

Reconstructing Roles and Relations: A gendered analysis of women's participation in reconstruction in post-Mitch Nicaragua

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Introduction

In October 1998 Central America suffered one of the worst disasters in over 200 years. In the region the disaster affected almost 3.5 million people, leaving 18,000 dead or disappeared, the majority in Honduras and Nicaragua. In Nicaragua the Hurricane brought the inequalities and vulnerabilities of the country into sharp focus. However, there were hopes that the destruction would create links between civil society, national and local governments, and the international community to construct strategies for sustainable human development which focus on people, in particular the poor and marginalised sectors of society.

Mitch did act as a catalyst for the organisation of civil society and the development of their own plans for the transformation of the region through processes of reconstruction. One outcome in Nicaragua was the formation of the Civil Co-ordinator for Emergency and Reconstruction (CCER), a Coalition of 350 national NGO and other civil society organisations. The CCER from the outset sought to combine practical, research and advocacy roles, to use information gathered on the emergency and reconstruction process to lobby national and international policy makers and thus better respond to the needs of the people.

In order to understand better the situation a Social Audit was conducted by the CCER. Two phases of this large-scale social survey are now complete and the third is in the planning phase. The first stage, carried out in February 1999, surveyed some 10,500 households in 16 of the worst affected municipalities. The second stage of the audit took place in September of the same year.² The results of the Social Audit and of a complementary more in depth study undertaken in four affected communities by *Puntos de Encuentro*, a Nicaraguan feminist NGO, will form the basis of this article³.

What the results of the Social Audit highlight perhaps most clearly is that reconstruction in Nicaragua, to the extent that it has occurred, has largely been via national and international NGOs. Government initiatives have been few, and largely centred on large-scale transport infrastructure projects. Indeed to the question "what is the most important thing the Government has done in the reconstruction process?" 60% of those

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² The aim of the Social Audit has been to collect data on damages, both material and psychological, suffered and aid received in both the emergency and reconstruction periods. The audit sought not only to collect information on the extent to which aid had been received and from whom, but attempted to give a voice to those included and excluded in the reconstruction process on the nature of that aid. Key elements were the equity and transparency of its distribution, the utility of the resources received and the involvement of the people in the decisions around the reconstruction of their communities. The Social Audit also collected information around both psychological affect and need for attention, and on the situation in terms of violence against women.

³ The full results of the Social Audit and the research undertaken by Puntos de Encuentro (in Spanish) are available on the CCER web page: <http://www.ccer-nic.org/doc.htm>

interviewed in the September Social Audit replied ‘nothing’ – this rising to over 90% in some regions.

In the face of this lack of action by the government, civil society became pro-active, not merely criticising government plans but presenting their own alternatives. The CCER proposal for reconstruction, presented at the international meetings in Washington and Stockholm calls for a reconstruction guided by a shared vision of sustainable human development. Placing as central the need to reduce social and environmental vulnerability the proposal stresses that to achieve this demands challenging unequal relations of power based on age, ethnic origin, class, and gender.

That the CCER elected spokesperson is a woman with many years experience within the women’s movement, that the member organisation that instigated and oversaw the Social Audit is a feminist NGO, and that the CCER brings under its umbrella the two largest gender networks, the network of women against violence and the network of women pro-health, may help to explain this focus on using reconstruction as an opportunity for transformation, not least in terms of gender roles and relations. To what extent this has been attempted and successful ‘on the ground’ will be the focus of this paper. It will consider the roles of women in reconstruction; their participation and leadership in reconstruction projects and in individual household responses.

Household response to crisis

It is interesting to note that the general level of damage suffered did not vary significantly by sex.⁴ One area where a gendered impact of Mitch has been seen, however, is in terms of emotional affect suffered. Overall in the February after Mitch more than 1 in 5 people interviewed for the Social Audit reported that someone in their household was very emotionally affected. Three quarters of the people reported as affected were women or girls. More female heads reported a person in the household affected emotionally by the hurricane compared to male-headed households. However, this may be better explained by the fact that the data also suggests men are less likely to report emotional affect, as are younger people, rather than any inherent characteristics of female-headed households per se.

