FEMINIST ECOLOGY AND SUSTAINABILITY OF LIFE: INSIDE LAS DIOSAS COOPERATIVE IN NICARAGUA

By Nani Ferreira-Mathews
Photos courtesy of Thread Coffee

WE TRAVERSE THE RUGGED DIRT ROAD and stony terrain on foot for nearly a mile before reaching the vista overlooking the mountainous countryside of northern Nicaragua. As we pause to take photos of the distant volcanos and breathtaking views, our guide points out the nearest town, barely visible in the hazy and warm afternoon air. Juana Olivas-Calero, our sprightful liaison and active member of her community, leads us to her half *manzana* (a manzana is roughly 1.72 acres) to show us her apiary. A young woman in her 20s, Juana lives in a small community of 300, where she maintains six to eight active beehives and produces honey for the cooperative known as Las Diosas ("the goddesses"). She maintains her plot of land, a stony and uphill 1.5-mile hike from her home, with the help of her mother, who also lives in the nearby village of El Colorado.

Juana helps us unpack our beekeeping suits and ensures they are sealed at all possible entry points. Once bundled securely, we proceed quietly and calmly up the steep terrain to visit her hives. It is the hottest part of the day when we finally reach the first hive. Sweat begins slipping off my cheeks and pooling around my nose as bees hum around my head and send vibrations through my limbs. Juana speaks in a passionate and hurried whisper as she uncovers her hives to show us how their production is progressing.

Beekeeping, an occupation traditionally held by men, has become the main source of income for more than 60 women producers in the 362-member Las Diosas Cooperative, which is made up solely of women producers in northern Nicaragua. After struggling with *la roya* and being forced to replant many of their coffee trees between 2013-2016, the co-op members realized they needed more security and began diversifying their offerings. Juana explains that women in Nicaragua have struggled to gain access to land, but she was able to negotiate with men in her family to title the small parcel of land in her name. In that sweaty buzz-filled moment, I find myself in awe at the purposeful and industrious character that Juana embodies.





ABOVE
Reyna Merlo is a founding member of La FEM. Her community, El Rosario, primarily grows corn.

PRECEDING PAGE
Isabel Zamora, a founding member of La FEM and coffee grower in the Los Llanos community, holds a baby coffee tree before planting.

Along with 3,000 women in northern Nicaragua, Juana is an active member of the women-centric agroecology group known as La FEM, the Foundacion entre Mujeres, or Foundation Among Women. Formed in 1995, La FEM encourages women living in rural areas to take ownership of their land, their bodies and their seeds. Their early programs included adult education and literacy, health and women's health, and seed preservation. Among the members of La FEM are the 362 producer members that make up Las Diosas. Today, Las Diosas has diversified to include coffee producers, beekeepers, hibiscus farmers and gardeners.

La FEM was founded collectively by 12 campesina women who envisioned it as a women-centered alternative to the successful agroecology, or sustainable agriculture, programs in Nicaragua that came with the Sandinista revolution of the late 1970s. Their shared vision of uplifting women through education, health and access to land quickly became more than a resource center. Women who benefited from these early programs began to lift up the women surrounding them. In 2014, 72 women who once struggled with literacy received their high school diplomas. Rosia Ramos, president of Las Diosas Cooperative, is over 60 years old. She is in the process of earning her college degree in botany.

The foundation expanded its offerings from adult education programs to meet the needs of the rural women it served. It launched programs to combat violence against women by organizing community liaisons to help women in need. These liaisons provide

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TOP Overlooking the mountainous countryside of northern Nicaragua.
CENTER Juana Olivas-Calero waits while the group gathers for a walk to her apiary.
BOTTOM Women of El Rosario community preserve corn cobs for later use as fuel in bee smokers.

shelter for battered women and transport them from rural communities to cities where they can report their abusers. La FEM expanded its work in women's health to include access to birth control, contraceptives and free preventative care. Its programs empower women to make their own choices about reproduction, and when and if they want to have children. In the 25 years since La FEM was founded, women benefiting from its programs have seen a decrease in children per household, going from 4.5 to 2.5 children per family.

La FEM also organized against femicide—the killing of women, generally by men, because of their gender. While Nicaragua is one of the countries with the lowest femicide rates in Central America, fewer than 1 per 100,000, the work is still of importance. When we meet Nayde, a young coffee farmer, she wears a shirt that reads, "We want lives, free and without fear." When asked what it means, Nayde explains that a 12-year-old girl went missing and was later found dead. The women of La FEM organized protests in the city of Estelí to seek justice and law reform to support rural campesinas and young women and girls in their communities.

In the years since founding La FEM, its members have flourished in agroecology, which has become a necessity among many coffee-growing producers who are unable to make a living solely off of export crops. The producers of Las Diosas, as well as the country as a whole, have made great advancements toward food sovereignty over the past 25 years. In El Colorado, we visit La FEM's seed reservoir—usually known as a seed "bank," but the women of Las Diosas thought that term was too capitalist and chose to call theirs a reservoir instead. The seed reservoir stores the organization's agriculture projects outside of coffee. We tour the modest shed that houses years of experiments and seed selection work. Gladys, the daughter of a founding member of La FEM, explains that the women, after receiving technical advice from international groups, began a seed-saving and improvement study. After seven harvests of red beans, Las Diosas was able to cultivate a disease-resistant and high-producing seed. They named the seed strain

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Reyna Merlo stores surplus corn for the winter.

