Councils (CTL)* were formed.

#### **d. Pilot projects and the Struggle for Autonomy**

After 1994, this new organizational form began to generate instruments of response through: a) production for food security and b) a process of literacy and consciousness-raising, with financing secured for both aims.

A pilot project was created in the community of La Esperanza, with 25 women from various rural communities who are members of the CCM, in order to experiment with goat raising and organic horticulture, breaking with the chemical culture established by the mono cropping of cotton production.<sup>19</sup>

The reaction throughout the municipality, particularly on the part of men, was one of ridicule and skepticism, as they labeled the project "crazy" and called the women involved in the project "tramps".

By the end of that year, the Center was in the midst of a second crisis, this time with the mayor's office (in the hands of the FSLN), which was attempting to take control over the Center, arguing that the center's staff was straying from the center's original purpose. From a party-based perspective, the Center was devoting too much energy and resources to rural communities, to the detriment of the urban areas. In its aim to take control over the Center and its resources, it fueled a rural-urban split, manipulating the women from the urban areas to oppose the Center's Junta, with the goal of replacing those women with people who shared the party's interests.

The crisis wore down the Center in its resistance to party-based interventionism, and finally ended with the reaffirmation of Xochilt-Acalt's political and ideological autonomy and the rupture of relations between the FSLN and the mayor's office.

In 1995, the Center established its own legal status as a development organization (NGO). At that moment, Xochilt-Acalt had become involved in three types of participation that had emerged from the National Women's Movement: the *Concertación* of Rural Women, the Women's Health Network, and the Literacy Network.

### **e. Project implementation and the Path Upwards**

With the establishment of its autonomy, the Center continued to be a pathway of functional and quantitative movement upwards, which meant the expansion of the number and type of activities carried out by its members. The program of goat raising and vegetable gardens was expanded, and a program of agricultural production was undertaken, activities were begun with young people and the technical team grew in order to be able to attend to those agricultural programs. Attention to and participation of the beneficiaries was reorganized.

This continued in 1996. The agricultural program was expanded from 6 women to 90, for a total of 146 *manzanas*; a program began to reforest the area immediately around the women's houses, in order to create microclimates, generate fruit trees and organic agricultural inputs; and machinery for planting was acquired, as were other tools, inputs and technical assistance. In the area of education, the first results were obtained with the graduation of the first group of literate women (15); a post-literacy program was undertaken; training around nutritional issues began, and a civic education campaign was undertaken in the context of the electoral process underway that year.

In the context of the Center's process of expansion, technology workshops began for the fabrication and use of rope pumps; the construction of wells, water tanks and micro-irrigation productive systems. Work was also done on the construction of the Xochilita Center.<sup>20</sup> The women become producers of technology, with the rope pump workshop eventually giving way to the manufacture of grain-storage silos.

### **f. Political and productive progress**

With the development of new programs and an increase in the number of participants, new women with leadership capacity began to stand out. These women wanted to participate directly in the Center's meetings, rather than only through territorial representatives, which led to the generation of changes in the organizational model, modified in 1994, in order to generate organizational spaces in each community. Thus the Territorial Leadership Councils were replaced by the broad assemblies in the communities, which were conceived of as a space of synthesis and collective reflection regarding the activities in which the women are involved, their own lives and the Center's work.

In this way, communication and information is promoted, as well as the bringing together of women and their capacity to influence the decision-making process; additionally, their self-esteem is increased, as is each community's own capacity.

In 1997, a jump in the productive area took place, with the beginning of a program of cattle raising, accompanied by a training session in animal health; changes were made in terms of access to land and property when the beneficiaries' husbands agreed to cede four *manzanas* of land, as a loan, for the cattle-raising project, while the Center began to buy lands to favor those women who had no access to land. In the area of education, a second training cycle began for midwives who had already gone through a literacy program—the program was expanded with 29 literacy teachers and 203 women. The construction of the Acalitas United Center began, as did the construction of a training center in the municipality's urban area.

In addition, a space for “dreamers” was opened up, an environment of communication and reflection among women to allow them to discuss their future expectations and each of their dreams. From this space came the initiative to improve the women's housing, given the serious problems of overcrowding and lack of privacy, related to the different forms in which women live their sexuality, as well as the theme of technology with the aim of improving agriculture, and not depending so seriously on the climate.

### **g. The Test of Mitch**

In 1998, things continued along the same lines, but at the same time, a program was implemented with the goal of legalizing properties in women's names; new modes of credit were developed and properties were bought for livestock raising and grazing.

In October, Hurricane Mitch hit the area, affecting what the project had hoped would be its best harvest ever, both in agriculture as well as in community gardens. Nevertheless, the silos that had been established allowed the beneficiaries to better resist the consequences of the hurricane, as they had mung beans stored from the previous year. They were also able to save the animals and, thanks to the wells, they had water. The Center itself was left standing, and with its resources (vehicles and food stored in the silos) was able to provide assistance to the communities, before other municipal organizations. It was also able to offer emergency aid to the mayor's office for the following two months. The capacity generated by the Center was clearly seen in the following activities:

- The creation of a “communal kitchen” to feed children.
- The organization of an animal health campaign throughout the entire municipality, with veterinary technicians who had been trained by the Center.
- Women organized through the Center were given food and medicine was provided to the communities.

- The Network of Health Promoters was organized.
- The agricultural debt acquired by the Center's beneficiaries was forgiven, and the Center facilitated the means with which to plant beans and corn (assuming the costs of preparing the land, while the women provided the labor) with the aim of procuring food for the summer, which sparked more women to work in agriculture.
- The logistical work for the construction and improvement of housing units began.
- Cleaning and purifying the water of the municipality's wells took place.
- Specialized studies regarding the contamination of the water supply in 3 communities (Piñuelar, Esperanza and Puente de Oro).
- Receptacles to store water and chlorinate the water were distributed (carried out in coordination with Doctors of the World—*Médicos del Mundo*).
- Distribution of filters for the improvement of water quality.
- Distribution of ecological kitchens in the most affected communities.

#### **h. In the post-Mitch period**

In the following year (1999), the Center began a program to build houses, first building 84 houses for refugees in Casitas and Apante, both in the municipality, as well as for organized women and other *damnificadas* (those affected by the Hurricane) in the communities where they work. The homes followed a design that had been previously discussed with the women, incorporating criteria of privacy, security and family hygiene. Each of these homes, of some 50 square meters, has a chimney and an improved kitchen, three rooms, a living room, a corridor. The beneficiaries come to these new homes from houses (huts) made of palm or red clay bricks and roof tiles. The construction program has respected rural cultural values, and used community and family-based housing patterns.

At the same time, a plan for the improvement of 250 existing homes was undertaken, with these homes aimed at benefiting the women who had been involved with the center since 1998. It was the women in each community who decided who would receive a new house, improvements on their existing home, or the construction of an addition. After seeing the impact that this program had on the emotional security of the beneficiaries, this one-shot construction program became, for the Center, a strategic factor of empowerment.

At the same time, a pilot project of the installation of eight wells for wind-powered energy began, and the goat-raising and vegetable garden projects continued (benefiting 80 women), while a storage center was established for the agricultural harvest, and efforts began to recover the fertile topsoil and create a model of terraced agriculture.

In 2000-2001, the expansion of the productive programs came to cover a total of 18 communities. For the women who have cows, the project began to construct stables. The water system for houses under construction was also extended. The first women who benefited from the cows (26) paid off their debts in kind four years later, which allowed this project to expand to 72 women. The Center aims, in the coming months, to expand the construction of stables for goats for the 180 who have received goats as part of the project.

By the same token, a group of women were trained as technical experts to train rural women who were organized by the Center after Hurricane Mitch.

#### 4. The Current State of Xochilt Acalt

Ten years after its founding as a small clinic that emerged within the context of a municipal program, Xochilt Acalt is a civil, autonomous and developed institution that has a place in the community as a strong social actor in the area and as an agent for social change in the lives of women in the area. Its administrative organization is divided into seven working areas that are in charge of the programs, along with two more areas that are in charge of the financial and logistical administration of resources. The Center has a Coordinating Council, made up of all area heads (seven) and one overall program head.

##### a. Health Care

This is the founding area of the Center, and has as its nucleus the clinic. It is made up of three programs: attention in reproductive health; the formation of midwives and health promoters; primary health and community health. There are currently 54 midwives and 48 health care promoters. A decade of ongoing gynecological attention shows the following results:

**Program of Gynecological Attention**

<b>Total Number of women attended</b>	<b>5,390</b>
<b>No.of consultations</b>	<b>27,933</b>
Dysplasias	466
Cervical Cancer	43
Breast Cancer	5
Infection with papilloma virus	333
Sexually transmitted diseases	1,001
Cytologies	3,857
Prenatal Visits	2,653
Family planning	1,541

## **b. Educational Area**

The objective of this area is to facilitate processes of consciousness raising around gender and academic issues, through reflections that contribute to the formation of new subjects in the society.

It is made up of three programs:

- A. Gender education
- B. Academic education
- C. Youth education

The first program makes possible spaces of reflection that favor the deconstruction of the identity assigned to women by society. It also promotes the ideological empowerment that allows for women to change their attitudes vis-à-vis life.

The second favors access both to literacy and post-literacy programs, as well as levels of primary and secondary education, through the provision of grants, which allows for women to increase their academic level as part of their overall empowerment.

The third began in 1996, with an initial coverage of two communities, making possible spaces of reflection and allowing for the ideological empowerment that allowed young women to take on other perspectives regarding their role in society.

This space has been gradually opening up, and is currently present in 8 communities. There are also more programs specifically directed towards young people, including a program of sewing and the construction of water tanks. In addition, the ongoing incorporation of young people into the Center's programs has been made possible.

## **c. Area of Production**

Divided into three programs—agriculture, livestock and technology, this working area promotes family units of production, through a rational exploitation of land through productive diversification and the planting of lands unused to date due to a lack of assistance.

The women first began the *Agricultural Program*, and to the degree that they demonstrated commitment and responsibility, have subsequently been included in the Livestock Program (first with goats and then with cattle). With this, the project aims to guarantee that women make good use of their productive investments, and that they are truly contributing to women's economic empowerment.

The *Agricultural Program* promotes ecological production techniques, as well as lines of credit to encourage production through vegetable, fruit and reforestation plots, as well as agriculture (mung beans, corn, wheat, sesame, etc.)

The *Technology Program* centers on the fabrication of equipment and tools to reduce women's physical work, as well as small implements for the gardens and agriculture (pumps, irrigation systems, ecological kitchens and silos).

The overall number of women organized in agricultural programs is as follows, according to the zonal division of territory made by the Center.

**Total Number of women in Agricultural Programs**

Place	Garden	Agriculture	Fruit	Cattle	Goats	Veterinary
Zone 1	93	11	90	9	68	5
Zone 2	62	9	63	6	13	5
Zone 3	104	13	97	55	74	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>259</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>250</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>155</b>	<b>20</b>

#### **d. Legal Area**

This area has been operating since 1997, and emerged out of the need to guarantee that the work that women are doing, as well as the investments that the Center has made, will remain in the hands of the beneficiaries.

This Program has been fundamental for the process of women's empowerment, as well as contributing to the emotional and family security of the women and their children. Through this program, the organized women, who never had land or title, have become landowners.

According to assessments that have been carried out, 90% of the women were not landholders, nor did they own the land that was used in family units of production (yards, pastures, land under cultivation, etc.). The process of legalization shows that some women have been able to legalize up to three properties, including titles handed over by the Agrarian Reform. (*see Table 1*)

#### **e. Area of Construction**

This area is made up of three programs: construction of housing units, stables for cattle and water equipment.

The construction of houses is a contribution by the Center in the communities where it has been working to diminish the effects of Mitch, as well as the improvement of housing for the women producers. The construction of stables

was undertaken to improve the storage and hygiene of the milking, of both goats and cows. The water equipment was installed in all the productive programs, particularly in terms of irrigation equipment for the gardens.

In accordance with the project's specifications, installations have yet to be built in 8 communities.

**Table 1**

**Relationship between women and land before and after the legalization process**

Community	# of organized women	# of women that were land owners	# of women that were land tenants	# of women that didn't have property	# of women that currently own property (house & garden)
Puente de Oro	25	0	2	23	25
El Piñuelar	60	4	3	53	60
El Valle	2	0	0	2	2
Sta. Teresa-Tolapa	10	0	3	7	10
El Cambio	8	0	2	6	8
La Sabaneta	12	0	1	11	12
El Madroño	18	1	2	15	18
San Agustín	22	0	15	7	22
Las Lomas	15	0	5	10	15
La Unión	15	0	10	5	15
Espino-Las Lomas	7	0	4	3	7
El Barro	35	2	6	27	35
Malpaisillo	26	0	6	20	26
Espino-Larreynaga	5	0	1	4	5
Las Brisas	2	0	0	2	2
San Claudio	3	0	0	3	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>260</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>198</b>	<b>265</b>

## f. Organizational Area

The objective of this area is to strengthen the process of the empowerment of women in the different programs promoted by the Center, as well as promoting their participation in spaces of community and municipal power.

