THE GENDERED BURDEN OF DEVELOPMENT IN NICARAGUA

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Abstract

The recent political “left turn” in Latin America has led to an increased emphasis on social policy and poverty-alleviation programs aimed at women. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews in a rural village in Nicaragua, I argue that one of the unintended consequences of such programs is an increase in women’s daily workload, which I call the gendered burden of development. By exploiting women’s presumed availability, these NGO and state-led programs entrench established gender roles and responsibilities. Furthermore, by placing the burden of community work on women, these programs contribute to the formation of a particular kind of developmental subject who assumes responsibility for her own hardships. Consequently, the structural conditions affecting the precariousness of women’s survival remain unchanged.
Women in Latin America are no strangers to the *doble jornada*, or double workday (Gonzalez de la Rocha 2001; Howell and Piza 1982). Women’s increasing participation in the paid labor market\(^1\) combined with their continued disproportionate share of household labor has contributed to the persistence of women’s “second shift” (Hochschild 1989) throughout the region. This dynamic was exacerbated following the drastic reduction in state spending on social services such as health care and education, and the privatization of many state industries in the 1990s (Metoyer 2000; Sassen 2000). As a result of these neoliberal economic policies, many women subsequently faced additional burdens as they sought to meet the basic needs of themselves and their families by entering the informal labor market or engaging in different forms of grassroots organizing (Babb 2001; Lind 1997; Moser 1993; Rodriguez 1994).

In recent years, however, Latin America has witnessed a shift away from the state retrenchment policies of the last two decades. The political “left turn” in the region has been characterized by an emphasis on social welfare, redistributive policies, and poverty-alleviation programs (Lomeli 2008; Weyland, Madrid, and Hunter 2010). A key component of many of these programs is women’s participation, which often takes the form of voluntary community labor (Cornwall 2003). While much debate has centered on whether or not such participation empowers women (Fernando 1997; Kabeer 1999; Sanyal 2009; Wieringa 1994), in this article I take a different approach, examining how participation has impacted women’s daily workload. To do so, I draw upon ethnographic fieldwork and interviews conducted in Loma Verde\(^2\), a rural village in Nicaragua where women have a history of involvement in participatory development projects of both NGO and government origin. I argue that one of the unintended consequences of these policies is an increase in women’s daily workload, which I call the gendered burden of
development. By exploiting women’s unpaid labor, these programs entrench established gender roles and responsibilities. Furthermore, by placing the burden of community work on women, these programs promote the formation of a particular kind of subject who is responsible for coping with her own hardships. As a result of this “care regime” (Franzoni and Voorend 2011), the precariousness of women’s survival remains largely unchanged.

WOMEN AND THE RISE OF NGOS IN LATIN AMERICA

For centuries, women have occupied a subordinate position throughout Latin America (Acosta-Belen and Bose 1990). One crucial contributing factor to the maintenance of this system of gender inequality is the historic devaluation and invisibility of women’s labor, both inside and outside the home. In response, women have mobilized in a variety of ways to draw attention to both their “practical needs” and “strategic gender interests” (Molyneux 1985). In addition to participation in labor unions and established political parties, women have also collectively organized to address material needs such as access to land, housing or basic services (Lind 1997; Radcliffe and Westwood 1993; Rodriguez 1994), as well as to protest the actions of repressive authoritarian regimes (Bouvard 1994; Jelin 1990). In the 1990s and 2000s, many autonomous women’s groups were formed in hopes of addressing women’s concerns more systematically (Chinchilla 1990; Ray and Korteweg 1999; Richards 2005).

The implementation of structural adjustment policies in Latin America during the 1980s and 1990s profoundly impacted women’s lives, including their forms of organizing (Babb 2001; Lind 1997; Radcliffe and Westwood 1993). Faced with severe debt crises, many Latin American countries adopted the neoliberal economic policies that the World Bank and International Monetary Fund prescribed (Weyland 1998). Broadly speaking, these policies included severe
cutbacks in state employment and government subsidies, the devaluation of local currency, higher interest rates, the privatization of state industries, and the elimination of import tariffs (Babb 2001). The primary “shock absorbers” for these policies were women (Babb 2001: 108). For example, based on an analysis of wages, employment rates, consumption patterns, and public spending in an urban area of Ecuador, Caroline Moser (1993) found that neoliberal structural adjustment policies produced specific disadvantages for women at the household level. She further described how these policies led many women to take on a “triple role” by working in the precarious lower rungs of the paid labor market while simultaneously maintaining the primary caregiving role and taking on new unremunerated community-management responsibilities (Moser 1993).