The passing of Hurricane Mitch

During the crisis, as Hurricane Mitch passed and in the immediate aftermath when communities were isolated due to damaged infrastructure, men and women worked together to evacuate people, move belongings, and later to clear the roads and make safe passages.

From in-depth interviews with men and women in affected communities⁵ a small proportion of the men suggested that during this time the women were inactive, either in general *“They only went about with their arms folded, the poor things, crying for their things that were flooded”* or because of their child care responsibilities, *“(They did)*

⁴ While some suggest that more men than women died as a result of Mitch in Nicaragua due to men’s more ‘risky’ behaviour patterns, this data is far from reliable.

⁵ The research undertaken by *Puntos de Encuentro* focussed on 4 communities impacted by Mitch. It utilised three research methods; a questionnaire census of the women in the community, semi-structured interviews with a sub-sample of the women and focus group discussion with a small number of the women interviewed. In two of the four communities questionnaires and semi-structures interviews were also undertaken with the male partners of the women. Here then men were included as partners rather than as ‘people’ in their own right.

nothing, the poor things, sought ways to take care of the children who were becoming ill ...". Thus while women were performing 'traditional' female activities such as childcare, preparation of what little food was available and caring for the sick, they were seen as 'doing nothing' by men.

The majority of men recognised the work of women, however, when this work was outside the traditional;

"...as the river started to rise more quickly we started to organise and we helped those that had more things to loose, to rescue youngsters, belongings, to evacuate them, the women helping, rescuing other women.....all the people struggled ..."

While recognising women's contribution on one level, women's activities were still often presented as 'helping' men in their activities. A division is also noticeable between men and women, not only in terms of the activities performed, but in terms of the organisation of groups as all female or all male. As one man interviewed notes of his wives activities; *"She went with the women looking how to repair the road... The men in front and they (the women) coming behind with rocks...."*

After the initial passing of the hurricane even for those men who recognised women's 'help' with more traditionally male activities sharper divisions between men's and women's activities become clear *"...the women on their own account have not done anything more than to organise to do a census....."* and women's important activities once again become undervalued.

The women interviewed mention activities such as mending roads, walking many miles in search of food and other types of help, making makeshift housing etc during the immediate crisis. In their opinion at least, they worked equal to the men during this time. Many noted, however, that men had a different opinion about either the value of their contribution *"The men say that women work less 'you don't work equally to me, women can't work, they don't know how to'..."* or that they contributed at all; *"Men recognised our contribution at the time. Some have now forgotten"*.

Reconstruction responses and their consequences

In the longer term Mitch has had a number of consequences for men and women in terms of the roles they perform. However, these changes are not necessarily in line with those suggested by the literature on the theme around coping responses. For example rather than women entering into productive work or diversifying their productive activities the proportion of women in productive activities has declined post-Mitch, both in absolute numbers and relative to men's employment in income generating activities⁶. What this means is that a larger proportion of households now rely on a single, male income earner. This has consequences for the position of women within households in terms of access to, and control over resources.

However, differences are apparent between women. More women in male-headed households than female heads of household ceased to perform productive activities post-Mitch. Thus while female heads that could not continue with their pre-Mitch activities sought alternative income generating work, women in male-headed households appear not to have done so to the same extent. For female partners once

⁶ Pre-Mitch half the women interviewed in the Puntos de Encuentro study were involved in an income generating activity, after Mitch this had fallen to below a third.

their income generating activity was gone they appear to have returned to the home rather than seeking alternative activities. This suggests one impact of Mitch to be a reinforcing of stereotypical women's roles rather than a transformation and diversification.

