

CAPÍTULO 12

NICARAGUAN FEMINIST JOSEFA TOLEDO DE AGUERRI (1866-1962):

HER LIFE AND HER LEGACY¹

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RESUMEN

Este ensayo analiza el legado de Josefa Toledo de Aguerri (1866-1962), educadora y feminista nicaragüense. El análisis se enfoca en sus escritos sobre el feminismo, la eugenesia, y la sexualidad.

Descriptor: Feminismo. Educación. Eugenesia. Josefa Toledo de Aguerri. Nicaragua. Siglos XIX y XX.

INTRODUCTION

Josefa Toledo de Aguerri, a teacher, was not the only feminist in Nicaragua during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, **her** vision and **her** activism in particular are vital to understanding the history of feminism in Nicaragua before the 1979 Sandinista Revolution. The reasons for this are quite simple. Toledo de Aguerri's life spanned almost a century, a key century for women's rights in her country. No other Nicaraguan feminist participated in both the nineteenth century struggles to secure secular secondary education for girls **and** the mid-twentieth century campaigns for woman suffrage. Equally notable was the

extent of Toledo de Aguerri's feminist involvement. Unlike other women, she dedicated her entire adult life to implementing her feminist vision. She was involved in a myriad of national and international feminist organizations, many of which she established herself. She also founded Nicaragua's first feminist journals. Moreover, Toledo de Aguerri was interested in addressing an incredibly wide array of issues from a feminist perspective. Only after her life is placed in its proper historical context can scholars begin to make nuanced and accurate generalizations about Nicaragua's feminist history.

1. JOSEFA TOLEDO DE AGUERRI'S EDUCATIONAL LEGACY

Primary education for girls and boys changed relatively little during the first fifty years of Nicaraguan independence. By the late 1870s and early 1880s, however, some major educational reforms were introduced. Religious as well as secular secondary / teacher training (Normal) schools for girls were opened in the nation's largest cities (López 1988: 11-15).

Josefa Emilia Toledo Murillo (later to become Josefa Toledo de Aguerri) was one of the first students to enter the secular *Colegio de Señoritas* in Granada on a state-sponsored scholarship in 1883 (López Miranda 1988: 11-15). Founded in 1882, the *Colegio's* objective was to train young women to become primary and secondary school teachers. *Colegio* students, most of them in their teens, were taught science, industrial arts, pedagogy, philosophy, fine arts, and literature, among other things, all in English. Religious tolerance was also part of the school's curriculum, since its teachers were from the United States, and many were Protestant (López 1988: 11-15).

Although the state-run *Colegio de Señoritas* might have represented "the beginnings of women's modern education" in Nicaragua, it was the second, not the first, *Colegio* founded in the country (López Miranda 1988: 11-15).² Elena Arellano Chamorro (1836-1911), a religious

lay-woman from Granada, since the mid-1870s had run another *Colegio de Señoritas* in her own home (Rodríguez 1992: 19). The difference was that Arellano Chamorro's school was Catholic, unlike the one Toledo de Aguerri attended, and later directed between 1891 and 1897.

The two schools, one Catholic and one secular, competed fiercely for Granada's students' minds and hearts in the late 1880s and early 1890s. Arellano Chamorro and Toledo de Aguerri, in fact, became rivals. But in the end, Toledo de Aguerri's school prevailed, with the full backing of the state (Rodríguez 1992: 19). The conflict that erupted between Toledo de Aguerri and Arellano Chamorro was part of a larger pattern. As historian Francesca Miller notes "...[f]emale teachers... come from two distinct traditions: that of the *normalista* (the woman trained in [secular] teaching schools) and nuns and lay members of Catholic female teaching orders..." (Miller 1991: 35). Friction between these two groups was practically inevitable. Most importantly perhaps, their differences reflected confrontations at the national and international levels.