Women’s community labor under neoliberalism increased for two main reasons. On the one hand, in order to cope with the drastic reduction in state-provided social services, some women organized neighborhood health care clinics or community kitchens (Barrig 1996; Ewig 1999). These attempts to collectivize women’s growing workload were often spearheaded by local feminist organizations (Radcliffe and Westwood 1993). At the same time an influx of new NGOs began to offer programs aimed at women’s skill development, training, or access to microcredit (Haase 2012). Rather than encourage women’s collective political participation, these NGOs focused on improving individual women’s capacity to survive on their own (Jenkins 2011). Although the work of some feminist organizations continues, the “NGO-ization” of the organizational landscape has made it much harder for the women involved to generate resources to sustain their efforts (Alvarez 1999).

In this context, women have become frontline recruits for the tasks of development. Sylvia Chant (2006) called this process the “feminization of responsibility,” one that is heavily
driven by gendered assumptions about women’s roles in their families and communities (Boesten 2003; Murdock 2003; Sassen 2000). Because of the invisibility of women’s work, both inside and outside the home, development policies often generate additional burdens for women due to the rigid sexual division of labor (Moser 1993).

Women and the Reemergence of the State

The state’s recent reentry into social policy in Latin America, and particularly the explosion of programs aimed at women, warrants a new examination of the “triple role” that Moser (1993) identified. During the previous period of austerity, much of women’s community management activity stemmed from their lack of alternatives. Community organizing was often an essential survival strategy within the neoliberal context. Today, however, NGO and government programs for women abound, dramatically expanding women’s opportunities in some arenas (Sanyal 2009). Optimism about these recent advances is tempered by research that shows how some of these policies reinscribe women’s identities as mothers and fail to alter the gendered division of labor (Molyneux 2006).

Yet much of this recent scholarly discussion has taken place at the aggregate and policy levels; less is known about the day-to-day lived experiences of women who, more than beneficiaries, are becoming “agentic subjects of development” (Madhok and Rai 2012). This article thus centers the quotidian experiences of women who maintain a variety of community responsibilities arising from their involvement with development programs introduced by the state and NGOs. In doing so, I extend on Moser’s (1993) concept of the “triple role” by focusing on the connections between the specific kinds of community work women perform and the hardships they face in their everyday lives. These women’s experiences illuminate how, despite
the state’s presence, women are still expected to take responsibility for their own development needs. Buttressed by persistent neoliberal notions of participation and empowerment, these initiatives perpetuate the exploitation of women’s labor while failing to address the social and economic conditions affecting women’s vulnerability.

WOMEN, NGOS AND THE STATE IN NICARAGUA

Nicaragua’s revolutionary history makes it a compelling context within which to study the changing dynamics of women’s participation. Following the Sandinista revolution in 1979, women’s right expanded to include equal salaries, pre- and post-natal benefits, equal custody rights, alimony, and the decriminalization of abortion (Molyneux 1985). Women were also vital participants in the country’s health and literacy campaigns. However, as U.S. economic and military pressure on the Sandinistas intensified during the mid-1980s, a policy of national unity eclipsed women’s advocacy efforts on key issues such as sexual harassment, abortion, shared childcare responsibilities and domestic violence (Chinchilla 1990).

The defeat of Sandinista President Daniel Ortega in the 1990 presidential election ushered in a new era in Nicaragua. Faced with a severe debt crisis, successive presidents Violeta Barrios de Chamorro (1990-1996) and Arnoldo Alemán (1996-2001) adopted many of the neoliberal economic policies previously discussed (Metoyer 2000). The subsequent decline in state and other formal sector jobs meant that women were increasingly pushed into the informal employment sector, while simultaneously forced to assume greater responsibility for meeting household needs (childcare, for example) due to a reduction in state-provided social services (Babb 2001). The state’s lack of attention to the impact of these policies on women was
exacerbated by its antagonism towards feminist organizations, which fell under increasingly intense scrutiny and sometimes even direct attack (Kampwirth 2003).