However, other trends suggest that the situation is not quite so clear cut. Women were asked about their ideas of who made (pre-Mitch) and makes (post-Mitch) the most important contribution to the household. Recognition both pre and post-Mitch of a woman's own contribution is, not surprisingly, associated with female headship. The majority of female heads said that before Mitch it was they who made the most important contribution to the household. It is also associated with the woman performing productive work – in male-headed households more women who had/have productive work state they, she and her male partner, or (less commonly) she alone makes the most important contribution to the household. Productive work and the income this brings, increases recognition of women's rights to a voice in the household, as one woman explains: *“..before we were dominated by men....it was when women started to work that we could speak, before the man was the one who dominated, it was as he said and nothing else, this has changed.”*

Thus given this relationship the decline in proportions of women in productive work would be assumed to affect negatively women's perceptions of their own contribution post-Mitch. While this has occurred in some cases two interesting trends appear to exist. First, more female heads after Mitch state someone else in the household, usually a son, makes the most important contribution. This in comparison with the fact that more women partners in male-headed household state it is they who make the most important contribution to the household after Mitch compared to before.

Thus, in terms of women's leadership roles in households two trends are apparent. In female heads a worrying trend of decreased recognition of the importance of their own leadership role in the household is apparent. In male-headed households an increased perception or recognition by the women of the importance of their contribution is found.

This being said, not all women in male-headed households share the same experience. Young female partners/wives (below 25 years of age) appear to have had a different experience of reconstruction than both female heads and older women. While generally the proportion of women partners in productive work has fallen, this is greatest among young female partners (already least likely to be in productive work pre-Mitch). Moreover, while the evidence suggests a general increase in perception of women partners own contribution to household post-Mitch, the pattern with young female partners is the reverse (i.e. more young women name their husband as making the most important contribution post compared to pre Mitch).

Since perceptions of contribution, along with productive work, influence the position of women within households in terms of access and control over resources the situation of young female partners, already of concern pre-Mitch may be deemed, from a feminist perspective, to have worsened post-Mitch.

Interventions for reconstruction

Types of reconstruction interventions

The case study evidence from the four communities studied shows the range of types of reconstruction initiatives post-Mitch.

First, some established national NGOs do not appear to have altered substantially their programmes. In the community studied in Estelí a national NGO working with small scale farmers changed very little its approach: some help was given to a small number of women to rehabilitate damaged patios but the main approach for reconstruction appears to have been the condoning of some outstanding credit debts and the offering of new credit to buy seeds etc. In terms of its gender focus a representative from the organisations states; *“men participate more ...in that more men than women work in agriculture..”*⁷

Second, has been the arrival of new international NGOs in communities. In the community studied in Neuva Segovia an international NGO arrived to work in the area post-Mitch. In terms of its focus a representative states; *“we do not work with individual people, we work in a determined geographical zone”*. More specifically the organisation admits it has no gender perspective *“..we have initiated some actions, but we don't have anything defined as gender as such....”*.

This is in contrast to the community studied in Leon. This community also benefited from international aid but with important differences in both the mechanism used, aid is delivered via a partner national NGO, and the focus of the project; *“We have positively discriminated towards women. Some of the resources to rehabilitate livelihoods we have given to the women after hurricane Mitch”*. In terms of men's acceptance of this positive discrimination the representative of the national NGO further states that *“the men accepted that the women are in the project because they have seen that it has supported them in their household economy... the women have their cows and the men are drinking the milk...”*. Here then is a third situation, a focus on women's practical needs post-Mitch or perhaps better stated the delivery of household material aid, to benefit all, via women.

A fourth scenario also exists; a reconstruction approach which attempts to include more 'strategic' as well as practical gender needs via consciousness raising activities often for both women and men. This experience, seen in Nueva Segovia, has been via the activities of national NGOs, in general those that already have a number of years of experience working in the community either on issues such as health or directly with women's groups. The entrance into the project may be 'practical' but this is seen only as the gateway: *“...we work with training women that come to get credit from us, we invite them to participate in workshops on gender awareness, their situation of subordination, the need to organise, improving self esteem.... to take decisions in their lives”*.

These different approaches to reconstruction may be assumed to have different impacts on women. Before exploring the outcomes a little further it is important to note the evidence from the Social Audit suggests that the group who have most obviously feel to

⁷ Although women themselves may under report their agricultural work, for example over half of those women interviewed who stated they were not working also reported that they 'helped' in agriculture, such statements by organisations working with agricultural communities are worrying.

have benefited from reconstruction are not men compared to women, or women compared to men, but young compared to older people. This appears to be related more with young people's ability to gain access to the available resources for reconstruction rather than a targeting policy by NGOs.