Miller points out that in Latin America as a whole "...the history of public female education is intimately linked with attempts to secularize, or modernize, the state..." (Miller 1991: 35). As in Mexico, Nicaraguan liberals in the mid-nineteenth century sought to weaken the Church by educating girls in public schools. And like Argentine liberals, those in Nicaragua gave priority to the training of Normal teachers. In Argentina this move "...incited furious opposition from Catholic female [teachers]... who regarded education... as their domain..." (Miller 1991: 35). A similar reaction took place in Nicaragua.

Although religious teachers like Arellano Chamorro were exasperated, there was little they could do to stop the wave of secularism in Nicaragua. Secular teachers like Toledo de Aguerri

were allowed a high degree of influence in the newly emerging educational system from the early 1890s onward, until Conservatives, (who had dominated politics during the 1860s, 1870s and 1880s), returned to power in 1910.

Between 1891 and 1897 Toledo de Aguerri administered the *Colegio de Señoritas de Granada*. Then, between 1897 and 1900, and 1907 and 1910, Toledo de Aguerri held important posts as director of two newly created schools in Managua, first the *Colegio de Señoritas de Managua*, and then the *Escuela Normal de Señoritas* (López 1988: 19-30). In 1910, however, she was dismissed from the latter school for political reasons. Her adherence to secular liberalism and her feminist ideals made her *persona non grata* in the new conservative administration (López 1988: 33-39). In response to these circumstances, Toledo de Aguerri opened her own privately funded school in 1912, a new *Colegio de Señoritas de Managua* (López 1988: 41).³

In her school Toledo de Aguerri was joined by a group of colleagues, among them her close friend Concepción "Conchita" Alegría, who became the school's Vice-Principal. Together they provided young women a curriculum which covered many subjects, including mathematics, the natural sciences, literature, drama, accounting, photography, and physical education (López Miranda 1988: 42). In addition to educating adolescent girls, Toledo de Aguerri was interested in educating the very young. To meet this goal, her 1912 *Colegio* included a *kindergarten*. As in a first kindergarten she had founded in Diriamba almost a decade earlier, Toledo de Aguerri implemented Maria Montessori's educational methods in the *Colegio's Kindergarten Modelo* (López 1988: 49-50).

Like Montessori, Toledo de Aguerri was very concerned with children's personalities and their independence. She believed that "...a Kindergarten teacher... must know she is no more than the midwife for the child's personality, a governess who guides his/her steps and spirit, without

taking away the child's liberty..." (López 1988: 50). Unfortunately, not everyone agreed with her on this point, and in 1912, the same year the Kindergarten *Modelo* opened, kindergartens were officially considered useless by the nation's conservative government and were dissolved (López 1988: 50).

It was not until 1924 that (Montessori) kindergartens became institutionalized in Nicaragua, with the creation of a state-sponsored *Kindergarten Nacional* (López 1988: 49-50). This National Kindergarten, however, did not last long in state hands, for the wars which took place in Nicaragua during the mid 1920s interrupted its existence as a Ministry of Public Instruction project. The government handed the endeavor over to Toledo de Aguerri, who ran the Kindergarten as part of her *Colegio* from the 1920s on.

In part, Toledo de Aguerri's keen interest in early childhood education had to do with her new status as a wife and mother. In 1900 she had married Juan Francisco Aguerri, an older Spanish émigré who owned a chocolate factory, and together they had had two daughters, Inés and Esperanza. Toledo de Aguerri wanted to educate her girls in a school of her own. Moreover, she felt she needed a flexible schedule in order to attend to her husband and his two sons from a previous marriage. Running a kindergarten annexed to her home allowed Toledo de Aguerri to supervise her own children, spend time at home, and still be useful to the larger society as a teacher and activist. As her daughters grew older, Toledo de Aguerri continued to be interested in kindergartens, but she also intensified her educational activities at the secondary/teacher training level (López 1988: 22-23).

Toledo de Aguerri's private *Colegio*, which her daughters also attended, remained open for twenty-five years (from 1912 to 1937), educating hundreds of teachers. Then, in 1937, Toledo de Aguerri moved on to inaugurate and direct (at age seventy-one) the state-funded *Normal Central*

de Señoritas de Managua (López 1988: 44). When this school was relocated to Jinotepe in 1947, Toledo de Aguerri finally retired from teaching, at age eighty one, although she continued to be active in academic and feminist circles until her death in 1962 at age ninety-six (López 1988: 115).