The growing sense of disillusionment with the failure of these neoliberal policies, coupled with a change in electoral law\(^1\), provided an opening for Sandinista President Daniel Ortega’s return to power in 2006. Although Ortega has sought to distinguish himself from its neoliberal predecessors through his attention to social welfare, other continuities remain (Rodgers 2006). Important examples of these continuities include the government’s continued opposition to legalizing abortion\(^2\) and its antagonism toward feminist organizations (Kampwirth 2010). In terms of social policy, President Daniel Ortega\(^3\) has eliminated many school and clinic fees, built new housing, and sought to address issues of food insecurity through *Hambre Cero* (Zero Hunger), an initiative which targets female-head-of-households.\(^4\) Another government program called *Usura Cero* (Zero Interest) offers women microloans and small business training, and reportedly distributed funds to 77,000 women in its first two years (Navas 2010).

**METHODOLOGY**

The village of Loma Verde represents an ideal setting in which to study the changing dynamics of women’s community participation for two main reasons. First, it is similar to many other rural areas in Nicaragua where both NGOs and government-led development initiatives have been implemented. Having extensive experience with both of these entities, the women in Loma Verde are well-situated to illuminate both the continuities and changes in the effects of different development programs and policies on women’s daily lives. Second, my long-term

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\(^1\) Prior to the 2006 election, the Nicaraguan National Assembly voted to change the required winning percentage in the presidential election to 35% with a 5% margin. Daniel Ortega won the 2006 election with 38% of the vote.

\(^2\) Something about the penalization of abortion
relationship with this village gave me a unique level of access that proved crucial for this research.

In order to capture the discourses, material practices, and relational dynamics associated with women’s participation as fully as possible, I used both participant observation and in-depth interviews. Combining these methods provided several important advantages for this study. First, I was able to document interactions and daily practices of both women and men in the village over a period of time. Secondly, I was able to engage in multiple conversations with each of my respondents, offering a richer, more nuanced window into their perceptions and attitudes than a single interview might have permitted. Finally, I was able to compare individuals’ responses to questions in formal and informal settings with repeated observations of their actions in a variety of everyday life situations, a process that enhances data reliability (Flick 1992).

I visited Loma Verde nine times between 2006 and 2012. My most prolonged stay occurred during June and July of 2010 when I lived with five different families in the village. In each of these households, either the man or the woman were heavily involved in community activities. I met most of my informants with the help of the 16-member Cabinet of Citizen Power (CPC), the village’s officially recognized decision-making body. I observed four large-scale community events, nine organizational meetings (including agricultural and ceramics cooperatives, health promoters, and political leadership), and seven training workshops. When I was not attending meetings, I embedded myself as closely as possible in the daily lives of the women of the village—eating and cooking with them, washing clothes, playing with their children, attending church, and going on family visits with them.
In addition to taking detailed field notes each day, I conducted semi-structured interviews lasting between 30-60 minutes with 12 women (11 married with children, 1 single with no children), ages 24-42, all of whom were currently active volunteer mothers, health promoters, or coordinators for government programs in the community. Interviews covered the following topics: personal and family background, process and experience of community involvement, volunteer tasks and time commitment, and village history. For additional perspective, I also interviewed 9 men (ages 28-59), husbands of volunteer mothers, pastors, and political leaders. All but two of the respondents were born and raised in Loma Verde. I conducted all interviews in Spanish at respondents’ homes and audio-recorded them with respondents’ consent.

In the remainder of this paper, I outline the distinct community tasks women perform, describe their material and relational consequences in women’s lives, and analyze the meanings women attribute to their participation. I conclude by discussing how the apparent shift in state policy masks a continuation of neoliberal understandings of participation and empowerment, thereby contributing to the production of a particular kind of developmental subject.

COMMUNITY CONTEXT

Nestled in the green hills of northwestern Nicaragua, the village of Loma Verde is home to about 400 people, mostly subsistence farmers. According to the latest government census data, half of the households in Loma Verde live in extreme poverty (less than $1/day), while another 31% live below the poverty line (CITE). The overall literacy rate in 2005 was 33%. Aside from four families, no one possesses a legal title to their land. Most inhabitants rent small plots from
wealthier property owners in the area. Men typically leave at 6:30am and travel two to three miles on foot to work in the fields. Women spend most of their days in the village cooking, cleaning, caring for children, tending to their family’s garden, and/or raising animals. Most families’ diets consists primarily of corn and beans, though some families raise chickens, pigs, or cows; others have small patio gardens where they grow fruit, squash, tomatoes, and green peppers for family consumption. Hunger is an ever present concern during the dry months (January-May); families rely on crops harvested in the winter to last them through the next planting season. All cooking is done using wood-burning stoves. Most families have one outdoor latrine.