With the expansion of the programs and their coverage, the Center decided to organize its attention to the beneficiaries, dividing the municipality into three sectors, each one of which brings together 3-5 communities. Additionally, in each community, groups of women were organized with coordinators of the different programs, whose function was to serve as the link between the Center and the group of beneficiaries. This organization responded to the need to over-

see the development of the productive programs, although it was not limited exclusively to this, but also to maintaining a space for reflection and exchanges, as well as discussion, in the hopes of offering solutions to the problems facing women. It also gave us a chance to note the different kinds of leadership qualities among the women.

In order to resolve the limits of communication, it was decided in 1998 that a woman who had been an outstanding member of the community groups would form part of the Center's administrative team. After Mitch and with the increase in the number of beneficiaries, the Center was obliged to establish distinct types of beneficiaries: the "old" ones, those who became involved at the end of 1998 and throughout 1999 and, finally, the most recently involved women – who became involved in the year 2000-2001. The Center began to select leaders from the most outstanding community groups, to coordinate the meetings with the most recent beneficiaries.

The Center used the following criteria to categorize the beneficiaries:

### **1. Organized women**

This was used to refer to the beneficiaries who were involved in one or more of the Center's productive programs and had been involved for at least a year; they participate in reflective sessions, as well as the organizational meetings in the communities and they have a positive attitude vis-à-vis the rest of the beneficiaries.

### **2. Leaders**

This is used to refer to the "organized" beneficiaries who have moral authority recognized by the other women, are concerned about the well-being of others, take on a degree of responsibility in the work promoted by the Center and demonstrate a higher degree of ownership of their projects and problems, as well as the capacity for leadership.

Included in these categories are the women who became involved at the beginning of the Center's programs during the 1991-1997 period (the "old" women), as well as those who became involved in 1998-1999. The women who came together after 2000 are only considered "beneficiaries", in that they have not passed the process of testing, assimilation and change that comes with ongoing participation in the center's programs.

In the organizational arena, the Center seems to have been creating a system of promotion based on personal merit to develop local capacities, both in terms of institutional development, as well as in terms of the technical-productive and political capacities of the communities.

## **g. Citizen Participation in Local Development**

Given the process of organizational expansion developed through the Center's programs and the integration of women into those processes, the Center decided to establish the Area of Citizen Participation beginning on January 15, 2001, and covering the entire municipality.

In its first phase, the area is aimed at developing local leadership and equitable protagonism among men and women in municipal life.

A school of political formation was created, with the following objectives:

1. Promote processes of reflection and deepening of a critical gender consciousness.
2. Develop an integral and democratic understanding of participation and leadership.
3. Offer methodological tools and techniques for community leaderships.
4. Define strategies of construction of local power to promote human development, the construction of agendas, planning, presence and self-administration of the needs and practical and strategic interests of gender.
5. Generation of the autonomous organization of women, understood as ongoing spaces of political negotiation, and other actors.

At the time of this study (November 2001), a total of 296 people were participating (141 women and 155 men), from 45 different communities.

## **5. The Organization**

The Xochilt-Acalt Center is a non-profit organization that has an executive board of 4 women and an assembly of 8 members. These 12 women have chosen Coordinating Council as the Center's executive body. It is made up of eight women, of which five are also members of the executive board.

### **a. Personnel and Resources**

The Center has 51 people who are full-time employees in different areas. The institution has established general working policies, which regulate the hiring process, as well as working hours, the formation and treatment of personnel, the use of the Center's resources and equipment, project administration, the policies of attention to the clinic's users and to program beneficiaries, compliance with the State, the policies of financial administration and relations with cooperating financial organizations.

The Center also established criteria for the integration of women into the programs and the formation of values in general for the “organized” beneficiaries, as well as for the insertion of (the) women and of the institution as another arena of local development.

The Center is linked to the Women’s Movement through its participation in spaces such as the Literacy Network, the Network of Women Against Violence and the *Concertación* of Rural Women.

The institution has the following resources:

- Vehicles: 5 double-traction pick-up trucks; 2 trucks and 4 mountain motorcycles
- Animals: 5 horses and 6 pair of oxen
- Land: 170 *manzanas* of land
- Infrastructure: 1 technological workshop, 1 training center, 1 center of grain storage for production, 3 buildings in the urban area totally equipped for the offices of all the different programs, 1 building for gynecological attention in the urban area, 4 community centers in La Esperanza, El Piñuelar, El Barro and Las Lomas.

## **b. Organization of the Beneficiaries**

According to the features that exemplify the relations with the beneficiaries of the Center’s projects, this follows a “learning process” model that promotes the participation of the beneficiaries in each stage of the cycle, basing its implementation on flexibility, as well as feedback from the participants. The Coordinating Council is linked to the community women grouped into three sectors, where groups are voluntarily organized into ongoing, or “ad hoc” groups. In this way a volunteer base of 60 women has been developed, which coordinates the agricultural program in the three sectors, and a total of 530 women (differentiated as “old”, “intermediate” and “new”) are organized at the grassroots level as program members.

In conclusion, we can see that the Xochilt-Acalt center is developing from a micro-project of health support for a rural development organization centered on women, with a rationality that responds to the social reality of the municipality and also to the identification of the sociocultural characteristics of the project’s potential protagonists.

The application of methodologies for social action designed by the same process has also generated a kind of grassroots organization that sparks collective action. The current organization that the beneficiaries are engaged in and the role of guidance on the part of the Center responds to the needs of the project as well as the role of accompaniment that the process requires. This base organization sees itself as the seeds of a deployment of new organizations that are expanding the framework of women’s participation in all areas of municipal life.

## **CHAPTER III- The Road to Change: Methodologies of a Proposal for the Empowerment of Women**

Alongside the innumerable and successful experiences that describe the incorporation of women into productive processes, we also find countless experiences of proposals for women's empowerment that have been cut short, principally those in the rural areas of the country. In the majority of the cases, the principal weakness is that administration of the projects works with a notion of partial empowerment that includes only, or predominantly, economic aspects in terms women's incorporation into productive activities.

In the case of the experience of the women organized by the Xochilt-Acalt Center in Malpaisillo, the results indicate the steps for a methodological proposal that serves as a baseline for a process of critical debate around the real empowerment of rural women—in other words, economic, ideological and political empowerment.

In another sense, the case of this group of women provides valuable information regarding the processes of construction of a new model of productive rural development, especially for women, and a model as well of accompaniment on the part of local organizations and NGOs.

This chapter describes the process that both the women and the Center itself have experienced over these 10 long years of systematic work, with the aim of paving the road for debate and offering examples that can be considered by those undergoing similar experiences. To this end, the information has been divided into three methodologies, in such a way that it allows them to continue in areas separate from the process of development, although the process itself has been developed in an integral way.

To identify these methodologies and the general process of development, the key documents that brought together Xochilt-Acalt's history were revised, and information from direct sources was included. This fieldwork included the formation of three focus groups and 12 interviews with women who are beneficiaries of the program, community leaders, program directors, male community leaders and municipal representatives.

This information was ordered and classified into two analytical frameworks: the first took into account the development of the Center's programs from its inception, centered around productive and organizational aspects, while the second was focused on the process of ideological change experienced by the women. Both have allowed us to identify the existence of a procedure that, once it is systematized, offers a proposal for three simultaneous working methodologies for the empowerment of women in the rural communities of Nicaragua.

## **Part I: Women and a New Model of Rural Development**

Throughout the world, there are many successful experiences of the incorporation of rural women into productive processes. Nevertheless, very few of these processes have effectively contributed to facilitating processes of real empowerment of women to the end of transforming traditional gender relations.

In the case of Latin America, the studies indicate that a change in rural women in this sense, particularly peasant women, is not limited exclusively to their incorporation into processes of production, but also to the acquisition of property and access to land<sup>21</sup> in such a way that they are able to locate themselves within a better position, not only within their family nucleus, but also with relation to the state and to the market.

Throughout the process that the women in Malpaisillo who are connected to the Xochilt-Acalt Center have lived through, this premise has been borne out. It has also been possible to identify other elements that have allowed for women to become actively involved in productive labor, improve the living conditions of their families, improve their own and their family incomes, modify property and land use for production and generate a new model of small-scale rural development in their communities and the municipality.

A number of questions come to mind: How has it been possible to obtain these types of results in a municipality with so many difficulties in terms of production? What are the elements of success that this small group of women has had? What can this experience contribute to the processes of searching for new models of rural development, particularly those based on a gender approach?

The systematization of this experience indicates that the women in Malpaisillo have walked along a road of gradual growth that, in economic terms, has raised them from the level of planting their yards to meet the most pressing needs of their family to small-scale agricultural production and the incipient formation of productive networks and commercialization on a municipal level.

This chapter is divided into three parts, with the first describing the general characteristics of the productive programs promoted by the Center. The second part is centered on support actions, or the Center's intervention to spark productive development, and the third part underscores the process of appropriation of the programs on the part of women and some important factors for the facilitation of this process.

## **1. The birth of the productive programs**

The history of the development of the Xochilt-Acalt programs begins in 1991 with the concern of a group of political leaders within the municipality around the reproductive and sexual health situation of women in the area. Among the principal problems affecting the women were mortality due to cervical-uterine cancer and the lack of family planning and reproductive-sexual health information in general. At that time, the idea was to develop services similar to those already offered by other NGOs, with the creation of a clinic offering gynecological attention and ongoing workshops about reproductive and sexual health to women throughout the municipality, in both the urban areas and rural communities. To this end, a house was purchased in the urban area of the municipality that could house a gynecological clinic, and a mobile clinic was developed to make visits to the rural communities. In other words, at the beginning, there was no thought given to programs or projects of a productive nature.

Two years later, and after carrying out a participatory assessment of the situation of women in the municipality, a series of problems and demands were detected. Those included: the lack of food; problems with reading and writing; lack of information with regards to family planning; high levels of intra-family violence linked to male alcoholism; high rate of male migration out of the community; fears about the current situation and the future of their children; need for a program of community gardens and orchards to improve family nutrition and unequal power relations between the genders.

These results led the Center's administration to reformulate both the type of programs it was offering, as well as its role in accompaniment of the women. It was thus decided to undertake a series of actions that could serve as an instrument of response to the problems women were having, based on an economic hub concentrated on two areas of attention: financing of and access to the technology necessary for small scale agricultural production, based in women's yards. This was the starting point for an economic process that has led women from a subsistence-based economy to one of commerce.

There are currently 325 women throughout the municipality participating in four productive programs: cultivating fruit trees and community gardens as well as raising goats and cattle. The majority of the women participate simultaneously in all these areas, although this depends on the length of time they've been with the project, the legal status of the land and, more than anything, the will of each woman to become involved in the area she is most interested in.

## 2. Producing for the Family

The production based in women's own yards is composed of two programs: family gardens and raising livestock. The general objective of both programs is to achieve food security for the women and their families, especially their children. When the decision was made to implement this program, around 1993, the fundamental criteria were the following: the desire of the women to learn to cultivate fruits and vegetables in their own yards and at the same time to fight against the high levels of malnutrition affecting their whole families.

Both this small-scale production as well as livestock raising took off as pilot projects, with the focus on family gardens and raising goats. At this stage, nine communities were covered, with a total of 45 women selected on the base of their interest and the incipient communal organization that had been created around the gynecological services being offered by the clinic.<sup>22</sup> In the case of raising goats, one community - La Esperanza - had been selected, given that its population, especially the children, suffered from the highest levels of malnutrition in the entire municipality. To decide what types of programs would be implemented, a number of criteria were taken into account, related not only to the scant availability of resources from the Center, but also to the reality lived by women.

1. Both programs required a great deal of individual effort, which could be carried out by the women, with some help from their children.
2. It was not necessary for a woman to "leave" the domestic space in order to carry out these productive tasks.
3. It did not require adding a huge amount of time or work to women's daily tasks.
4. Although not all the women had water close-by, the sources were quite superficial throughout the municipality.
5. At least on the part of the women, there was not a need for great amounts of financing.
6. A positive impact on family nutrition was felt over the short term.

Two conditions were established for the participating women: previous training and the use of organic techniques. This was understood as a way to assure the efficiency of the productive resources, efficient soil management and a change in chemical-based agricultural production. No woman received, or receives, productive inputs without having gone through technical training about how to efficiently manage those resources.

## Family Gardens

The family gardens program began in 1993 and currently has 259 women in different communities throughout the municipality. Its principal objective is to contribute to improving the nutritional level of families through the cultivation of fruits and vegetables right in the family's yards. The products grown include tomatoes, green peppers and squash.

Generally, this activity is carried out only by women, who consider tending to the family garden as part of their domestic chores, since they don't need to leave home. However, to the degree that the space dedicated to planting has expanded or the women have begun to generate a surplus for the market, their children generally become involved and, in some cases, their husbands or *compañeros*.

Once the production covers the needs of the family, the surplus produced is used to exchange for other items within the same community with the aim of completing the family diet. Many times, these exchanges are carried out between women—those who are producing on their family plots and those who are not organized. Gradually, after these trades, the women go on to a new stage, where they begin to market their products, always within their own community.<sup>23</sup>

Over the last years, women have learned to diversify their production and make better use of the available space, which has allowed them to plant other things, including lettuce, all variety of plantains, yucca, watermelon, papayas, ayote and fruit trees.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, some of the women who have had good harvests have decided to expand the area in cultivation, moving their family plots to larger spaces. This in turn allows them to produce in sufficient quantity to be able to market their products. However, this depends on various factors including the availability of land that women have, as well as their access to water and the participation of their family as one sole production unit.