For forty-seven years, Toledo de Aguerri held the highest possible administrative position in five different schools for young women in Nicaragua. She founded all but the first school, the one she herself attended as a teenager. It is truly no wonder she is currently acknowledged as the mother of Nicaragua's educational system (Montes 1995). But what was most important about Toledo de Aguerri's schools was not necessarily that there were so many of them, nor that they lasted for so many years. The importance lies in the events that took place in these five institutions as well as in the students who attended the centers. First of all, it must be noted that the schools became the foci of cultural, intellectual and socio-political events for the nation (López Miranda 1988: 46-47). Secondly, we must acknowledge that, not coincidentally, Nicaragua's first college graduates were Toledo de Aguerri's former students.

Toledo de Aguerri's schools became magnets for female (and male) artists, thinkers and politicians. Indeed, during the early twentieth century, most of Nicaragua's artists and politicians set foot in Toledo de Aguerri's *Colegios* at one point or another during their careers. Ruben Darío, for example, Nicaragua's most famous poet, was honored with a cultural event in 1908 at one of Toledo de Aguerri's schools. Present at the occasion were President José Santos Zelaya and his wife, Blanca de Zelaya. Darío recited several poems for the First Lady, and others entertained the group for the rest of the evening. Among the performers were two women: María Castro, who played the piano, and Luisa Bonilla, a poet (López 1988: 33-34).

Although many of the cultural events at the *Colegios* involved the community at large,

most seemed to revolve around the students themselves. Toledo de Aguerri for instance, insisted that her pupils take up drama, and she herself wrote many of the plays they performed. Some of the plays, like *Fiesta de Santo Domingo*, required that students learn traditional dances, in an effort to rescue what is commonly referred to as "folklore" in Nicaragua (López 1988: 118-119).

Toledo de Aguerri also placed emphasis on environmental activities, institutionalizing June twenty-fourth as the "Day of the Tree" throughout the nation. To celebrate the holiday, the younger girls at the *Colegio* would plant trees in the plazas and dance around them, placing colored pieces of cloth on their branches (López Miranda 1988: 98-99). Former students, now in their sixties and seventies, fondly remember these activities, and amazingly, continued to meet regularly in Toledo de Aguerri's honor into the 1990s, according to professor Elba Alvarez de Hernández, herself one of Toledo de Aguerri's former students (Alvarez 1995).

Although Toledo de Aguerri fought for women as a group to be allowed to study, she was very conscious of the economic differences and the rural/urban split that divided women in Nicaragua and throughout the world. Born in an agricultural region herself, one of Toledo de Aguerri's special projects was the training of rural school teachers. During her brief tenure as General Director of Public Instruction in 1924, she personally traveled to remote areas to evaluate the quality of rural education throughout the nation and to lecture on the need for its improvement (López 1988: 72-73).

In order to alleviate the specific educational problems faced by working-class urban women, Toledo de Aguerri took even more concrete steps. In 1919, she founded the *Escuela Femenina de Prensa*. Set up as a night school, the *Escuela* was funded by newspapers throughout western Nicaragua. Two hundred and sixty female students enrolled during the first few months of the school's existence. The curriculum focused on mathematics, reading and writing, with a day

set apart for cultural activities. The *Escuela's* success was so great that the Ministry of Education decided to partially subsidize Toledo de Aguerri's efforts (López 1988: 83-85).

Although the lifespan of the *Escuela Femenina de Prensa* remains unknown, it is clear that Toledo de Aguerri's interest in the education of working-class women did not diminish over time. In 1936 she and a group of members from the feminist organization LIMDI y *Cruzada* formed the *Centro Femenino de Cultura Obrera*. This working-class women's cultural center attempted to educate working-class women in order for them to become, in Toledo de Aguerri's words: "...homemakers, conscious laborers... [and] contributing citizens... to the state's greatness..." (López 1988: 109).