Physical access to Loma Verde is very limited. The one rocky road into the community is prone to flooding during the rainy season. Public transportation consists of an all-terrain covered truck, which travels to and from the village twice a day. Residents access electricity via the main power lines that run through the community. There is no phone service with the exception of one landline and a few individuals who have cell phones. The nearest clinic is two miles away, and the closest hospital is 45 minutes away by bus. There is one elementary school (K-6).

Originally formed due to migration from a nearby village, Loma Verde was granted official status within the municipality in 1982. Although residents described their community as highly organized during the 1980s, they nevertheless faced enormous health and economic challenges. Men and women described the community as “dirty”, having “zero personal hygiene,” a place where “you would see the pig excrement in the street” and “people came to sell but not to buy.” In the 1990s, the community’s challenges attracted the attention of numerous NGOs who built wells and latrines, offered agricultural loans, donated food baskets, and installed an emergency radio system. Since 2001, NGOs have recruited and trained women volunteers to
be local health educators, formed agricultural and microloan cooperatives, and constructed rainwater storage tanks in the village. Loma Verde residents universally expressed a sense of accomplishment for the subsequent decrease in infant mortality, increased beautification, and renewed sense of community pride.

Community organizing and participation are now well-established aspects of village life, with the vast majority of this work being performed by women. On any given day, a circle of women fills the village’s dusty plaza. Known colloquially as “las organizadas” [the organized women], many of these women were trained by an NGO called Save the Children to be “volunteer mothers,” responsible for health education and training in the community. Others became coordinators of agricultural or microloan cooperatives, or run child/parent education programs for the government. These women meet at least once every three days for three hours of training workshops or planning meetings. They have organized numerous major community events, including: an inauguration ceremony for two construction projects, a clean-up, an assembly to prioritize projects for the municipal budget, and a short-term team visit.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section is organized around three main findings from my ethnographic research. First, the forms of community participation promoted by NGO and state programs extend women’s care work from the private into the public sphere. Second, these programs’ exploitation of women’s voluntary labor generates significant material and relational burdens in women’s daily lives due to the rigid household division of labor. Third, women perform these community responsibilities as a way to acquire new skills, resources and recognition. Together, these
findings lay the groundwork for the discussion of the gendered burden of development that follows.

When Community Work is Women’s Work

July 6th, 2010. Around 10am I meet up with ten women who are gathered to accompany Diana and Carolina, two local health promoter coordinators, on their monthly community walkthrough. Diana and Carolina had both received training in the prevention and treatment of diseases and maternal and infant health care from Save the Children. As coordinators, they are responsible for gathering monthly information on every family’s health and living conditions for ADP, another NGO in the community. Diana and Carolina held clipboards with a checklist of different things to look for at each house, including: cleanliness of patios and latrines, chlorination of water, use of chicken coops, and possession and use of medicinal plants. As the thirteen of us walked carefully up and down the steep and muddy footpaths to reach the increasingly remote houses, animated chatter and laughter filled the air. Diana and Carolina asked the woman at each home a series of questions from their checklist, while Liza and Maria walked around the property to inspect the latrine and record what kinds of plants they had. The other women stood or sat in small clusters on rocks or benches and made small talk with each other. At 1pm it started to drizzle. No one had an umbrella, but we all kept going. Three hours later, we returned to the plaza to compile what we had seen.

The events of that morning encapsulate many of the quotidian practices of women’s community participation that I repeatedly observed in Loma Verde: holding meetings, attending and facilitating trainings, conducting surveys, organizing community clean-ups, and visiting families to monitor and assist with their health needs. Prior to these activities, women attended a
series of workshops and trainings on topics such as illness prevention and treatment, breast feeding, child nutrition, and family planning. Armed with this information, women volunteers subsequently replicated trainings at other gatherings of women, or by conducting door-to-door house visits.

In addition to their work for NGOs, women are also responsible for the implementation of three new government initiatives: early childhood stimulation (Programa Amor), clean water (Agua Segura), and pregnant women’s health (Plan Parto). Carolina, 35, a soft-spoken woman whose community involvement spans eight years, described the tasks she performs as part of these new programs:

[I] work with Agua Segura. I go house to house, I document whether 10 families are putting chlorine in their water, how much water they consume daily…I have to do the math, how much they drink in a month and then fill out the paperwork and send it to the hospital. Through the Ministry of Health, I make bleach to give to the community. There are talks where they give me serum, acetaminophen, gloves, liquids to clean wounds…we go to meetings every month, and since we also work with Plan Parto, we walk with the pregnant women, giving them these cards, because every pregnant woman has to have one.