While young people may not have been targeted in reconstruction one group appears to have been - female heads of household. While this may be taken as a positive step forward, given their 'vulnerable' position in society (itself a contested idea) it needs to be considered more closely given the evidence available. For example, while similar proportions of female heads as male heads received help in order to sow after Mitch, fewer actually did so. Similarly, while higher proportions of female than male-headed households received help for housing, fewer felt that their opinion had been taken into account in the construction process.

Providing material resources to women then is not sufficient. The former finding highlights the need to consider the wider context. For example giving seeds to a woman who no longer has land on which to sow them, or has no money to pay the needed male labourers to prepare the land has little sense. Access to resources is necessary but is not sufficient if the capacity to use those resources is lacking. The latter example raises the issue of how and to what extent female heads are really benefiting from this targeting in terms of their longer-term more 'strategic' needs.

To explore the impact of reconstruction on these more strategic needs demands a closer analysis of how women are being incorporated into reconstruction. It demands a shift from an analysis of material gains to an analysis of the other benefits that 'participation' is assumed to bring.

Women's participation in reconstruction projects

Participation rates of women in community based projects and programmes have increased post-Mitch raising from under a quarter to over half the women interviewed in the four communities studied. The lowest levels of participation are recorded amongst young female partners/wives in male-headed households. The highest levels are amongst female heads of household. This is perhaps not surprising since women heads are assumed to take on dual responsibilities of male heads and female partners when they head their own households. The fact that female heads appear to have been actively targeted in reconstruction may also help to explain this.

The real positive impact on women of participation in reconstruction, however, is debatable since ensuring women's inclusion in the reconstruction process does not necessarily bring benefits for women. First it is important to note that the majority of women participating in reconstruction are doing so, perhaps not surprisingly, for practical ends. Women's perceptions of projects as fulfilling practical needs may be contrary to the ideas of those instigating them. As a representative from one women's organisation notes; *"We have found that training (conscious raising activities) is not the women's priority now, their priority is survival... looking for a penny in order to live..."*

Yet even on this level the data suggests a lack of 'success' if the aim is to provide material benefit for women. While over half the women interviewed think women are participating most in reconstruction (compared to men) only a quarter state it is women who benefit the most from reconstruction; the majority see benefit as being for the

family. If in contrast, this is the aim – to target women merely as better deliverers of services and resources, then the indirect outcome may be to reinforce traditional gender roles and relations rather than transform them.

In terms of more strategic or transforming roles of reconstruction, the research shows no real evidence of success at least at this time. Taking a concrete example, no positive relation between participation and increased perceptions of contribution exists. That is women who are participating in reconstruction projects do not show improved perceptions of the importance of their contribution to the household, nor is it the case that more women who are participating recognise their own contribution compared to those women who are not participating.

In fact one of the clearer aspects of the possible consequences of reconstruction interventions is a negative one; the research suggests one outcome of reconstruction to be conflict, both between and within communities and households. A third of all the women interviewed felt that there had been problems with the organisations working in reconstruction in terms of establishment of needs and priorities of the communities. Moreover, half felt that distribution of aid had been unfair⁸. Most worrying in gender terms is that problems with reconstruction projects appear to have an impact on relations between men and women in households.

Indirect impacts of reconstruction projects

A relationship exists between perceptions of problems with/in reconstruction projects and perceptions of conflict and increased violence in the household. That is while less than a fifth of those who do not think there have been problems of some sort with the reconstruction projects think that there has been conflict between couples over reconstruction, this rises to over half of those who perceive problems with reconstruction projects. In terms of violence the pattern is the same with around a quarter of those who do not perceive problems with reconstruction projects suggesting that violence against women has risen post-Mitch, compared to almost half of those who do think there have been problems with the reconstruction process. What the evidence appears to suggest is that getting reconstruction wrong may impact on more than the material well being of people, but affect their health, safety and emotional well being also.