The development of the gardens and the utilization of the spaces have given way to the classification of these same gardens, by observing the area used for planting. One group uses spaces between 20 and 80 square meters, while a second group is farming in areas between 50 and 100 square meters, and a third group is working on areas larger than 100 square meters. Generally, the first group is still producing exclusively for family consumption, while the second and third groups are producing with commercial ends.

Access to technology has been fundamental to achieving the development of the program and has been concentrated in three areas: training, technical assistance and infrastructure.

All the women participants should receive training not only in planting vegetables, but also in organic techniques that allow them to work without the need to resort to chemical products. The topics covered include soil preparation as well as the treatment of different types of crops, reforestation for the creation of microclimates, organic fertilizers and pest control, among others.

Although the beginning of the training sessions lasted three weeks, these continued over the whole time that the women were involved in the program. They were offered regularly, every month or so, depending on the specific needs that the women themselves presented to the technical experts.

The technical advice is in the hands of a team of specialists contracted by the Center, who train and supervise the productive process.

The level of this program's development has led, in recent years, to the expansion of the technical team with the preparation of a group of women from the communities themselves, who have been trained as rural technical experts to attend to the producers in cases of emergency.

The infrastructure has been concentrated in the construction of wells, installation of pumps, construction of water tanks and the installation of systems of micro-irrigation.<sup>25</sup> With this, there has been a substantial reduction in the physical effort and time invested by women in carrying water for irrigating their gardens, as many women traditionally had to carry the water fairly long distances.<sup>26</sup> This routine was carried out in the morning and again in the evening to ensure that the crops were always watered. It has also contributed to an improvement in production, both in quantity as well as in quality and to the efficiency of the work force, allowing for the shift from vegetable-based production for family consumption to production for the market.

The installation of the infrastructure, along with access to technical knowledge, have been fundamental elements not only for improving and increasing production on the family plots, but also in ensuring that the women take ownership of the programs, "falling in love" with the programs, as the women themselves put it, and thus moving towards sustainability. Today, the women consider themselves sufficiently able to manage the gardens on their own, and they themselves are entrusted with transmitting knowledge and making seeds available to other women in their communities who are interested in getting involved in this type of activity.

### **The Development of the Goat Raising Program**

The goat-raising program also began with a pilot project in the year 1994. Of the 20 women who were initially involved, the group has grown to 155 who are today

dedicated to this activity in a number of different communities throughout the municipality. The objective of this program is also to contribute to improving family nutrition, especially of children, by assuring the consumption of milk and meat. The decision to implement a cattle raising program was made on the basis of a number of criteria that were considered important, including:

1. In the first place, consideration was given to animals that would provide food rich in nutrients and proteins, and almost immediately, to the participating women and children.
2. In the case of the goats, it was taken into account that their milk is highly nutritional and would make an immediate positive impact on the nutrition and overall health of the children.
3. They don't require much physical space, either to keep or to graze, and can easily be accommodated in the yards of houses and put out to graze in outlying areas.
4. The type of goats selected is resistant to the prevailing climate in the municipality and easily adapt to the conditions.
5. The principal criteria taken into account are that the goats are not competing with the family food for their maintenance.<sup>27</sup>

This type of activity has introduced a new element into the development of a subsistence economy, as it implies a new distribution of work with the participation of children, particularly when the animals reproduce, the herds grow and the production begins to generate surplus that can then be traded.

The women who were interviewed note that while they dedicate themselves to caring for the gardens, the older children take care of cleaning, milking and grazing the animals as long as they don't have to go to school. Thus, for example, the children who go to classes in the morning take care of the animals in the afternoon, while the children who have the afternoon shift at school take care of the animals in the mornings.

The introduction of this new activity also sparked a change in the distribution of the productive space in this subsistence economy—in other words, the women's yards. The women had to protect their garden space with live fencing so that the animals would not eat their crops, but it was also necessary to arrange the space so that both the animals and the crops would fit. This has meant, in practice, a diversification and redistribution of the yard for all the activities.

In the cases in which the herds have grown considerably and in which the women who own goats have expanded throughout the community, there has been a need for greater pastureland. Thus, 25% of women use a one *manzana* plot for this purpose, while 34% use collective areas provided by the Center in five communities and 41%, who have difficulties with finding sufficient space, graze their animals on roads or rented lands.

Considering that the goats constitute a good of greater costs than seeds, they cannot be given free of charge to the women. The Center thus decided to use a model of in-kind payments such that each woman is given two goats (who have either already given birth, or are pregnant) with the commitment to return a similar pair at the end of two years. According to the women who were interviewed, this mode of credit ensures that they do not have to be worried about money to make their payments, at the same time as it obliges them to take good care of their animals, so that they will reproduce. It also guards against the women getting rid of the goats—by eating or selling them, so that they will in fact be able to make their payment.

As with the gardens, in this program access to technology has been of great importance for the efficient management of livestock. The areas of attention are the same: training, technical assistance and infrastructure. It is an indispensable condition that the women receive training about the care and management of their animals before receiving them, with the aim of ensuring that they are able to care for them efficiently. This training is carried out by the Center's technical teams, and lasts for about three weeks, with monthly follow-up sessions.

At the same time, the technical team is constantly supervising the state of the animals and advising the women as to their care. But in this case the most important advance has been the organization of a group of 20 women<sup>28</sup> who have been trained as veterinary technicians with the goal that they be able to take care of the animals in each community—providing vaccines, assisting at the births and sharing their knowledge, not only with the women who are integrated into the program, but also with the rest of the community. These women have finished primary school, and have received systematic preparation over the course of four consecutive years, making use of the model of preparation by cycle. The livestock team is in charge of this training. The success of this transmission of knowledge has made it possible for one of the technicians to be promoted to working as a member of the Center's team.

In terms of the infrastructure, the growth of the herds, as well as the diversification and intense use of women's yards in different activities--vegetables, fruits and minor livestock, the women created as a new demand the need to build stables and corrals to improve the care and hygiene of the animals, as well as to protect what is planted.

For the women and their families, the results of this program have been quite tangible, as the women have seen a notable reduction in malnutrition and some of the illnesses associated with that. But, at the same time, the quality of the family diet has improved. The fact of giving women goats has ensured that women and their families can have highly nutritional milk in the short run. They will also have, once the animals reproduce, fresh, protein-rich meat.

The rapid reproductive rate of the animals has also allowed for an increase in the production of milk and the diversification of the products: the women began to make *cujada* (a farmer's cheese) and goat cheese, as well as consuming meat. But, it has also allowed them to carry out trades and exchanges within their communities and, in recent years, they have sold their animals, substantially increasing both their personal as well as their family income.<sup>29</sup> Currently the average number of animals per participant is seven goats, but some women, particularly those who were only temporarily involved in the program, manage herds of between 25 and 40 animals.

In economic terms, the incorporation of women into these two programs has had important results that are reflected both in strictly economic aspects as well as in the living conditions of the women themselves and their families. A quick review of those results reveals that:

1. From inactive subjects, women became active economic subjects of production.
2. They were able to develop a subsistence economy that has resolved problems of food security for women and their families.
3. At the same time, they have generated sufficient surplus so that the women can manage their own income to cover personal and family necessities.
4. This has laid the foundation for the transition from a subsistence-based economy to a market economy, as the surplus produced is sufficient for them to carry out small-scale commercial exchanges.
5. Other changes that occurred during this process have to do with the evolution of productive resources, especially the work force, the use of space and technology.
6. With relation to the work force, it is possible to observe how a change is produced by the participation of women and of their children in productive labor.
7. In terms of space, the women have learned how to distribute their small family plots in order to allow for the production of different crops: vegetables, fruits and goats.
8. The diversification of crops has allowed for women to plant crops and use animal-based products all year long, which in turn has permitted them to maintain a more balanced family diet on the one hand, and on the other, have sufficient products to market throughout the year.
9. With relation to technology, one of the most important results has to do with the transmission of knowledge to women and the effectiveness of the technical assistance. Nevertheless, one of the fundamental elements for the evolution of this type of economy has been the access of women to the productive infrastructure, specifically that which has improved access to water.

### **3. Producing for the Market**

With all the changes resulting from the incorporation of women into small-scale production in their own yards, both the Center and the women themselves were ready to make a qualitative leap and move from a subsistence economy to a market-based economy. This leap was the result of a sustained, on-going process, not only in economic terms, but also ideologically and organizationally, and has been based on three factors of transcendental importance: a new distribution of domestic labor, the access of women to technology and a change in the perspective and attitude in terms of their role as producers. This is the starting point of small-scale agricultural production.

By the year 1995, once the garden-based production and goat raising program had been expanded, the decision was made to open two new productive programs: agriculture production and cattle raising. The introduction of these two new programs into the family economy, at the same time, has generated changes in a number of aspects: the economic evolution of production, the evolution of resources, especially the work force, and the level of appropriation that the women have reached through their participation in all the programs.

#### **Agricultural Production**

The Agricultural Production Program began in 1995 with a pilot project, as the others did; the initial group was six women and that was the beginning of using organic production techniques. The premise at that point was that, once food security was ensured for a family, the family would be able to move to a new stage based on the work of the family productive unit. The principal objective of the project was defined as motivating agricultural production to generate greater levels of income for women.

Currently, the program includes 36 producers, but unlike the production based exclusively in women's yards, it is required that women meet certain criteria for their integration: good producers in patio-based programs, responsible, family backing for agricultural tasks, and, the most important, being landowners.

The products selected for the crop were fundamentally basic grains: mung bean, corn and sesame. This selection of crops has a double purpose: first, complementing the family's nutrition with basic grains and creating reserves for difficult times; second, selling the surplus production to generate income.

Participation in this new Program supposes a substantial change in the use of the work force—in the first place, because women should be able to count on the participation of the rest of their family members and second, because it assumes a new sexual division of both productive and domestic labor.

The integration of the rest of the family into productive work has meant that the family has become a productive unit, wherein each of the members has activities and responsibilities to fulfill. Thus, for example, in a typical day's work, a woman and her husband will go to the fields to work, accompanied by their older children, while the younger children are left in charge of the house and the goats. The garden tasks are divided among everyone during the course of a day, and the division of labor depends upon the free time each person has after finishing her/his other tasks. This means that the whole family will take turns watering the garden before the morning's work begins, those in the house all day long will do the cleaning, and in the afternoon, the garden will be watered again. The same goes for grazing the goats.

In other cases, the women have formed production collectives in order to carry out their agricultural work, which has meant a change in the use of the agricultural work force, with the shift from family production units to collective production units made up principally of women. Nevertheless, this generally occurs in those cases in which the women are working lands made available by the Center, and where they also share tools. In any case, it is a modality of production that responds to the reality of the women and not to an organizational motive. The level of development that some women have reached has allowed for the contracting of labor to help with the crops, either temporarily or for a specific kind of task.

In a productive work day, the women work and carry out the same tasks that have traditionally been carried out by men; but there is also a more equitable distribution of domestic labors among the entire family, in such a way that the woman can dedicate more time and energy to her own productive activities and to those of her organization.

Another change of vital importance has to do with land tenure. One of the criteria put in place by the Program to select women is that the participating women should hold title to their land. This element has been central to the development of the Program and its results, because the women, who are generally landless, had to "convince" their husbands, brothers, fathers or other family members to cede them the parcels and also allow them to put those parcels in their own names. The application of these criteria have made it possible for women to decide about how the land will be used, as well as its benefits, not to mention its positive impact on autonomy, self-esteem, etc.<sup>30</sup>

In those cases where it has been very difficult for women to get the parcel titles in their names, the Center has bought land for collective cultivation,<sup>31</sup> although this has been managed more in an experimental form than as an institutional policy. Currently, the total number of *manzanas* involved in organic agriculture is 40.75, and the average area cultivated by women varies between 0.5 and 2 *manzanas*.

Agricultural production requires the use of tools and implements that are not necessary for garden cultivation, including animal-drawn plows, wires for fences and the utilization of silos<sup>32</sup> for the storage of grains. It has also meant the use of new technology, which has been facilitated by the Center through training and technical assistance.

Just as is the case with yard-based production, it is an indispensable requisite in this program for the women to have previous training, offered by the Center's technical team. This same team is in charge of technical assistance, which consists of supervision, accompaniment, and oversight of agricultural tasks.

At the same time, it has been necessary to implement a new credit model, with the aim of women having access to minimal funds for certain key inputs, such as wire fencing, small tools, etc. This has meant a diversification in the model of in-kind payments, because the credit system still operates under conventional norms of credit to small producers, although with special considerations for the women.

The most important results of this program are: food security for the family unit and the generation of additional income for women. But this has only been possible with the incorporation of the entire family as a unit into the productive process, the new sexual division of labor, women's legal title to land and their access to technology.

### **The Livestock Program: Raising Cattle**

*The Livestock Program* began in 1997 under the same criteria as the *Agricultural Program*. The initial group was 42 women and the group currently includes 70 women. The principal objective is for women to obtain income in the short run with the sale of milk and the preparation of dairy products; and in the medium term, with the marketing of cattle or beef.

The criteria utilized for the selection of women were the same as those used in the *Agricultural Program*. Nevertheless, for the implementation of this program, the Center took into account special considerations and criteria with regard to the participation of the whole family in productive activities and the accessibility of women to land as well as their legal title to land. In other words, only women who had achieved the participation of their entire family as one productive unit and who had a minimal extension of land, in their names, to graze livestock, were integrated into the Program.