Carolina is responsible for maintaining accurate information about village water quality as well as all of the village’s pregnant women which she is required to report to the Ministry of Health office. Her account demonstrates the high level of discipline, precision and technical skill that her community work requires, and the stakes involved (in this case, preventing disease and maternal mortality) in her ability to successfully complete the tasks involved. Many of these tasks also mirror women’s traditional responsibilities in the home, making the performance of
kind of community labor an extension of women’s care work from the domestic into the public sphere.

The structure of Programa Amor reflects a similar pattern. Begun in 2008, Programa Amor is part of Nicaragua’s National System of Social Welfare. Its stated objective is to “restore the rights of children to health, safety, education, and overall well-being” (Ministerio de la Familia). Mothers bring their babies (0-2) and pre-school age children (3-5) to meet with the women volunteers twice a week for two hours of manual dexterity exercises, academic enrichment, parenting classes, and the distribution of healthy snacks. Like the previous example, this program relies on women to perform additional care work (in this case, through the physical and emotional nurturing of children) in the public sphere with little consideration for the toll it takes on the women involved. These sacrifices do not pass unrecognized, as the following incident makes clear.

January 4, 2012. A particularly heavy rainy season had ruined the village’s staple crops, and many men had left to seek work elsewhere. Most of the NGOs that previously worked in the community were gone. On a sunny afternoon, I found Flora and Maria in the village’s bodega. Normally filled with sacks of grain in a good year, the room was noticeably vacant except for one blue plastic table and chair. The two women stood close together hunched over the table and spoke in soft tones as they pored over pieces of paper. I asked them what was going on. Flora told me there were filling out a chart with all the information on the children enrolled in Programa Amor to be submitted to the government next week. “We’ve been working on this document for six hours,” Flora said. Later, as she walked with me to the bus stop, Flora told me she receives $10 (USD) monthly from the government for her work as the local Programa Amor
Flora’s comments reflect her belief that community participation demands a disproportionate sacrifice of her time and energy, for which she receives little in return. With her partner gone, she alone is responsible for the care of her five year old son and the domestic labor required to maintain her household. Although she scarcely has sufficient food to eat, she is now charged with educating approximately twenty children and their mothers for several hours a week, and fulfilling the bureaucratic requirements of this government program. Flora’s experiences are not unique, however, but common among the women of Loma Verde. Below I trace some of the specific ways in which the gendered burdens of community labor manifest themselves in women’s daily lives.

**The Sacrifices of Women’s Community Work**

June 20th, 2010. Clap-clap-clap. I awake to the sound of the “palmada”—the sound of tortillas being made. Before dawn’s first light (5am) the girls are up and at it. Eva sweeps debris off the front patio, Jenny rinses grain to prepare to take it to the grinder, and Regina goes to get water from the well, while their mother Alicia grabs several logs from against the wall and places them in the earthen stove to start the fire. Smoke fills the air and stings my eyes. Arturo lounges in the hammock strung across the kitchen talking to his wife, who carefully monitors the burning wood. After drinking coffee and eating a piece of sweet bread, Arturo heads out to work on a construction project. Alicia sweeps the chicken coop, while Jenny cooks rice, beans, and plantains. A few hours later Jenny walks up the hill to the other side of the community to bring Arturo his breakfast. After breakfast is over, Alicia starts hand-washing the laundry in an outdoor
sink while her daughters prepare lunch. Arturo comes home from the fields in the early afternoon to eat and rest.

In addition to cooking, cleaning, and caring for their children, Alicia also contributes to her family’s livelihood by picking beans, gathering firewood, milking cows, making cheese, selling eggs, and creating pottery. Community participation adds new burdens—time spent in meetings, trainings, house visits, completing paperwork—to her already physically and emotionally demanding daily labor. Liza, 34, has three children (Tamara, 13; Mateo, 8; Jacob, 3), and has been volunteering in the community for eight years. Her story epitomizes these difficulties.

