



The Equity Diamond: National values in terracotta compared to regional ones in blue. Source: Infant mortality: UNICEF, The State of the World's Children, 1998; Adult literacy: UNICEF, The State of the World's Children, 1998; GDI (Gender Development index): UNDP, Human Development Report 1998; GINI: World Bank, World Development indicators 1998. (The regional average for this indicator was calculated by Social Watch).

The Central Bank and the Statistics and Census Institute still do not separate by sex the most important numbers relative to the contributions of women to the national economy. This makes it difficult to measure the impact of policies that promote the progress of women. Five years since Beijing, Nicaraguan women are worse off than ever in social, economic and political-institutional terms.

The government's economic policy has not lowered poverty indexes for women, estimated to be 87.7% of the poor. Employment policies are non-existent and like poverty, under-employment is

WOMEN: 87.7% OF THE POOR

rising. This pushes women into the informal sector, making invisible their contributions to the country's economy. Women are 41% of the economically active population and 44.5% of the employed population. Within this latter figure, 9.1% is fully employed whilst 90% is under-employed. In the service sector, women represent 37.5% of the employed; they are 27.3% of the employed in commerce, 17.4% in small industry and 16.4% in the agricultural sector.

The government has established basic education and follow-up programmes and projects for illiterate female adults, but it has no programmes to prevent children from dropping out of state schools, which year after year increases the illiteracy rate.

The official figures show that 19% of the population over ten years of age does not know how to read or write, 28% of girls and boys age 6-18 years are not in school and only 22% of students are in a grade corresponding to their age.

Per capita expenditure for health is US\$ 11. The maternal mortality rate for 2000 is expected to reach 200 for every 100,000 births. Despite efforts to decrease maternal and infant mortality rates, the country continues to see a high impact of immune, respiratory and gastrointestinal illnesses that could be prevented. These are the main causes of disease and mortality in children under five. The long distances people have to go to health service locations and the lack of economic resources are still the main obstacles in accessing state health services. Only 60% of the population has access to public health consultations.

There has been a slight increase in the budgets assigned to the ministries of health and education, but coverage for basic services has in practice been reduced. According to demographic figures supplied by INEC-CELADE, the female population in 1998 reached 2,730,522 persons. But when designing public policies and strategic plans in the health sector, women are viewed only from the mother-child perspective, associated with childhood and/or adolescence.

Structural adjustment has substantially reduced the budget for social investment. This has led women's organisations and civil society to provide services, offering an alternative to poorer women.

Mechanisms to mediate the impacts of structural adjustment—such as improving the social infrastructure, building schools, providing sewerage and drinking water—are carried out with contributions from the beneficiary populations and are incorporated

into the so-called Social Investment Funds. But these mechanisms are insufficient to balance the impacts of three consecutive structural adjustment programmes in the 1990s on the most vulnerable groups of Nicaraguan society.

The Endesa national survey established that 29% of women have been victims of violence and that the highest rate of violence is suffered by urban women. Other studies have concluded that two in every four women have suffered some episode of domestic violence in their lives.

The women's movements have had some achievements. There have been some penal reforms and the creation of specific police stations (with participation of the Network of Women Against Violence). The ministry of health has placed violence against women in an epidemiological vision, considering it a public health problem. But assignment of budgetary resources is indispensable to sustain programmes against intra-family violence and especially for the police station programmes, which currently rely on external funding.

Although in formal terms no gender discrimination exists in access to employment, remuneration, property rights, credit and services, in practice women's possibilities are limited. Institutional mechanisms, especially the Nicaraguan Women's Institute (INIM), are weakened in their capacity to influence

formulation of the economic and social policies that most impact on the women's lives. This reinforces the government's lack of commitment and insufficient promotion of public policies that support progress for women.

The National Assembly must discuss and pass budgets that assign economic resources to support progress for women. Existing discriminatory laws (*eg*, in family law) demand urgent modernisation. Laws that discriminate on the basis of values, usage, traditions and customs must be abolished. New laws that promote positive actions for the participation of women in decision-making are vital.

Any plan that is promoted must contribute to reducing and eradicating poverty, as well as to the cancellation of external debt and the incorporation of Nicaragua to the HIPC initiative. It must also include social programmes that improve access of the general population and women especially to basic services.

- **Iniciativa para el Seguimiento de Beijing**