Each one of the women in the program was given two cows as a loan that had to be paid off, in-kind, in a period of four years. In each community where

the project is operating, the women are given a breed cow, which is rotated every so often. Currently, the key beneficiaries have already paid off their cows, and each woman has an average of 5 animals.

The implementation of this Program has meant an evolution in the use of the work force as it has implied that the women themselves, their children and their *compañeros* have strengthened the unit of family production, redistributing not only the work invested in the gardens, the goats, agriculture and cattle raising, but also in domestic responsibilities. This, in addition to a being a change "induced" by the requirements for participation in the Program is a change in the attitude of the rest of the family members, who have begun to recognize and appreciate not only women's work, but also the importance of their own participation in the process of production and the benefits that are obtained through everyone's labor.

Just as was the case with the Agricultural Program, the topic of property has been vital for women's participation in, and appropriation of, the productive process. As was already mentioned, the Program stipulated that the lands used for animal grazing be in women's names, which has meant that previous owners had to transfer the lands, titling them to women. This changed not only the structure of property in the communities, but also the capacity of women to make decisions, as well as negotiate and use this resource.

At this writing, 180 *manzanas* of land are being used for agriculture and grazing and the average area used by women is between 2 and 6 *manzanas*. Although the Center established a minimum of 2 *manzanas* per head, the reality of women with relation to land tenure forced them to reconsider this requirement, and the quantity was lowered to 1.5 *manzanas* per person. In some communities where the women do not own land, the Center has made some *manzanas* of land available for collective use.

In terms of access to technology by the women who are participating in the Program, this has included the following basic components; training, technical assistance and the construction of appropriate infrastructure. As is the case with the rest of the programs, the women receive technical training before they are given the animals and subsequently receive follow-up training in two monthly sessions. The topics covered in these follow-up sessions include animal care and health, and the cultivation of pasture lands for grazing the herd.

The technical assistance is carried out by a group of livestock technicians contracted by the Center for this purpose. This group, in addition to carrying out the training sessions makes visits and offers individual follow-up to women who own animals. The group of veterinarians who were trained by the Center also offers this service. They participate actively in the vaccination campaigns that are

organized every year and in the follow-up on animal health. They also assist at the birth of animals, deal with illnesses and manage a small, portable first-aid kit. The services and resources are available not only to women who participate in the Center's programs of goats and cattle, but also for the rest of the community.

The third component, providing adequate infrastructure, has contributed enormously to women being able to efficiently manage their animals. Thus, the Center has accompanied the Program with the construction of stables and water troughs on women's properties so that the cattle can be maintained in hygienic and safe conditions.

As was the case with the goat program, the modality of credit used by the Center is through in-kind payments. This has freed women from worrying about earning cash to pay off the value of their animals, and has also forced them to care for their animals so that they can reproduce, rather than selling them or eating them.

The results of this program, which is the most recent of the Center's programs, are still preliminary, considering that the women have scarcely achieved a situation in which the animals are reproducing in sufficient numbers to comply with their payment commitments. This has allowed for the program to expand, offering animals a second and third group of beneficiaries. Individually, each one of the women has seen her animals produce enough milk to be able so sell some.<sup>33</sup> Additionally, their integration into the Program has meant the consolidation of the family production unit, the reaffirmation of a new sexual distribution of labor and the diversification of the market economy. In spite of the limitations, these results are hopeful for women, who are impatiently awaiting the expansion of their herds.

#### **4. The Center's Involvement**

It is clear that the support and involvement of the Xochilt-Acalt Center has been an absolutely fundamental element of women's economic development. Their actions are oriented in two directions: assistance for development and services, as well as facilitating the ongoing processes. In other words, the Center has not limited itself exclusively to providing women with resources for their productive integration, but also has accompanied them and facilitated a process of economic empowerment. The Center's key activities have concentrated on:

- 1. The provision of economic resources for production through credit or donations.*

As was already mentioned, credit has been issued in two ways: in-kind or cash payments. In both cases, special considerations and facilities were extended to women though they were not exempt from payments, with the exception of 1998, after Hurricane Mitch. After the hurricane, the women involved in the organic agriculture pilot project lost everything<sup>34</sup>. To date, this model has worked well, both for the women as well as for the Center.

The in-kind payments are used exclusively for the provision of animals, while cash payments are used for inputs such as seeds, wire, small tools, etc.

Donations have meant much greater amounts and have been used principally in the provision of other kinds of resources such as the construction of productive infrastructure—wells, micro-irrigation systems, and silos for grain storage—all of which means investments beyond the means of women.

2. *Transfer of technology through training and technical assistance.*

The trainings have been the cornerstone of the transmission of new knowledge for the women who participate in the different productive programs. No woman receives any type of resources or support from the Center until she has received at least one training module related to the program she is hoping to become involved with. After this, the women receive training at least once a month, with the goal of deepening their acquired knowledge and answering any questions or concerns.

This training program includes the interchange of experiences with other productive programs for women in different regions of the country, thus the women see, or are seen, by other women who are integrated in different areas of the project, sharing their knowledge and experiences.

Technical assistance has also been of great importance in development of the programs, and to this end the Center has formed a permanent team made up of five technical experts, primarily women. This team trains, visits, and supervises the different programs. But, additionally, with the aim of maintaining a systematic presence and also transferring knowledge to the rest of the participants, the Center has spurred the outstanding producers within the program to form part of a program to train a team of veterinarians and rural technical experts who can assist the Center's ongoing work. These women receive training from the technical team (1.5 years for veterinarians, with monthly follow-up; and 3 years for technical experts).

The women who participate as technical experts or veterinarians have, on the average, completed primary school. The basic requirements for their selection are: being able to read and write, good assimilation of knowledge and facilities for the transmission of knowledge. One of the most important tasks of the rural technical experts is that they collaborate with the Center's technical team in the investigation of different activities and project ideas that can later be shared with the rest of the women.

3. *The facilitation of processes among women.* Some of the most outstanding activities of the Center have been oriented towards the facilitation of social, cultural and political processes related to productive activity. The most important of

these have been: the legalization of property, the construction of infrastructure, the economic self-sustainability of the programs, the acquisition of technical knowledge, a new sexual division of labor, the construction of a new identity for producers, and the transition from a chemically based vision of agriculture to one based on organic techniques.

Thus, the productive area of the Center that includes the programs of gardens, goats, agriculture and cattle raising is supported by the rest of the Center's work areas. These include the program for legalization of properties with two lawyers and notary publics who are in charge of overseeing, case by case, the women's efforts to receive land titles; the construction program and technology workshop in which a group of women is entrusted with providing all the necessary infrastructure and technology, the educational programs that, in addition to providing formal education, include a systematic reflection about the different areas of gender and productive knowledge, technical training specifically focused on the acquisition of new knowledge, but also facilitating the transition from a chemically based vision of agriculture to one based on organic techniques.

## **5. A New Model of Peasant Production**

A predominantly economic analysis of these four programs should take into account at least three important aspects: the economic evolution of production, the evolution of resources and the level of project intervention. Although this study does not pretend to carry out a technical evaluation of the programs that have been implemented by the Xochilt-Acalt Center, it is important to identify the development that they have experienced alongside the level at which women have taken on the project as their own, as well as the link that they have with other processes such as the change in mentality, those of organization and the more general process of empowerment.

It is clear that, since the project began 10 years ago, the women who participate in the agricultural production programs implemented by the Xochilt-Acalt Center have experienced profound and important changes, both individually as well as collectively. This is reflected in the evolution of a process that has transformed women from economically inactive subjects through a subsistence economy, and towards a market economy.

Thus, the model of production has gone through different stages of development that range from yard-based production for family consumption, through in-kind trade or interchange, small-scale commercial production and the creation of incipient networks of production. The transition, through these different stages of development has not been easy and has faced a number of difficulties, including:

- a. The initial prejudices on the part of women themselves, who did not trust in their own productive capacities, as they simply did not believe that their gardens could produce a variety of products,<sup>35</sup> nor did they trust in the benefits of raising goats, as they thought it would be very difficult to manage.
- b. Breaking with the culture of chemical-based agricultural production that was inculcated with cotton cultivation and substituting that with organic agricultural production. This was a difficulty that needed to be overcome at both the individual and collective levels, given that in the majority of the communities, it was thought that yield and quality of organic products was inferior to that of chemically based products. Nevertheless, women have been able to achieve greater yields and quality in their products than many other producers, including men.
- c. The successes obtained by the women and the profound change in their daily activities generated an enormous resistance and lack of trust on the part of the women's husband and *compañeros* and also within their communities. It touched off a huge campaign intended to discredit the work of the women that ranged from derogatory name-calling (crazies, tramps, etc.) to pseudo-religious explanations ("pacts with the devil").<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, convincing these women of their own abilities definitely overcame their prejudices.

One of the factors of greatest influence in the economic evolution of production has been the simultaneous processes of evolution of resources: here it is important to consider at least three variables: the work force; property and the use of land, and access to technology.

1. The changes in the use of the work force demonstrate the evolution from simple production with the individual work of the women in the cultivation of gardens, moving from the use of family labor with the incorporation of children into goat-raising and the garden work: the formation of a family-based unit of production that implies not only a new distribution of productive labor but also of domestic labor based on the active incorporation of women, their children and their husbands or *compañeros*, until finally arriving at the formation of collective production units integrated primarily by women.
2. But the central element in this intense process of change is the fact that women have achieved not only access to, but also the legal rights over property both in agriculture as well as in livestock production. This factor in and of itself represents a huge change in women's condition. However, it is not reduced to traditional productive aspects, but rather refers to the possibility that women currently have in terms of making decisions about the productive process (what they are going to grow, how, with whom, etc.) as well as the income generated by that process (what is the family priority, how money is distributed, what quantity each family member receives, how much is set aside to be capitalized, etc.).<sup>37</sup>

3. Access to technology includes three aspects: access to technical assistance, changes in capital, and the acquisition and application of new knowledge. Although it is less important than land tenure, this aspect is of critical importance for those women who have achieved true 'ownership' of the programs and an accompanying change in their mentality. This importance is given because the women received new technical knowledge and ongoing follow-up from the Center's team; they were provided with inputs and tools for the crops; and they were also given infrastructure for production (silos, wells, stables, water tanks, micro-irrigation systems and wind-powered wells). This element was fundamental as it allowed the women to reduce their physical effort and their domestic tasks in order to dedicate more time and effort to their productive work. According to Merxte Brosa, director of the Center's productive area, "... we would not have been successful in the other stages if we had not lessened women's load".

Along with the evolution of resources and the economy of production, the role of the Center as an external agent of support for the women had a significant impact. In this case, the involvement of the NGO began with the drawing up of a participatory assessment and the design of productive instruments that responded to the needs and ideas of the women; but the most important elements have been the moral accompaniment and technical assistant that has been offered to all the women involved in the different programs.

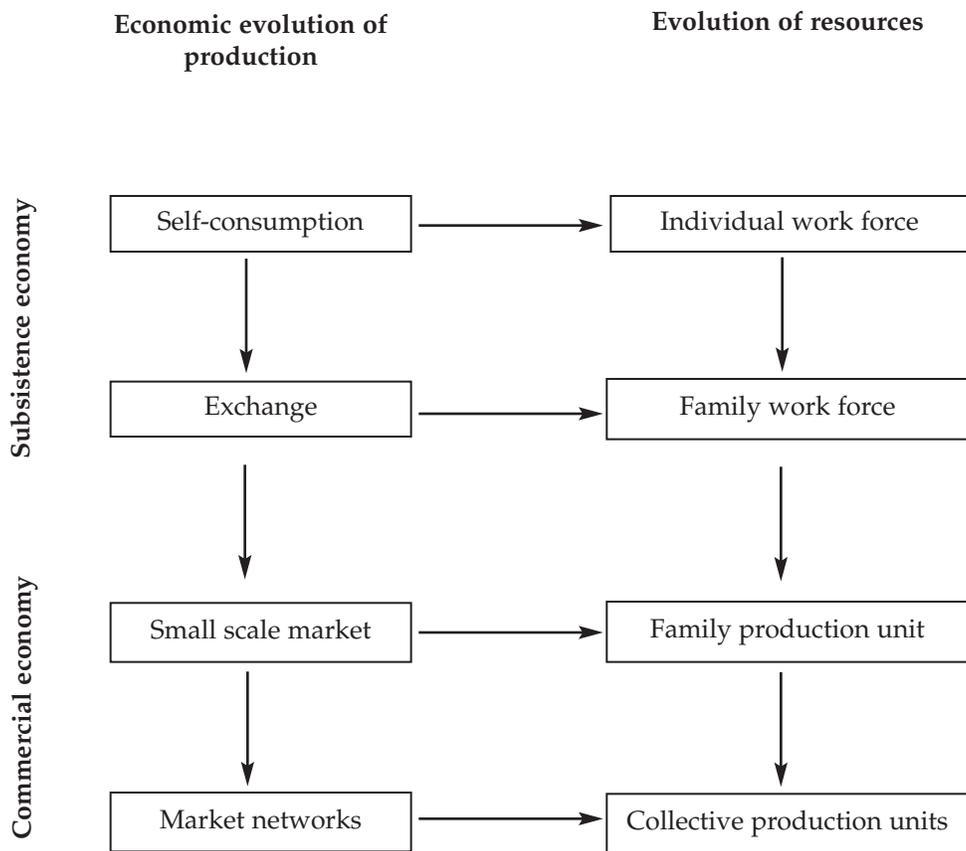
While it is true that the Center has provided important material conditions to women through donations, its principal role has been to facilitate the processes that these women have experienced. To that end, the Center has been involved in ongoing accompaniment, trying to distance itself from a position of only offering aid or assistance. It's also important to point out that some actions, like the credit policy, have been adapted to the needs and conditions of the women involved.