The only thing is, I neglect my children, I neglect my family because going to workshops sometimes we go 3-4 days in a row. We leave at 6am in the morning and return at 4:30pm. So, I neglect my animals, my children, my house, everything. But I know it’s to learn… Sometimes Jacob hasn’t bathed, or Mateo either, the chickens sometimes haven’t had water… and this is what happens to all of us. Sometimes there was a dead chicken, what do I do, you know, but now that [Tamara] is bigger, I tell her, when I’m not here, you’re going to do this and this and this, but no, she always forgets, so one neglects her children. There are workshops where they let us bring the children but you can’t concentrate with kids around. Because you get really distracted, and maybe there’s no budget for food, and so both you and the child go hungry. We’ve been to workshops where there’s not even a snack.

Liza’s narrative demonstrates some of the hardships experienced by women who engage in community work. In order to attend the required meetings or trainings, she and her children may
go hungry, or find the family’s animals injured or dead upon their return home. Her husband’s notable absence from her narrative suggests that Liza alone bears the responsibility for the domestic duties she describes. Thus, women who work in the community must work longer and harder for the survival of their own families as they try to juggle productive, reproductive, and community roles (Moser 1993). Because the traditional gendered division of labor remains unchanged, the sacrifices of community work fall disproportionately on women’s shoulders.

In addition to its material consequences, women’s engagement in the community has also generated emotional burdens in the form of new conflicts with their partners. Maria, who has been a health promoter for nine years and helps coordinate an early childhood development program for the government, described her partner’s reaction when she first got involved: “When I started, it was a fight. I knew there was going to be a sermon when I came home, but I went anyway.” Maria’s story reflects a common experience of the women volunteers, many of whom faced significant resistance from their male partners during the initial stages of their community involvement.

Raquel, 27, mother of two children (9 and 2), has been a part of the “organized women” for ten years as well as treasurer for the community’s agricultural cooperative. She explains her marital tensions this way:

I always go [to meetings]. [My husband] hardly likes it. But we talk, and I tell him, one is poor. Maybe there is enough to buy food, but not a latrine. Not to buy a chicken coop, because that’s expensive. So now, he doesn’t get that angry. I have to get up, make the tortillas, leave the food made, and when I come back, even if it’s cold, then we eat. Since we get out late from the meetings, I leave the food ready…and I go.
Although Raquel successfully persuades her husband of the long-term benefits of her community participation, the sacrifices of time and energy required to make it work are hers alone. The established gendered division of household labor remains unchanged; the difference is that Raquel now must manage the additional time commitment required by her community work.

The burdens generated by community participation are not only borne by the women themselves, but also by their extended families. Similar to the cases of poor black families in the U.S. described by Carol Stack (1974) and the shantytown dwellers in Mexico studied by Larissa Lomnitz (1977), the women of Loma Verde rely heavily on kinship networks to help with the many time-consuming tasks of daily life in the countryside. Because most men spend their days working in fields far away from the village, older daughters, aunts, and grandmothers become the primary—if not sole—means by which these women manage to maintain their households and complete their many tasks in the community. Women without these networks find themselves at a disadvantage in terms of their ability to participate.

Paradoxically, neither the demands of participation nor the precariousness of their circumstances have prevented women from assuming these roles. Why is it, then, that women continue to perform this work despite its heavy toll on their time, resources, and most intimate relationships? In order to answer this question, in the next section I discuss the perceptions and beliefs women hold about their community labor.

**Women’s Empowerment and Community Work**

Women’s accounts of their involvement in community work contain three major cross-cutting themes: (1) their identity as mothers, (2) working for the community by caring for others, and (3) the importance of acquiring and imparting knowledge. Nearly all of these women
initially decided to participate because they wanted to learn new skills or information to address the pressing needs of themselves, their children, and the community at large.

So I decided I’m not just going to ask for things, I’m going to give. I can do something here even if it’s just weighing children, which I know is community work because now the moms won’t have to go to [nearby town] just for that. We can do it here. (Raquel)

What motivated me was my daughter; I had to bring her so that she could a better development. Also, the support I could give to other children and mothers that needed help, and to become more integrated in the community…so that I know could teach my children, my family, and in my house have more knowledge as a mother. (Maria)

The sense of responsibility that these women articulate, both for their own families and the community, shares some commonalities with the concept of “activist mothering” coined by Nancy Naples (1998) in her study of women participants in the U.S. War on Poverty. In both cases there is a clear connection between women’s identities as mothers and their community work.

“Working for the community” has also contributed to women’s personal growth and sense of accomplishment. Consider the following remarks from Maria and Diana.