Interestingly the research shows no direct relation between perceptions of conflict in couples and perceptions of increased violence. The mechanisms by which violence is transmitted then in situations of crisis and reconstruction still needs further research. In fact overall the figures from both studies are inconclusive in terms of levels of household violence post-Mitch, with half stating violence has increased or stayed the same and half that it has decreased. In this context three concepts are important:

⁸ Moreover, it is interesting to note that while the assumption may be that the problem stems from agencies setting priorities with little or no dialogue with the community, this does not appear to be the case. Indeed the problem may actually lie with agencies attempting to employ 'best practice' criteria. First, international relief agencies appear to have favoured some areas over others (perhaps through lack of knowledge of other initiatives already established there or perhaps for more 'political' and status reasons). Second, entry routes have been via discussion with local leaders who help to identify those households with most need. That a number of projects have talked to the same local leaders and thus targeted the same 'needy' households has resulted in more exaggerated feelings of inclusion/ exclusion in these communities and highlights the continued lack of co-ordination between these high profile funding organisations.

conflict (arguments / discussion), violence (conceptualised by the women as physical violence alone) and fear. Fear here is of abandonment, not of physical violence. To a large extent fear of abandonment appears to stem from the perceived problems of female headship, in social not economic terms. The fear of abandonment for the social stigma this brings keeps women in male-headed households and putting up with men's actions; drinking, infidelity and violence; *"If he goes with other women then it does not matter. That he doesn't forget his obligations to his family, his children is what matters"*. Moreover, the need for a man is clear from the following quote; *"When he ran around with other women and didn't want anything to do with me ...I didn't leave, didn't move from the house...because really it is very difficult, very hard on the children to have a stepfather"*.

Reconstruction: Transformation or Reinforcement?

The extent to which the much-talked about change in gender relations in situations of crisis and reconstruction has occurred in Nicaragua is questionable. For female heads while they have largely managed to maintain their income generating activities, and at the same time have participated in reconstruction projects, the final outcome may be material gain at the expense of their physical and mental well being. The decrease in their recognition of the importance of their contribution to the household stands in contrast to their increased work load post-Mitch.

For women in male-headed households while the experience may be different the outcome appears to be much the same. As noted above changes in women's productive activities, with women partners returning to the home, may be seen to reinforce traditional gender roles and increase women's dependence on men. Women's participation in projects of reconstruction may not compensate for this having similarly reinforcing tendencies given their often practical focus on women as service deliverers alone. Moreover, even if 'positive' changes occur, such as the noted increased recognition of women's own contribution in male-headed households, the impact may be limited since power relations in households are based on more than productive/reproductive divisions or who brings in the resources as the following illustrates:

Question: If only you were working in the household, your husband was here without work, who would be the head?

"It would be me because there would be no one else besides me. But really it would be him.... because if a woman is working it is because he gave his consent"

Moreover while woman's ideas of contribution to the household may change these may not be shared by male partners. In the two communities in the study where women's male partners were also interviewed high levels of disagreement were found on many issues. Only about half of the couples interviewed shared the same opinion around issues such as if the woman was working, who made the most important contribution to the household, or who was the key decision-maker in the household. Changes post-disaster such as in perceptions of ideas around contribution may actually work to increase points of conflict within couples, as men and women's opinions diverge. Work with men then may be as important as that with women in the reconstruction context.

In one community studied an integrated reconstruction project had been implemented, that includes an element of 'masculinity' training with men, and was reported by the

women as having a positive affect on gender relations. That the women in the community had been organised for many years and had been involved in a process of consciousness raising activities pre-Mitch may have provided the necessary conditions for this 'success'. It may also act to ensure that such an approach or rather such a diversion of resources to men, brings benefits for women as well. The danger would be to attempt to replicate such successes without the appropriate context, merely in response to the continued failure to find the mechanisms by which to include women in reconstruction in a way that optimises the opportunities for change, or worse, as a means to justify a continued focus on men.