Thus, this new model of rural development is characterized as a small scale commercial economy, with the participation of the family productive unit, a new sexual division of productive and domestic work, access to full property rights by women, access to technology, and environmentally sustainable. But its most important characteristic is that it considers women to be subjects of their own processes.

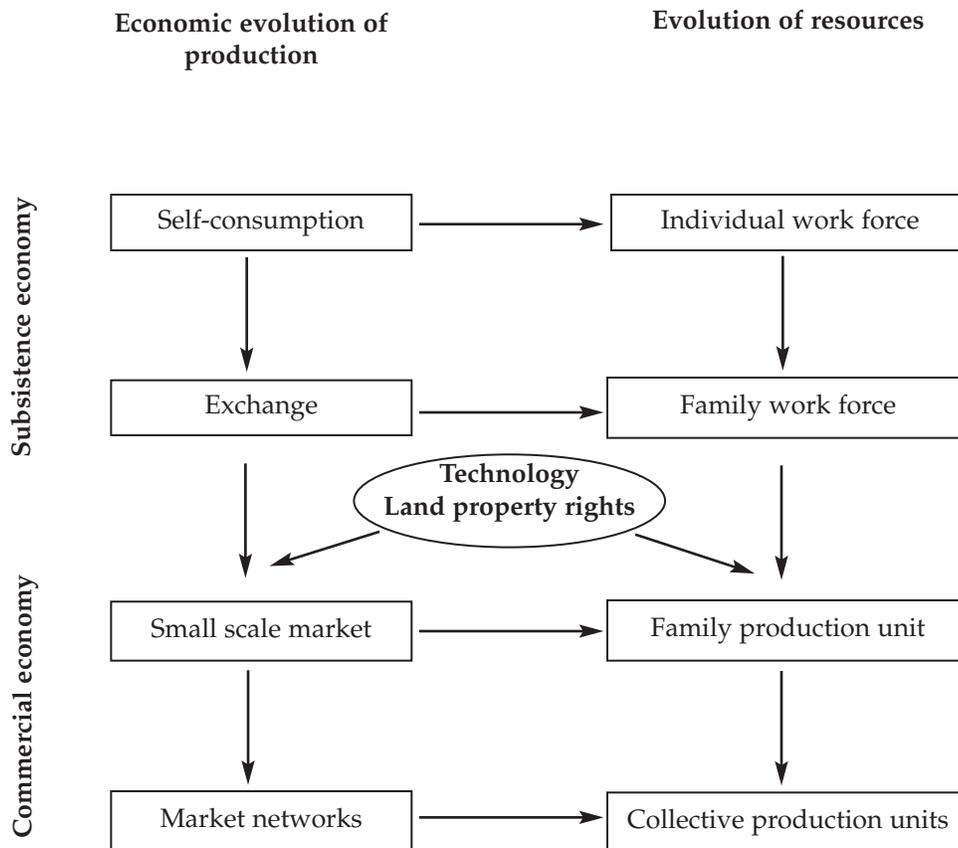
All these elements underscore the fact that the women who participate in these programs have really taken ownership, not only of the resources, but also of their new role as producers, generators of wealth and citizens of their communities. They are conscious of their abilities and of the power that they have to modify their situation and their family's, as well as the possibility of modifying the conditions of power and misery in which they have found themselves for a number of years.

The level of ownership has been such that many of the women feel that they no longer need the moral accompaniment and technical assistance from the Center, as they now realize that they have in their hands the power and potential to make significant changes in their living conditions.

Because it has proved to be efficient and sustainable, this type of experience, analyzed from this perspective, contributes many ideas, and much hope, to other initiatives that continue to search for new models of rural development. But more than that, it has shown that the key for an authentic process of change in rural development depends upon the empowerment of women in the productive arena.



This chart shows the evolution that women have experienced, beginning with their integration into the productive programs and the stages that have taken place from a subsistence economy to a market-based economy. It is clear how the use of the work force has evolved; nevertheless, two elements that have been central to the process are not included here: the use of technology and land tenure.



This chart, unlike the earlier one, shows the moment in which the use of technology is introduced, alongside a change in land tenure, elements which the women have pointed out as being fundamental for the shift from one model to another.

## Part II: From Subordinate Woman to Subject of Her Own Transformation

It is indisputable that a real empowerment of women moves inevitably for a profound transformation of the subjective, of mentalities and ideologies. One of the most studied processes, and one where the majority of projects for women are concentrated, is that of economic empowerment, as it is seen as the basic, or principal, condition for political and ideological empowerment. Nevertheless, there are few studies and methodologies offering sufficiently clear indications to prove this thesis and "measure" the degree of real empowerment achieved by women in specific contexts, especially in terms of the processes of a change in subjectivity and of the constitution of women as many subjects.

In this chapter, in addition to reconstructing the process which this group of women has undergone, the key aspects that have impacted this process were identified, with an emphasis on the educational programs promoted by the Center, the sexual division of labor, the changes in gender identity, relationships in a couple, the change in relationships between generations (mothers to daughters) and the construction of a consciousness and leadership among women within their communities.

## 1. The Impotence of Being: "I Was Nobody"

Throughout the different interviews and focus groups carried out over the course of this study, the women said time and again, "...before, I knew nothing, absolutely nothing"; "...to myself, I was nobody" and "now I feel like I have been born again". With these comments, they are comparing the situation they had to deal with before becoming involved in the Center's programs and their current situation, as well as the intense process of change that they have undergone.

The starting point for the process is a condition women experience of feeling personally deficient, a deep sense of individual "non-existence" that is expressed in all areas of life. Thus, in the different interviews and focus groups that were carried out, the women describe their situation with compelling comments:

- The lack of technical knowledge regarding productive aspects: "before I would say that land wasn't worth anything, due to my lack of knowledge, the land needs to be helped out...I didn't understand that before". "The truth is, I didn't know anything about preparing the soil".
- The lack of formal education: "I didn't know how to read and write ...I felt bad because I didn't know ..."; "I can remember when I didn't know how to read and write, and my husband was full of himself, he would throw the letters from the women into the garbage, and there they'd sit. Once I took out a paper without meaning to, and I thought it was (from) my daughter...I said, I'm going to see what this is about, and I went to my sister and I said, read me this letter. This letter must be from my *comadre*. He was so confident with that letter because he knew I didn't know how to read, and it was a love letter".
- The subordination of women to their husbands or *compañeros*: "before we were dominated by our parents, and then we fell into the hands of men, dominated by men, and they never let us go anywhere, there we were, submissive, chained to a stone, grinding away ..."
- Their exclusive dedication to domestic work and the raising of children: "before I only did the work at home—ironing, washing, sewing, sweeping, doing everything...only the man would go out to work with his father and we, the women, we'd be back making tortillas, getting the food ready at the right time, setting the table..."

- The ownership of goods, especially land: “before I didn’t have my own house, I didn’t have any cows, or any goats, either...” “We didn’t have even a tiny bit of land to our names...”
- The low self-esteem, the lack of identity and autonomy: before we didn’t really give much importance to ourselves, and much less so to other *compañeras* ... I was nobody, and I felt less than the other *compañeras* perhaps ...”; “We were manipulated women, before they treated us like objects, sitting there, without taking us into account for anything. We lived at the mercy of our husbands; if he wanted to eat, if he wanted onions in his food, then we put onions in.”

The isolation and the lack of communication with other women: “*They know that women aren’t organized and are stuck at home all the time, women are seen as shy, they don’t talk, they’re alone, in a very lamentable environment*”. “*Before it was like we didn’t even think about living, only him, being there, stuck at home, not leaving, just stuck there*”.

## 2. The Expansion of “I”: I Feel Like My Life Changed A Lot

Through the process of changes that the women have experienced, they have passed through a condition of “Not being” to one of “Being”, which indicates what has taken place in the evolution of “I”. This change has been so deep that the women themselves are conscious of it and one can see it not only in what they say, but also because they are using a language that denotes the possession of values, perceptions and new knowledge, as well as goods and resources.

1. New technical knowledge for production: “We have made gains, we have learned things that we didn’t know before”. “I have learned to diversify my garden, so that it’s part vegetables, and part fruit, and there’s also the goats, and with this diversification, you can get a lot of different things in a year. I also have pigs, and so we’ve learned that this gives back to us all year long”.
2. Economic independence; “I help myself with the goat’s milk, I help myself with what I harvest from the garden: I don’t have to buy peppers, onions, squash, tomatoes, cabbage, beets, radishes, cucumbers, all that – I don’t have to buy any of that anymore. If I don’t have a harvest, then I go out and buy, but I always have something planted, one right after the other.” “I made five and half thousand pesos, just from watermelons, I made more than 200 pesos from squash; and some from melons, too. This past year, I made good money, about 6,000 pesos. And if it’s my garden, I have my vegetables and my garden right there; I can plant whatever I can. Now I even have a *manzana* and a half of beans”.
3. Productive self-sustainability: “... now each person has to look out for herself, for example, before they gave us seeds, now they sell them to us; I had to buy

this seed, save up this money to buy this seed and the rest to help myself out, too. So we have to always be looking, and if I can set the seeds aside, I do, because that's one less thing to buy. We aren't worried about it because we have all the knowledge, thanks to God and to the technical experts who had such patience in teaching us, and we've put into practice what we learned, now we know how to fumigate, what to fumigate the plants without chemicals, we should only use organic materials, we know that well".

4. Women who have learned to read and write or who are in adult education: "... I began to learn my letters, I was learning them, and when they starting asking me questions about them, back and forth, I was so happy to know them".
5. New relations within the couple: "...they were the owners their work, they were the ones who planted, we had no option to say, well, I'm going to plant this, because they were the men, they were the ones who could say that. But not now. Now we decide how we're going to plant, when we're going to plant and they do it". "Before we just did all the housework, but not anymore, now our husbands help us. I feel like my life has changed a lot".
6. A new sexual division of labor: "They help to carry water, we have to go graze the cows, if they have to milk them, then they milk them. My son also helps me if we have to repair the fences, and my daughter helps me, too. At the beginning ... nobody wanted to help, but now look, now they're helping."
7. A new relationship with the children: "At the beginning, it was hard, because what did my boys do? They closed the door when they were sweeping, people called them "faggots", at the beginning, it was hard for them to get into this process of helping their mother. Now they don't hide because they see it as something natural".
8. The transmission of knowledge from mothers to daughters: "I remember when I had my first daughter ... the same education that I had been given was what I gave her. Now, after we started to work on reflections, I said to myself: how awful. I have more daughters and what I learned I told my daughters, that it wasn't good just to put up with a man, that they had to learn that".
9. Property rights—Goods and Land: "... before where we lived, it wasn't a question of "we", but rather the man's, if he said, this is mine, this is mine, get out, get out. And now, no more, I'm the owner now, if he says anything, I'll give him his, I'll get whoever I want involved, because I know this is mine, mine, and nobody tells me what to do. I'm the one in charge". "... we have a good house, now we're living pretty well, now it's a big house, a big house that I have". "... I have my house in my name, we have the cows, and now I feel different. The Center has given us all this, and the knowledge; I'm one more woman. I feel like another person".
10. Self-esteem, identity and autonomy: "... it's not the same thing as it was before, things have changed, they've changed, because our knowledge of ourselves has been tremendous and they're not going to treat us like they did

before". "Before it was them, not now. Now it's us". "Who were we? ... Through our reflections, I have realized that we are important people for ourselves ... I know how to respect the other *compañeras* and I know that they are people who we have to respect, they are valuable people, and I am, too. Now I feel equal". "Now I feel that my self-esteem has changed, I'm not the same as before; before I was an object, now I'm the one in charge, I make the decisions. I'm happy with myself, and sometimes that's what I say to the *compañeras*".

11. Solidarity and relationships with other women: "...helping the *compañeras* who are blind the way we were blind; telling them that they're not dumb, that they shouldn't let themselves be ordered around, because she's the one who has to decide, it's not the man who's in charge, she's the one in control of her own fate".
12. New social status: "I also think that we're different vis-à-vis society, because in the communities, in the rural areas, they don't look at us like they used to". "When we started all this, most women and men told us we were crazy, out of control ...but when they started to see the gains we had made, people began to see that we weren't just hanging out, they saw the well, the water tank, and so they saw what had been achieved".

Although the Center's involvement in the projects has been an important element in facilitating this process of change, this would not have been possible if the women themselves had not had the desire and the determination to carry the projects forward. "Really, to be able to do something, my life was a struggle that was going on inside me ... and I can say that it was more than just my effort"; "at the beginning, I got involved in this because I wanted to have a garden".