I used to be really timid when I was a girl. I was even embarrassed to say my name; when they told us we had to introduce ourselves, I would tremble. But not anymore. Now I can introduce myself anywhere, and I feel normal. Serious questions too, I can answer, if I know about the topic. I can participate in a meeting. If I have a workshop, I can do it. It has served me a lot to be involved in the development of the community. (Maria)
Before I felt like my self-esteem was low. Today my self-esteem is higher. I don’t feel the same as before. We see that we as women have rights. We can work in the community, do something so that it develops. (Diana)

Maria and Diana both articulate a sense of personal empowerment resulting from their community work. Seemingly small opportunities for self-expression and skill development have increased women’s confidence in themselves, their ideas, abilities, and their rights.

These women’s increased sense of efficacy (Bandura 1982) derives not only from what they feel they have achieved for themselves, but how their collective efforts have benefited the community as a whole. In this precarious context, “being organized” is a critical survival tool. As Leonor put it, “the benefits have to be for everyone, because we are all hungry.” Carolina explains, “If we hadn’t been organized, ADP wouldn’t have given me a chicken coop…chicks, [or] a toilet. You have to be organized so that the organization helps you. Because the ones who aren’t organized, don’t have anything.” Together with the preceding discussion, these comments illustrate three effects of “being organized” in women’s everyday lives. First, it increased their access to crucial resources such as seeds, construction materials, and medicine which otherwise would be out of reach. Second, being organized reduced women’s prior sense of relational isolation by increasing opportunities for interaction with other women. Finally, being organized strengthened women’s belief in their right to claim resources.

Women’s confidence was further bolstered by the public recognition they received, both inside and outside of the community. As Flora told me, “It makes me feel good when my neighbors say, Flora works, Flora serves the community.” She and other women volunteers often share their stories in other villages to help other leaders improve their level of organization and
deal with local health or environmental problems. These validating encounters serve to reinforce women’s sense that managing their community on their own is not only possible, but also desirable and rewarded.

To recap, two main dynamics contribute to the gendered burden of development in women’s everyday lives. The first is the relationship between women’s community care work and the reproduction of the traditional gendered division of labor. The second is the production of a particular kind of subject, one who is trained (disciplined) to assume responsibility for her own development needs. In the sections that follow, I elaborate on each of these two processes and how they are intertwined.

**Care Work and the Gendered Burden of Development**

Despite the state’s reentry into social policy, women are still treated as “shock absorbers” (Babb 2001) who can reshuffle the demands of their “triple role” (Moser 1993) to meet whatever is expected of them. More importantly, however, assumptions about women’s limitless time and capacities are intricately tied to the maintenance of the traditional gendered division of labor. This reliance on women’s volunteer community labor is one component of a broader “care regime” (Franzoni and Voorend 2011) which serves to further entrench traditional gender roles and responsibilities while failing to address structural conditions that contribute to poor women’s vulnerability.

Rural families’ lack of land ownership is one of these factors. Families without their own land are especially precariously situated because they are dependent on the fluctuating needs of landowners or the unstable wage labor market for income (USAID 2011; World Bank 2009). When families in Loma Verde face this situation, men frequently search for agricultural work far
from home, leaving women and children alone in the village for months at a time. Given this arrangement, women are the ones who are defined as “available” and subsequently recruited to participate in the work of development. This assumption of women’s limitless availability lies at the core of what I call the gendered burden of development. By using this concept, I extend on Moser’s (1993) work on the “triple role” by focusing on the specific connections between the kinds of community work women perform and the material and relational hardships in their everyday lives, as well as how the meaning and practice of community work contributes to the formation of a particular kind of developmental subject. Due to the women experience in their everyday lives, as well as how women’s experiences and practices shift and relationship to the state and NGOs as a result of certain kinds of development programs reproduction of the traditional gendered division of labor. As a result, women are the ones who bear the daily material and relational burdens associated with these development programs.

The gendered burden of development is intricately linked to the ongoing process of “neoliberalization” (Peck, Theodore, and Brenner 2012). Broadly speaking, “neoliberalization” refers to the process by which the principles of market logic and individual responsibility underlying neoliberal policies have become increasingly universalized and pervasive. Despite the state’s more active role in social policy, the persistence of this framework is evident in the daily practices of women in Loma Verde, who have assumed personal responsibility for their hardships as well as the tasks perceived necessary to overcome them.

