

Conclusion

The campesinos included here have given us first-hand accounts of their own efforts to survive poverty, hardship, and the neoliberal policies that reduce them to landless laborers once again. What can we learn from these stories? We have seen that chief among their survival strategies are cooperative membership, the support of NGOs, and the strength of personal religious beliefs. The cooperative endeavor has only sporadically brought monetary benefits, but it has brought rich rewards of a personal, social, and cultural nature. The women in our study have developed organizational, technical, social, problem-solving, and negotiating skills, which have improved their productivity, contributed to the creation of alternatives to ease their plight, and strengthened their tenacity and determination to succeed. Benigna Mendiola, a leader of the women's section of UNAG, reported in a 1992 interview with the newspaper *Barricada* that what rural women want is very simple—land, titles, and loans. Whatever progress they have made toward that end, she says bluntly, has been due to their own “stubbornness” because the government “has not given them one cent.”¹

Women cooperativists, like Gloria Siesar of Masaya, have spoken of the self-confidence that they now feel, for they have proved to themselves and others that they are capable workers and that they play an important social and economic role. Similarly, Rosario Flores commented that AMOC members in Chinandega today are likely to be found working alongside men in non-traditional activities such as cement-mixing or tractor repair. In Guanacastillo, Don William's praise of his wife Bertha's efforts and those of her four compañeras in their minuscule agricultural cooperative attests to the change that is taking place in traditional and machista attitudes regarding women's innate capabilities and culturally conditioned gender roles. It has not been easy, nor is it easy today. Traditional machismo is still very much alive, but things are changing.

Despite the “double day” and the countless invisible adjustments made by women (mothers, grandmothers, adult female relatives) and their daughters, women cooperativists join, rejoin, or remain in cooperatives because they hope through collaboration to survive and, ultimately, to improve their economic situation and that of their children. Thus, they see membership as a way to live with dignity,