### 3. The Process of Changes

For some of the women, this process has taken years of effort and struggle against the resistance they encounter within themselves, their families and their communities. It's clear that not all the women have been able to break through all barriers, that development is unequal and doesn't have to do with one's seniority in the organization, with a woman's educational level or with the degree of attention she receives from the Center. The change in mentality can be seen over various stages, from the acquisition of new technical knowledge through women's constitution of themselves as new subjects.

This process was initiated with the knowledge that the women were acquiring about their sexual and reproductive health through the talks given by the Center when the gynecological clinic began operating. There they learned the importance of taking care of their health, of knowing their own bodies, as well as the importance of being able to make decisions about their bodies. But, there was

also a concern among the first organized women regarding their own, and their family's, situations. In other words, a condition of cognitive anxiety was touched off, one that had as a consequence an attitude, or will, towards change.

Based on the evaluation carried out by the Center and the opening of the productive programs, the process of change became more necessary, intense and profound. Thus, the second stage of evolution coincided with the stage of the subsistence economy; that is to say, with the incorporation of women into different programs of cultivating their gardens and raising livestock as implemented by the Center. At the same time, this stage had two moments of growth associated with the gardens and the raising of livestock.

### **Cognitive Uneasiness**

In first case, the condition of cognitive uneasiness, or anxiety, begins to materialize in three aspects: the incorporation of women into productive labors, the advance of socio-moral development and the construction of a gender identity.

The women began to experience a pressing need to carry out some type of productive activity that, in principle, would benefit their children, reducing their vulnerability vis-à-vis the conditions of poverty they were facing. Thus, many women had begun to plant small gardens in their yards, without very positive results, as they had neither the knowledge nor the technical assistance that the Center was later to provide them. It is common to hear in their testimonies, that, once they were aware of the opportunity that the Center offered, many women were quite interested in becoming involved in the program.

Once they received technical training and the seeds to begin to plant, the women encountered enormous resistance on the part of their husbands, who did everything they could to convince them not to get involved in the program.<sup>38</sup> The women had to fight, then, not only against the adverse conditions of the productive work itself—an increase in work and the labor shift added to the work of planting, the difficult access to water, given that long distances had to be traveled in order to water the crops—without also having to face the resistance from their partners. The huge will of the women overcame this second resistance when the gardens gave their first fruits.

### **The Change in Self-Perception and Will**

The advance in the process of socio-moral development was produced at this precise moment, when the women began to perceive that they were capable of producing something. Three elements were involved:

- they realized that they were capable of assimilating technical knowledge that would allow them to produce.

- They realized that they could plant on their own.
- They realized that they were not alone, as other women were in very similar situations.

The effects were immediate: an increase in self-esteem, in their security in themselves and the determination to continue in the program. They thus moved from a condition of total economic, emotional and affective dependence to one in which they began to see themselves as capable subjects, at least in economic terms.

Meanwhile, the women began to take their first steps in the construction of a gender identity. This occurred when they began to meet for the technical training sessions and they realized, as they talked about their daily lives, that their situation was quite generalized. This collective awakening was developed a bit more when they began to participate in the gender trainings—which the women have termed “reflections”—where they discussed topics such as knowing one’s own body and self-esteem. This allowed them to better understand their own realities.

The introduction of goat raising allowed for them to move forward another step in the whole process of changes. In this case, the women had to fight against their own prejudices, as they had the idea that managing this type of animal was very difficult and they were not able to clearly see the benefits they could reap from this. Once again, the technical trainings helped them to overcome this barrier and the women decided to take part in the program. Nevertheless, a new problem came up: they could not, on their own, dedicate themselves simultaneously to their gardens, goat-raising and domestic tasks. Therefore, they decided to incorporate their children into productive tasks, sharing with their children the cultivation of the gardens and the grazing of the animals. This meant a redistribution of both the domestic and productive work and an advance in terms of the evolution of the work force. At the same time, they had acquired new technical knowledge and were also beginning to involve themselves in the Center’s literacy program.

Their determination was strengthened when they began to obtain some benefits from the goat-raising, were able to pad their family’s nutritional content, and the gardens began to generate a small surplus that allowed them to make trades with other women in order to cover another type of family needs. At that time, the women still had to fight against the resistance of their husbands, although the hostile attitude and rejection by the men had weakened a bit as they saw the results of the work being carried out by women. With all this, the effects were reflected through an increase in self-esteem and women’s security in themselves.

Additionally, they were strengthened in their gender consciousness, since through their reflections, they became aware of their own rights, they increased communication among groups of organized women and began to share their knowledge and reflections, especially with their husbands, although the men always adopted an attitude of “not listening”.

### **Cultural Resistance and Prejudice**

During this stage, the women had to fight hard in at least three areas: with themselves to overcome their own prejudices and the cultural frameworks of subordination inculcated throughout their lives; against the enormous resistance put forth by their husbands; and with the overload of work and effort implied by becoming involved in productive labors.

Another element linked with the productive sphere was a positive influence in terms of reinforcing this process of changes, towards the end of this stage. It was the improvement of access of water through the construction of wells, installation of rope pumps and the installation of micro-irrigation systems for the gardens.

In individual terms, this meant that the women substantially reduced the type of work involved, as well as the physical effort they expended in, the gardens, a considerable increase in production and, consequently, an increase in income, and at the same time the beginning of an evolution between a yard-based economy towards a market economy.

In the subjective aspects, this contributed definitively to overcoming resistance on the part of the men, allowed for the beginning of a change in relations within the couple and the family, and placed women in a better position to negotiate within the family and thus increase their self-esteem.

But, on the other hand, it provoked a hostile reaction in the communities, a product of social prejudices. The women then had to face a new type of resistance that socially condemned them for the advances they had made, as the other residents of their communities declared that the clear majority in their economic and family situation was a product of “a pact with the devil”, in the fact of their inability to accept that women are capable of valuing themselves for their own worth and because these results openly questioned male authority.

In collective terms, there was also an important change as at the time the Center supported the opening of a technology workshop where the same women began to make rope pumps which were then used by the other women who were part of the productive projects. Clearly, this gave the women a certain social recognition and new position within the municipality’s social fabric, as it made clear that women were able, not only to plant their gardens, but also manufacture the tools they needed.

Thus, the third stage of evolution in the process of change took off with a group of women in a condition that was considerably distinct in psychological, ideological and cultural terms, and with a solid enough base upon which to build further changes. As we saw in the previous stage, these changes are closely linked to the productive activity of women and the level of ownership that they have had with the productive programs. Thus, we can affirm that they fully coincide with the market economy model that began with the implementation of organic agriculture and cattle-raising programs.

### **Change in Roles**

The incorporation of women into agricultural production supposes that there is a substantial change in their productive role, as they have to leave the family yard and go plant in areas that are often at quite a distance from their homes. This in turn means that women have to abandon their traditional role as housewife and take on a new role of producer, with commercial ends.

But it has also led to a new and more profound sexual distribution of labor, because, in addition to requiring the involvement of the women's husbands, this has meant that all members of the family have taken on new responsibilities in terms of domestic tasks, given that women are now out of the house more frequently. At the same time, this was the final step in terms of overcoming the resistance that both husbands and male children were offering.

It is important to underline the fact that, at this time, when the whole family has become involved as one family unit and has undergone a redistribution of the sexual division of labor, indicates that women have gained, not only a change in themselves, but in every member of their family.

With their involvement in agricultural production, the women acquired new technical knowledge and began to make use of a new technology—for organic production. This has allowed them to reach higher yields than the producers who have traditionally used chemicals, but it also increased hostility towards the women, and fueled social prejudice in many communities. Nevertheless, they decided to confront them and continue in their agricultural work.

At the same time, they continued with the literacy work and adult education, which gave them access to a different type of useful educational material. This has direct consequences in terms of the growth of self-esteem and personal security.

Additionally, the systematic participation of women in gender reflections has strengthened them to take on social prejudice in their communities.

## **Conversion into Landholders**

With the implementation of the cattle-raising program, a cycle of women's personal growth was close. This program allowed them to have full access to a good that had always been denied: land. Land ownership was established as an indispensable requirement for women to be integrated into livestock-based agricultural programs. However, almost none of the women had land. They thus had to initiate an arduous process of convincing their husbands, brothers and other family members—the legal landowners—in order to see their name as a titleholder on the very smallest parcels.

This fact, apparently limited to the economic sphere, has had invaluable effects on women, not only in terms of women's economic empowerment, but also in terms of their own personal development. Some of these effects are: reinforcing of self-esteem and personal confidence, greater emotional security, great negotiation power within the family, as well as the acquisition of a new position within the family hierarchy.

## **Economic and Psychological Security**

In collective terms, the impact of this change is also important, not only because there is a group of women beneficiaries, but also because it modified, at least to a certain degree, the structure of land tenure in the municipality and because they have served as a clear example for other women throughout the communities. At the same time, it has proven to be a key factor in the empowerment of women in all senses. For this reason, the Center decided to strongly support this process, with the creation of a legal office, which would oversee women's cases through obtaining land titles. But it also had to offer the women moral accompaniment so that they could take on the negative attitudes and resistance that they encountered at the beginning.

The most recent changes have been produced since the Center began a program of construction and improvement of housing units in the wake of Hurricane Mitch. As has also been the case in agricultural programs, to benefit the women with the construction or improvement of a house, the Center established as a requisite that the constructed area would belong to the female beneficiary, and so they also have to develop a whole persuasive work with the owner in order to secure the transfer of titles.

The effects of this have been expressed by a strengthening of self-esteem and individual confidence, greater emotional security, greater recognition and a new position within the family hierarchy, along with a greater power of negotiation within the family, as well as a recognition of a new social status in their communities.

One element that has been extremely important has been the design of the houses and the respect that they have of the already existing cultural mores in the communities.<sup>39</sup> With this program, an attitude of collective solidarity among the women also became clear, as the selection of the beneficiaries should be done by the women themselves, taking into account their housing conditions and establishing priorities.

As can be seen, the process of change experienced by all these women has been profound and has taken place in a relatively short period of time, considering the results. Four factors came together:

- a. The opening of educational programs by the Center in order to offer women training in areas of gender, education—literacy and adult education; and a special program for young women.
- b. The technical training sessions in productive areas—gardens, goats, agriculture and cattle raising; health training—training of midwives, community health promoters; the preparation of rural technical aspects—in agricultural production and veterinary knowledge.
- c. The systematic combination between practice and knowledge—that is, putting new knowledge into practice, both in productive aspects as well as in personal and family aspects, and
- d. The most important element of all: women’s will to carry out changes within themselves.

#### **4. A key factor: education and consciousness-raising**

One of the fundamental pillars for this profound process of change has been the educational work done by the Xochilt-Acalt Center, and among those programs one that has had special importance is the training in gender issues—which the women call “reflections”. The educational area of the Center has three programs: gender training; education, and youth education.

The first of them consists of the reflective workshops with the women in the communities who are integrated into the different programs promoted by the Center. These workshops are held once a month and last for two hours, for the women who became involved in 1998 or thereafter; those who became involved in earlier years have workshops held once every two months, in three-hour sessions.

The topics that are at the center of the reflective groups are: knowledge of one’s body, self-esteem, sexuality, gender violence, constitutional rights, maternity, communication, human relations, gender identity and domestic work. The order in which these are taken up responds to a strategy used by the Center, in which they begin with those topics that allow women to know, value and respect

themselves. The methodology utilized is participatory and based on women's personal experiences.

According to the different women interviewed as well as the Center's directors, this program has been fundamental to facilitating an ideological change. Pilar Alonso, head of the organizational area and one of the Center's founders, describes the program this way:

*"...we said to each other: well, if the women have a garden, if they have goats, of course we want them to have those things, but we also want them to begin changing their mentality, because what's the point of them eating vegetables from their gardens if they're crying while they're eating, crying because of the abuse they put up with from their husbands, crying from the mistreatment or discrimination at the hands of their own families. We haven't really done anything then, because in the end, the woman is not being nourished, although the vegetables have iron and vitamin E. We also said to ourselves: what's the point with a woman making one peso from selling peppers if that peso ends up in the hands of the man".*

The Program of Academic Education is divided into literacy and adult education. For the literacy classes, the "In our own words" primer is used, an educational resource drawn up as part of an initiative by women in Matagalpa, a province in the country's northern region. The methodology utilized is popular education, with gender content, and the objective is that women learn to read and write at the same time as they begin to reflect on important aspects of their lives. The classes are given in the communities, in two-hour sessions, three times per week. The literacy teachers are women from the communities themselves and most of them are involved in the Center's other programs.

Adult education is a three-level program that is equivalent to finishing primary school. It is carried out in coordination with the PAEBANIC program of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports (MECD), which provided the educational materials. The classes are also held in the communities, in three sessions each week, for three hours each session. The facilitators are also women from the communities.

The Youth Education Program works with women, generally the daughters of women who are already involved in the Center's programs. It offers gender education, scholarships to continue academic studies and training in basic sewing techniques. The gender education makes use of the same methodology as the reflective sessions, in eight different communities. The topics discussed included: knowing one's body; self-esteem; virginity; sexuality; masturbation; gender violence and political rights. The sessions are held once a month for two hours. Currently some 230 young women are taking part in these reflections.