Rosado Colorado, and it has since become widely adopted as the seed of choice in Nicaragua.

The cooperative maintains sustainable and biointensive models of food production within members' coffee farms and homes. Biointensive farming is a model of sustainability with a goal of high production that relies on organic practices. On the way to pick from the coffee trees, we visit biointensive gardens with carrots, bananas, beans and more. The women grow all the food they consume with the exception of sugar, salt, rice and oil. We see piles of cascara waiting to be made into compost that will be used in their farms and gardens. In the meantime, it provides a snack for the free-roaming guinea hens that are used as an alarm system for the community because they cry out when sensing danger.

On the following morning, we visit our host Don Julia's pig pen, where we dish out slop from the previous day's plate scraps. We peer into the murky waters of the *beneficio* (wet mill), where grubs grow in the fermenting wastewater from the coffee harvest. The grubs, Don Julia explains, are perfect food for her hens. The hens, of course, lay eggs; and roosters, when not fertilizing eggs to make more hens, serve as nature's alarm clock, often starting as early as 2 a.m. The cycle of life, living and sustainable efforts make me take pause. The five of us had brought more waste with us than the community of 300 had created collectively in our five-day visit. Our simple stomachs require pre-packaged bottled water, electrolyte solution and a modest daily dose of Pepto Bismol.

One evening during our visit, six young men from the solidarity men's group Miyotl (a Nahuatl word meaning "ray of light") give a presentation. A group of young men whose mothers are members of La FEM created Miyotl to work toward a new, positive masculinity. During their presentation, they explain that they wanted to become different men—not men

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of violence. Their workshops include exercises that help break down toxic masculinity and provide a safe space for men to be affectionate and compassionate without shame or fear. Their members range in age from 13 to 35 years old. One of the young men, Denis, comes to our meeting wearing a t-shirt emblazoned with the words, "Soy hombre, soy contra la violencia hacia las mujeres. ¿Y vos?" ("I'm a man opposed to violence against women. How about you?").

The young men of Miyotl conduct educational workshops on topics such as "Introduction to Sexism" and "What Is Violence?" Their motto is, "Somos hombres de campo, somos hombres de cambio, somos Miyotl!" ("We are men of the countryside, we are men of change, we are Miyotl!") When a member of our group asks the young men of Miyotl if there are any gay people in the group and whether they are accepted, the answer is an immediate "yes." Denis explains, "This [acceptance of gay people in the group] goes hand in hand with agroecology. We grow all kinds of plants, why shouldn't there be all kinds of people?"

In El Colorado, the fight for gender equity, adoption of feminism and the uplifting of women collectively is one of the best examples of feminist ecology I have witnessed. Feminist ecology, or ecofeminism, approaches sustainability through the lens of feminism, and argues that no true sustainability can be achieved without an analysis of gender oppression. That is not to say that only women should occupy positions of power, but rather that if we strive collectively toward gender equity and collaboration, then sustainability and the preservation of our Earth will find its natural balance.

While sustainability and biodiversity movements and resource sharing models have strengthened the rural and oft-exploited coffee farmers, the women of La FEM and Las Diosas have turned those ideologies into a true social movement. The women of La FEM organize around a life-sustaining model and cast away the market-centered capitalist ideology. This work, or people-centered economy, is the work we want to see at origin, but the truth is, it's the work we also need to see at home.





The view from the balcony of La FEM headquarters in Estelí, Nicaragua.

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LEFT Guinea hens have an afternoon snack of freshly discarded cascara.

RIGHT Nani Ferreira-Mathews is suited up and waiting quietly to tour the bee hives.

In collaboration with *Roast*, The Partnership for Gender Equity recently published results from its gender equity survey. (For more detail on this survey, see "Gender Equity in the Coffee Value Chain" in *Roast*'s January/February 2020 issue.) Results found that 30 percent of the companies surveyed ask their vendors if they promote gender equity, and 31.4 percent have internal policies regarding gender. These findings help us understand how far we must go to reach meaningful gender equity in our own companies.

During our visits with La FEM and Las Diosas, I was inspired by the organizations' agroecology approach to the land, and the relationship between that and feminist ideology. In an urban setting like Baltimore, where I live, how can a business committed to these same core values implement a sustainable model like agroecology in its everyday operation? How can we create both a just and dignified workplace that practices and inspires sustainability and social ecology?

I couldn't wait to get back to Baltimore and start translating the work and ideas of these groups into new ideas for my own company and city. Since the inception of Thread Coffee Roasters in 2012, we have aimed to elevate farmers and empower women—both at origin and in Baltimore. Our company was founded on the core value of transparent trade that has a genuine impact on the lives of the campesinos, with whom we want to stand in solidarity and support. We strive toward egalitarian governance in our worker-owned model, and we aim to employ women, queer people, people of color and people from marginalized communities in Baltimore. The key aspects of inclusion, uplifting women and queer communities, commitment to democratic/egalitarian models, transparency and commitment to smallholder farmers have helped move us toward a more just future.

In the coffee supply stream, we know that it takes many hands to process coffee from seed to cup. All hands that touch coffee along its journey, including those that source coffee, should work to lift up their neighbors and communities. Like Las Diosas, we understand that "a woman cannot live on coffee alone."

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