**Empowerment and the New Developmental Subject**

Through a long process of training, the women of Loma Verde have come to embrace a particular set of shared understandings about community work. Their daily routines and practices
are increasingly organized around the tasks of community development: meetings, paperwork, workshops, clean-ups, childcare, and health education. An enormous amount of discipline is required to complete these tasks, yet their attendant burdens are scarcely discussed—and if they are, they are mentioned briefly and then dismissed. The women draw meaning and satisfaction from their ability to rise to whatever is demanded of them. The most important thing to these women is that their community is healthy, organized, and recognized for it.

The understandings articulated by these women demonstrate the persistence of the neoliberal framework under which citizens are expected, encouraged, and trained to take care of their own development needs (Ferguson and Gupta 2002). In Loma Verde, women have been trained in how to prevent and treat diseases and to provide certain kinds of care to children and pregnant women. These goals are laudable and contribute to tangible improvements in women’s quality of life. However, receiving recognition and resources from the state is contingent upon women’s continued performance of specific development tasks in the community. Through its sporadic interventions, the state seems to affirm women’s contributions to the community while in practice expecting that they take on even greater responsibility for their households’ survival. This dialectic contributes to the reproduction of a particular kind of developmental subject, one for whom empowerment is reconstituted as self-sufficiency and participation as collective self-help.

CONCLUSION

Although community participation can provide women with additional skills and improved self-confidence, this article highlights how the burdens it generates also often fall disproportionately on the women themselves. The emphasis on women as both objects and subjects of development reinforces established gender roles and women’s precarious economic
position while ignoring important underlying structural issues in rural areas such as women’s dependence on men’s agricultural labor and inequitable land distribution. Not only does this arrangement lead to the reproduction of the traditional gender division of labor, but it also means that women are the ones who are defined as “available” and therefore recruited to participate in the work of development.

This assumption of women’s availability lies at the core of what I have termed the gendered burden of development. By using this term, I underscore the ways in which the ongoing process of “neoliberalization” (Peck, Theodore, and Brenner 2012) is not only classed but also gendered, insofar as women continue to bear the everyday material and relational burdens generated by this development model. In this context, women’s participation does not expand access to social and political rights and resources; instead, women’s energy, skills, and self-confidence are channeled into localized attempts at problem-solving and survival. As long as this kind of development framework prevails, the subordinate position of women in the global South will remain substantially unchanged (Acosta-Belén and Bose 1990).

While the findings presented herein are significant, they are nevertheless limited by several factors. First, this research was conducted in one small rural community in Nicaragua. It is an open question whether women’s participation in development has similar implications in communities located in countries with different political trajectories. Future research should specifically examine how programs aimed at women’s empowerment vary in countries with different relationships to neoliberalism. Second, the village I studied had a prolonged history of interaction with NGOs and state programs preceding my observations, making it difficult to assess the relative influence of each in the daily lives of women. It may be the case that specific NGO programs offer counter narratives about the goals of women’s participation in
development. Finally, communities with less exposure to various NGOs or development programs may differ in terms of women’s community management roles. This raises the possibility that other contextual factors play a part in both the forms and extent of women’s community participation.

These limitations point to several important avenues for future research. How do specific NGOs and governments affect the ways in which the gendered burden of development operates? In what ways does the reliance on women’s unpaid community labor differ in urban contexts? Are there any circumstances in which women’s participation in development lead to a shift in the gendered household division of labor? Does women’s engagement in unpaid forms of community labor dampen or encourage other forms of women’s social and political participation?

The preceding analysis has offered new and important ethnographic evidence about the impact of NGO and state development programs’ continued reliance on women’s unpaid or underpaid labor. I have argued that despite the state’s increased role in social policy following the political “left turn” in Latin America, the daily burdens of development remain squarely on the shoulders of poor women. Underlying this dynamic is the persistence of neoliberal notions of participation and empowerment that contribute to the formation of a particular kind of developmental subject who assumes responsibility for her own hardships. As a result, the structural conditions affecting women’s precarious survival remain unchanged.

WORKS CITED


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1 The rate of female labor force participation in Latin America has risen from just over 30% in 1990 to 53% in 2012 (ILO and UNDP 2012).

4 All names of people and places are pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of respondents.

2 Ortega previously served as president from 1984-1990 following the triumph of the Sandinista revolution in 1979.

3 Zero Hunger beneficiaries receive 1 pregnant cow, 1 female pig, 1 rooster, 5 chickens, construction materials to build animal pens, 5 fruit plants, 5 forest plants, tubes, fertilizer, and periodic technical assistance and training.

7 Programa Amor is the only one of these programs for which the local coordinators receive monetary compensation from the government.