The scholarships are offered to those youth who have been systematically participating for more than a year in the organization and are also facing financial difficulties. The scholarship includes paying the school fees, transportation costs, food, books and supplies. There are currently 42 young women receiving scholarship assistance. At the same time, the training in basic sewing techniques began as a pilot project, at the request of a group of young people in two communities. In addition to training, the project supplies the women with basic materials.

Another action of the Center that has contributed significantly to women's personal growth and is part and parcel of its educational focus is technical training for production sessions. Although they are not part of the educational programs, the women point to them, along with the gender reflections, as the more important support offered by the Center towards their personal change. The majority of them believe that these are the most valuable things they have been able to receive, as it has allowed them to experience all these changes. Once again, Pilar Alonso values the role of the Center, and of the women themselves, in this process:

*"You offer the knowledge, the accompaniment, and the woman has to know that she is the center of all this, she has to give her all to move forward. For example, getting the family invested in production so that they become involved; we're not going to go out and convince the families; that's a struggle that each woman has to take up".*

Thus, the principle objective of the different educational programs is to facilitate a process that leads the women to constitute themselves as subjects as their own process of change.

## **5. The Most Important Changes**

The process that these women have gone through to constitute themselves as social subjects has produced vital changes on various levels, which are separated into two fields and three spheres.

The fields are the individual and the collective, while the spheres refer to the spheres of action on the part of the subjects, in individual or collective terms, including: economic, ideological and psychological for the individual field and economic, ideological and social for the collective field.

Both in the individual field as well as in the collective, the depth of the changes has permitted them to take on a new economic and social status and roles. Now they see themselves as producers, as capable, autonomous and independent economic subjects, instead of their previous condition in which they occupied a position of subordination and total dependence with respect to men.

At the same time, the new sexual division of productive and domestic labor allowed them to use time for themselves, which they could use to study, to participate in gender reflections, meetings, technical trainings or any other activity that interests them. This has had as a result the acquisition of a new economic status in their communities and has come to constitute an experience that is a model of rural development not only in the communities, but also in the municipality.

In the psychological sphere, the most important changes are related to the evolution of the "I" and to socio-moral development. Thus, this group of women made the transition from an almost infantile condition to the increase in a sense of their own worth, an increase in their personal dignity, the experience of being a person, the existence of their own body and the acquisition of new knowledge. At the same time, this socio-moral development has allowed for the recognition of their own and other's rights, the acquisition of universalizing values and norms including gender solidarity and democracy, a high degree of autonomy in terms of decision-making and the ability to express discernment.

In the ideological sphere, the most important changes have to do with the acquisition of an identity and gender consciousness, which at the same time has led to changes in the sexual division of labor, to the claim of the right to time for themselves, to modifying the relations of power within the family, reaching a level at which they are able to verbalize and write about themselves, and—one of the most important changes—to begin to break with the patriarchal culture of feminine subordination with the recognition that children should live in a different situation, at the same time as new values are inculcated.

It is clear that, in this whole constellation of changes, there is a close relationship between economic and ideological development. It is difficult in this experience to identify which determines the other, and it would probably be an error to try and make such a separation. The truth is that both have developed simultaneously, in such a way that it is difficult to identify the borders between one and the other, and has contributed equally to generating real empowerment among women.

Field	Sphere
Individual	Economic: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• From housewives to producers</li> <li>• Economic independence</li> <li>• Autonomy in decision-making regarding production</li> </ul>
	Ideological: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gender identity</li> <li>• Gender consciousness</li> </ul>
	Psychological: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase in sense of one's own value.</li> <li>• Increase in personal dignity.</li> <li>• Sense of being a person.</li> <li>• Valuing and consciousness of one's own body.</li> <li>• Acquisition of new knowledge.</li> <li>• Socio-moral development.</li> </ul>
Collective	Economic: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Constitution as new economic subjects.</li> <li>• New economic status.</li> <li>• New sexual division of productive labor.</li> <li>• Constitution of a model of rural development.</li> </ul>
	Ideological: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New sexual division of domestic tasks.</li> <li>• New relations of power within the family.</li> <li>• Development of the capacity of discernment.</li> </ul>
	Social: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New social status.</li> <li>• Recognition of one's own, and other's, rights.</li> <li>• Universalizing values and norms (solidarity, democracy).</li> </ul>

### Part III: Organization and Participation of Women in Rural Development

The third pillar of this process of empowerment lived by the women of Malpaisillo is constituted by its organizational development, as this is what gives the collective dimension as social, economic and political subjects. Nevertheless, in this case, the development of the organizational structures has had the particularity that this has produced, as the hub of women's economic activity and not necessarily having a political objective, although it is inevitable that over the course of time they have had to carry out activities that are political in the sense that their empowerment openly questions the traditional power of men in the municipality.

## **1. The Seed of a Women's Organization**

Until the gynecological clinic began to offer services, the women of Malpaisillo had no organizational structure. Beginning with the interest of the first users of the service, small groups of organized women began to form in the communities. This began an organizational seed that had as its principal objective ordering and guaranteeing gynecological attention to the women in the different communities when the mobile clinic would come to offer services. There were no political motivations or objectives.

Nevertheless, as the foundation of the clinic had its origins in the concern expressed by the Sandinista council members of the municipality, it was perhaps inevitable that a link between strictly social interests and more overtly political interests would emerge. Thus, the women who were at that time in charge of the project's political direction decided to form an organizational structure which, in addition to overseeing the clinic, served as a public space of political action for the women. They created a municipal structure of broad community consultation in which there were women representing the groups from the communities. This was called the Municipal Women's Council.

This organizational structure functioned well, more or less, until internal disputes over financial, administrative and political control led to the first institutional crisis. This in turn had a significant impact on the outside funding sources. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that, in this crisis, the women who were organized in the communities were not involved, and continued to be active in providing health services in their communities.

The crisis, the intervention of the international NGO and the difficulties that arose as a consequence, led to profound reflections on the part of the project's leader, who made the decision to reorganize the center and search for new sources of financing to avoid dependence. To this end, they decided to elect a new executive council and broaden the Municipal Women's Council.

This organizational structure was in place until 1994 when the work with the small municipal councils was strengthened, though the executive council was weakened and the Municipal Women's Council ceased to function. These changes coincided with the beginning of the productive programs and an expansion of the Center's coverage, and the decision was made to administratively divide the Center's attention into four sectors that brought together various communities.

It was in this organizational context that the second institutional crisis took place, which led the Center to carry out clarifying assemblies with the different women involved in the program. Based on those assemblies, they decided to

take radical measures to resolve the crisis, including: reaffirming the project's political and ideological autonomy; breaking definitively with the FSLN and the mayor's office, forming a new executive council and Assembly, and changing the legal status of the Center to a non-governmental development organization.

With this new legal and political situation, in 1996, the Center's executive council decided to renovate the organizational structure of the women, replacing the Territorial councils with broad assemblies in the communities. This allowed for rotating leadership in the community sphere.

## **2. In Search of New Organizational Forms of Participation**

By 1997, the Center had been able to broaden its coverage, not only in terms of beneficiaries, but also in territorial coverage and program diversity. This produced an urgent need of strengthening the spaces for exchanges among women so that they are able to reflect on their own experiences, principally because the basic methodology that has been used has privileged the active participation of women in their own processes.

Thus, groups of women known as "the dreamers of the future" were created. In these spaces, the women who participated in the different programs carried out reflections about the process of change that they were experiencing and began to identify personal and concrete goals for themselves.

This structure was in place until the end of 1998 when Hurricane Mitch hit the country, which made clear the need to find a new organizational structure that would respond to the need for attention by women in distinct categories: those who became involved in the programs at the Center's inception; those who became involved in the wake of Hurricane Mitch, from the end of 1998 through 1999; and those who became involved in the years 2000 and 2001.

The Center's administration decided to form groups of women differentiated by seniority, naming coordinators for each of those groups. Thus, in a given community, one can find various groups of organized women. The principal objective of these groups is to offer ongoing monitoring of women's participation in the different programs that the Center has to offer, as well as maintaining a space of communication and exchange to discuss and reflect about problems and realities. This organizational structure did not change the distribution by sector in terms of the Center's territorial attention.

At the time, the Center's administration began to see the need to advance from a process of individual empowerment on the part of women towards a more collective empowerment, which meant moving from a strictly socio-economic field to one more explicitly political, with a goal of changing the situation of all

women in the municipality. To this end, the natural leaders in each community were identified, in order to facilitate this process.

The goal is to prepare the human resources to contribute to the process of change from within each of their own communities. The first objective has been to create a collective gender identity and consciousness among the leaders and gradually prepare them for taking on leadership roles within the Rural Community Committees, which are the grassroots organizational structures of local development and in which the participation of women has been minimal.

More recently, in 2001, the Center's administration decided to begin a strategic political project: the creation of a school of community leaders. With this program, which has been dubbed "Citizen Participation", the aim was to spark a process of changes among the community leaders with the emphasis on creating a critical gender consciousness and an integral and democratic conception regarding participation and leadership. Not only leaders involved in the Center's programs participate in this, but also other women who are leaders in their communities as well as male community leaders who want to collaborate with the Center. The program's coverage is municipal and has been designed for a four-year period.

The overview of the Center's history and this recounting of the organization of women shows us that, along with the process of economic and ideological changes, the organization thought of in political terms has yet to reach a stage of full development. According to the analysis carried out, this can be explained by a number of factors:

- a. Although an enormous individual change has taken place in the women, there has yet to form a collective gender identity and consciousness. In other words, the women have not been able to constitute themselves as political actors. This clearly indicates that they are at a pre-civic stage and have yet to move down a road toward more clearly political action—towards a civic plane, in other words.
- b. To date, most of the organizational process has been conceived of and directed as an initiative on the part of the Center's administration and has responded, more than anything to the needs of follow-up on women's participation in the program and has not had an explicitly political objective. This is not a deficiency in and of itself, as it is likely that the success of the women's ownership of the productive and educational projects has to do with the level of overlap existing between the organizational structures and women's everyday activities.
- c. A similar case can be seen with the Center's political and administrative leadership, as the Coordinating Council carries out political functions at the same time as it administratively runs the Center's programs.<sup>40</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

The principal objective of this study was, in addition to systematizing the Center's experience, to be able to identify whether or not a process of empowerment had been effected among the women linked to the Center. This led to the posing of several key questions: if a process of empowerment in this group had been noted, what kind of empowerment was it? What are its principal characteristics? And in what kinds of environments is it produced?

The current theory does not offer a clear definition of the concept and less so a method to evaluate a process of this nature. Thus, one of the key problems facing this study was the elaboration of the concept and the formulation of a method to carry out an analysis of this case. Thus, the more general definition of this concept indicated that the analysis should take into account at least two fields; the individual and the collective; and three spheres: the economic, the ideological and the political. Based on that, an attempt was made to identify some variables to evaluate whether or not the process of empowerment had been able to cover the fundamental aspects of the two fields and the three spheres.

In the case of the women of Malpaisillo, it's clear that processes of change have occurred that are expressed in economic conditions, private arrangements and public arrangements. The changes in economic conditions rest on four basic elements: property and access to land, a new sexual division of labor, access to productive resources and an evolution in women's economic status and roles. In this sense, it is important to underscore that economic empowerment has allowed women to become active, independent and autonomous subjects of their own economic processes.

The changes in the private arrangements are seen in changes in the relations between men and women, changes in the rates of abuse and violence, participation of men and male children in domestic tasks, changes in the levels of communication, changes in women's relationships with their daughters and changes in participation in activities outside the household.

Seen as a whole, all these factors indicate that a transformation has taken place in the subjectivity of women, as well as a fundamental redefinition of the I/self, which is an integral part of action for political changes. If our "I"s are social phenomena and take their significance from the society that they are part of, the development of an independent sense of the "I" necessarily calls into question other areas of life.

At the same time, the changes in public arrangements have allowed for the creation of an organization of women, feminine leadership, the emergence of a

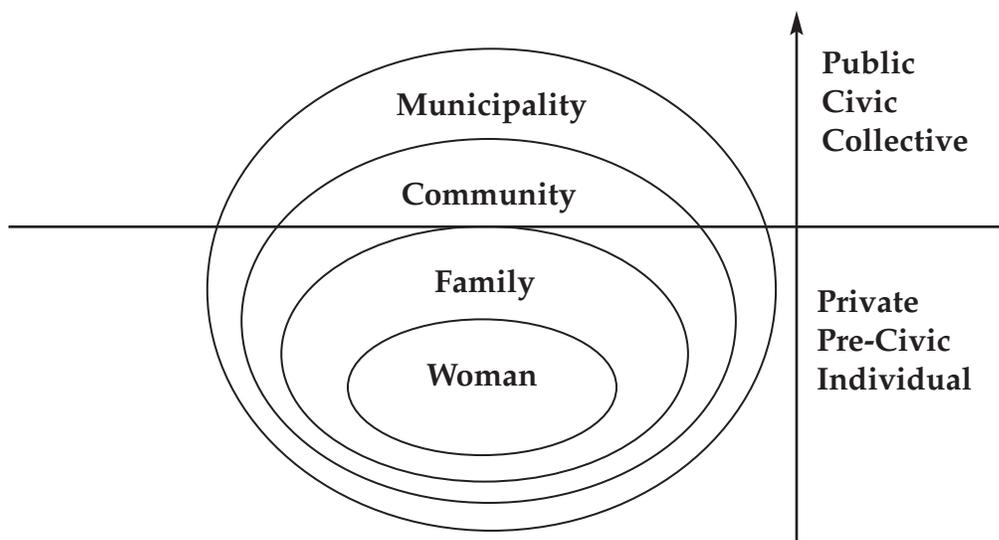
collective identity, the recognition and the legitimacy of their communities and the municipality, the opening of spaces of political participation, and the beginning of a process of political influence and local power.

Among all these, this process has been the slowest and is explained because up until now the most important changes for empowerment have been located primarily in the individual field. This is to say that, both the actions of the Center as well as the process lived by the women has led them to become individual subjects in terms of having a gender identity and consciousness, but they have yet to constitute themselves as a collective subject.

During the interviews and focus groups, the women were asked how they saw themselves in the future, or what other important change they wanted to make in their lives. The majority of them, with the exception of some who are considered leaders, responded with images having to do with their own economic well-being or that of their family's, but in no case did they visualize themselves as a group that acts politically against the subordination of the collective or against the relations of power between men and women.

### **The Model of Concentric Circles**

If we look closely, the organizational and political action process that the women linked to the Xochilt-Acalt Center have experienced can be represented through a series of concentric circles, which indicate the fields of action that have been gradually covered.



In the space that corresponds to the smallest circle, actions were carried out to create a gender consciousness and identity, as well as contributing to the constitution of women as social subjects. In this sense, the organizational structure formed now responds principally to this purpose, as the organized groups in different communities aim to work in their own spaces where the women can discuss their particular situations. The principal characteristic of these groups is that practically all their activities revolve around the economic hub—that is, productive activities and, to a lesser degree, around the reflective activities in terms of gender.

The second circle has as an objective action in the family, as this is the nucleus of social organization where values, ideologies and norms are transmitted; moreover, it is also the first form of organization where the women are subordinated to a form of masculine power.

The economic, ideological and psychosocial development that the women have experienced has allowed them to modify the relations of power within their families and assure that women will occupy a new position within the family structure. Nevertheless, as the women themselves explain, this change has not consisted in the substitution of one subordinate power for another, but rather the establishment of relations of a new type—more equitable and democratic.

The third circle is the community field, which implies a transition from the modification of power relations in a strictly private arena towards relations of power in a public arena. This means carrying out political actions, of course. At this moment, those actions are concentrated on the creation and strengthening of community leadership, especially women's leadership.

Finally, the last circle corresponds to the municipal action arena. This is the arena of action that is the least developed in political terms. Nevertheless, the strengthening of community leadership can be seen reflected in the strengthening of the Rural Community Committees and greater involvement in municipal politics. We must remember that political empowerment aims towards participation in the decision-making sphere and that the construction of citizenship refers to the exercise of rights, which has as a starting point of political equality among all citizens. While it's true that women in Nicaragua enjoy formal citizenship, what is still needed is substantive citizenship, and thus this point underscores the effective abilities of women to exercise their formal rights.

In this sense, the will-based nature of the concept of citizenship should not be forgotten. Thus, it could be the case that the women have sufficient abilities, but scarcely exercise their citizenship in the public arena. The construction of the political will to change requires a process of politicization that culminates in a vigorous exercise of citizenship and the resignification of politics.

The role that the women and the Xochilt-Acalt Center can have in this ongoing process depends on various factors, including:

1. The development of the process of political empowerment among organized grassroots women.
2. The strengthening of clear female leadership, both in the communities and at the municipal level.
3. The clear definition of the Center's functions, both as an NGO as well as facilitator of the process.

The data available to date indicates that there are sufficient conditions for the advancement in this process until women come to constitute themselves as political subjects with a clear presence and influence in both the community and municipal arenas.

In this sense, one of the principal necessities is the opening of a process of broad debate that involves everyone, with the aim of deciding the kind of participation that each person will have. The debate should try to respond to the following key questions:

1. Whether or not they desire to move forward with the process of empowerment and if they wish to strengthen that empowerment in the political sphere and political arena.
2. What the strategic objectives are which this empowerment is to respond to—in other words, empowerment for what?
3. How this empowerment will be developed—what is the strategic plan?
4. Who participates and how they participate in the process.
5. With relation to the Center's participation in this process, it is of great and urgent importance to develop a process of parallel debates that allow for a clear elucidation of the role that the Center will play in the future. In this case, one of the alternatives is to locate oneself in a position that privileges the facilitation of the women's political and ideological processes—in other words, their constitution as political and social subjects.

This implies that both the administrative structure as well as the human and economic resources should work towards this objective. In addition, the group that is currently directing the Center's work should assume a clear position of leadership and political direction, separating the administrative tasks and/or administration from more explicitly political tasks.

Another of the alternatives is to stick closely to the role that the development NGOs have played to date, which is to support the unprotected groups and sectors through the services they offer, as well as assistance for survival. This means, then, that the Center should strengthen its administrative structures

and, by the same token, clearly differentiate between political tasks and the administration and management of the NGO.

A third alternative would be to maintain the role that the Center has played until now, which combines the offering of services and assistance with the facilitation of processes. But in this case, it is important that they came to the task of differentiating, not only between political direction and administrative management, but also between the very organizational structures of the Center and the women themselves, strengthening leadership and the process of building collective identities and consciousness. This also implies that, even at the risk of losing a certain amount of control over the women, they continue to push for women's independence and autonomy.

6. With respect to the participation of the women themselves, it is important that the debate around these key aspects has their participation, just as has been done on earlier occasions.

The women themselves should clearly decide if they want to continue being primarily program beneficiaries or political subjects. The point here is that they should consciously decide whether or not they want to be treated simply as beneficiaries without substantially changing their collective situation, or if they would rather adopt a more active and pro-active attitude in all the processes of their community and municipality. In the second case, it would be necessary to reinforce both leaderships as an organizational structure oriented towards political objectives.

7. In the case of the leaders, the role that they can play in this whole process is absolutely essential. While they have to move forward with their own growth, at the same time they have to take on the political direction of the women's organization, and of the process itself. In this sense, it's essential that they participate in the training school and that they also expand their area of political actions. A strategic step is to gradually begin to take seats on the Rural Community Communities, in such a way that they are visible, recognized and legitimate at the municipal level from an autonomous position, one that is administratively distinct from the Center.

The process of empowerment that these women have experienced brings a key aspect to the debate--the relations between the empowerment of women and the problem of human development. This case demonstrates, with palpable deeds, that the human growth of women broadens out to the rest of the family and may even have repercussions in other dimensions.

In addition, this experience reaffirms the belief that development on a human scale is only effective if women's participation is considered as core to the whole process. It's also crucial that women's participation be conceived of from an integral perspective, rather than be restricted to exclusively economic issues.

In this sense, the systematization of this experience and the identification of the methodologies, or approaches, proposed in this study can all serve as input for a serious, open and systematic debate among the development NGOs and the cooperation agencies that support women's rural development projects and programs. This debate is key as it allows for the reorientation of the use of resources not only towards actors who have traditionally not been taken into account, but also towards processes of a different type and make-up.

At the same time, this experience renews the debate about the role that development NGOs, international cooperation agencies and the government institutions themselves can, and should, play. It openly questions the scope and results of assistance that, to date, has been concentrated on providing resources without considering the individuals involved to be subjects of their own processes. In other words, it questions those groups that look at project participants principally as beneficiaries, clients or target groups, instead of considering them to be the agents of change in their own conditions of life.

The experience of the women and the Xochilt-Acalt Center in Malpaisillo offers both lessons and hope in spite of the difficulties and limitations that have been faced. It is instructive because it shows how clear political will is a determining factor in facilitating the process of authentic empowerment. It is hopeful because it offers clarifying indicators regarding the way in which this process has taken place in a group of rural women, and how it has touched on all areas of the women's lives.

## **Recommendations**

The conclusions to which this study leads oblige us to formulate a series of recommendations.

1. The most important and urgent has to do with opening a debate internal to the NGO sector and among all participating that, with the aim of clearly defining strategic objectives and the type of participation that should be part of the processes underway, as well as those to come.
2. Once those decisions have been made along these lines, or in a simultaneous fashion, it is important to develop a process of differentiated strategic planning. In other words, formulating a strategic plan for the development of the NGOs and another plan exclusively for the health of the women.
3. It is also urgent that a separation and differentiation be made between the strictly administrative and management functions on the part of the NGO and the political actions and direction of the group. This would allow for a more efficient direction of efforts and resources and a more conscious growth in political and ideological terms.

4. One of the key aspects and one that needs to be monitored is the construction and strengthening of female and community leadership. In this sense, it is important to offer follow-up and constantly evaluate the way in which the leaders' training school is functioning, revise the curriculum and strengthen it with the content and experience of similar initiatives.
5. It is also important that the work methodologies discussed here be validated with the subjects themselves. This work (the project's results) should be discussed broadly, and not only with women from the Center but also with other organizations, groups and institutions linked to the issues, including funding and cooperation agencies.
6. In addition to carrying out technical evaluations of the programs at an internal level, it is important to have outside technical evaluations done on a regular basis, so as to be able to measure the efficiency and effectiveness of the programs and resources. At the same time, this is a first-hand input in the drawing up of strategic plans, not only for the NGOs, but also for the women as such.
7. Finally, monitoring of the gender distribution of productive work as well as resource distribution should be done on an ongoing basis. Monitoring will note whether or not we are talking about a "stable" change in the power relations within the productive process, given that the growth in the productive surplus allows for marketing, even in distant markets and this could mean that the men take control of this activity, becoming intermediaries for women.

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14. *Idem*.
15. *Ibid*. p. 409.

16. *Idem.*
17. *Ibid.* p. 21.
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19. Through an agreement with INATEC, training was begun for goat raising with 15 women, and the literacy program began with 29 women. In 1995, INATEC began offering training for the organic production of vegetables. Women's yards were used as "demonstration gardens" and the Center provided them with seeds, tools and technical assistance.
20. The construction of this physical infrastructure in the communities, is at the service of the activities that organized women are carrying out in the areas: it has a room where the midwife can work in good conditions, including electricity that is obtained through the use of solar panels; a meeting room for training sessions; and a storage area to store materials and agricultural equipment.
21. Deere, Carmen Diana and Magdalena Leon. Op. Cit.
22. During the first years of the Center's existence, the women organized in their communities to better manage the gynecological services provided by the mobile clinic. In the start-up phase of the productive programs, this same organization served as a base with which to select the women who would participate in the pilot projects.
23. The difference between the trade and this type of commerce is that in the first case, the women are paid in kind, while money is exchanged in the second case.
24. Currently, most yards are divided into three areas of production: vegetables, fruits and livestock.
25. In the majority of the cases, the Program utilizes drip irrigation that allows for the maintenance of the gardens with sufficient humidity and substantially reduces the work of women and children in carrying water.
26. One of the focus group participants said that she had to go approximately 5,000 meters from the garden to the water source and needed to carry 25 "cans" (about 5 gallons each) in the morning, and another 25 in the afternoon to water the plot. She had to carry out this task with the help of just one of her small daughters.

27. Asked about this, the women underscored this as an extremely important element, given that the other programs that support the raising of small livestock—chickens and pigs, for example—require the family to “share” the family food (corn, rice, beans, etc.) with the animals.
28. These women were selected for two fundamental characteristics: being good producers and having assimilated on the knowledge acquired through the training sessions. All of them are located in the three territorial zones covered by the program.
29. According to several women who became involved in the Program in 1994 and 1995, they have been able to reproduce 30-70 animals.
30. A second objective was to ensure that the Center’s investment in women, as there were a number of cases in which a couple separated and, once all the technology had been installed and the capital invested for production, the woman would leave the household with her children—with all the resources in the hands of the man.
31. The Center has 173 *manzanas* of land, with 148 of those used for livestock, and the other 25 for agricultural production.
32. The silos used to store the harvested grains are made by another group of women in the Center’s technology workshop and are sold at favorable prices to the women producers.
33. According to the interviews, the women used the goat milk for family consumption and the cow’s milk to sell and/or produce dairy products, also for sale.
34. At this time, the Center decided to forgive the debt that women had incurred so that they could recover and then begin again with a new agricultural cycle.
35. A number of women said that the first technical experts who offered assistance to the Program did not really believe in the possibility of carrying out certain type of horticulture.
36. One of the women who was interviewed said, “they said we were crazy, that all of us who were out in the streets were crazy, because we were out there without anybody in charge, because we went where we wanted to go, so they called us the crazy ones, untamed ones”.
37. In one of the focus groups, two of the women interviewed said “we didn’t have any voice in deciding what we were going to grow on a given *manzana*

... now we decide how we're going to plant, when we're going to plant ..."; "And at the time of selling those products that we harvest, the money goes into our hands".

38. In a very generalized way, the men developed a kind of campaign in all the communities where the women were becoming involved in the program; calling them "tramps" and "crazies", and adding as well that they wouldn't be able to grow anything on this unfertile land.
39. In terms of the design, the model speaks to criteria of privacy, security, hygiene and ventilation. The houses are made out of locally-produced materials (red brick and roofing tiles); and have an outdoor walkway, a living area, three rooms and a kitchen.
40. The Coordinating Council is the implementing organ of the Executive Council and the Assembly of NGO members; it is the administrative expression of the Center's different areas and programs; and it is also the coordinating body of the organizational structure that brings women together.