There is hardly a teacher or college student in Nicaragua today who is not familiar with Toledo de Aguerri's name, or her nickname, "Niña Chepita." Her former students are also well-known. Two students in particular stand out: Elba Ochomogo, the first woman to obtain a university degree in Nicaragua, and Concepción Palacios, the first Nicaraguan woman to obtain a medical degree.⁴ Elba Ochomogo began her studies in pharmacy at the National University in Leon in 1918. She completed her degree in 1923, thus becoming Nicaragua's first "professional" woman. Doctor Ochomogo, as she was called, married another pharmacist, Justo Hernandez, and together they opened a pharmacy in Managua. Their drugstore remained open, under Ochomogo's administration, for over fifty years, and was still functioning in the mid-1970s (Noguera 1974: 11).

Concepción Palacios' educational and professional trajectory was more complicated than Ochomogo's, even though it also began in the 1920s. In the first place, Nicaragua's Medical School was less tolerant of women than the School of Pharmacy. Palacios had to struggle, with Toledo de Aguerri's help, just to be admitted to the University. And then, her problems barely had

begun. As a student, Palacios was subjected to constant harassment. In addition to jokes and obscene drawings from her male peers, Palacios had to endure the reprimand of the Bishop of Leon, who from his pulpit denounced her presence in medical school (López Miranda 1988: 48). Under extreme pressure, Palacios eventually withdrew from the university in Nicaragua and moved to Mexico, where she successfully completed her studies and became a practicing physician, as well as an ardent socialist revolutionary (López 1988: 48-49). When Palacios came back to Nicaragua in 1929, she was imprisoned by President José María Moncada for political reasons. Toledo de Aguerri spoke on her behalf to the Moncada administration, but was unsuccessful in obtaining her unconditional release. Like many other Nicaraguan revolutionaries of the time, Palacios was forced to return to Mexico as a political exile (López 1988: 91).

Today, several health centers and medical organizations in Managua are named after Doctor Concepción Palacios. And, in an ironic historical twist that demonstrates how quickly Nicaraguan attitudes toward women in education changed, during the 1950s Toledo de Aguerri received a *Doctorate Honoris Causa* from the same university that had previously denied Concepción Palacios the opportunity to obtain a degree (López 1988: 140).

Due to her longevity, Toledo de Aguerri had the pleasure of seeing the struggle for women's education achieve enormous success. By the mid-twentieth century women were present in most professions and some had even obtained graduate degrees. Olga Núñez de Saballos exemplifies the changes which had occurred. In 1945 she became Nicaragua's first woman attorney. She then went on to obtain a Master's Degree in International Relations from the American University in 1947, while she served as Vice-Consul and Cultural Attaché at the Nicaraguan Embassy in Washington D.C. (*Corona Funebre* 1972: iii-iv). Most importantly, the number of college-educated women in Nicaragua multiplied in the mid-twentieth century. By the 1960s, twenty

percent of university students were female (Arnove 1994: 169-170). A new era of women's education had arrived.

2. JOSEFA TOLEDO DE AGUERRI'S IMPERFECT VISION: ITS IMPORTANCE TO THE HISTORY OF FEMINISM IN NICARAGUA

In addition to advocating suffrage and education for women, Toledo de Aguerri was engaged in promoting sex education in public schools, forming an "equal pay for equal worth" movement, increasing access to birth control, and developing special education programs for children with disabilities. Moreover, Toledo de Aguerri was interested in fostering women's cultural expression, creating child care centers for working mothers, improving the situation of women in prisons, stopping U.S. intervention in Latin America, giving refuge to those fleeing from European fascism, promoting industrialization in Nicaragua, and furthering world-wide peace activism. During the 1930s Toledo de Aguerri (like many Latin American, U.S.-American and European intellectuals of her generation) also favored the implementation of eugenic policies.

The eugenics movement was founded in England by Sir Francis Galton (1822-1911), a cousin of Charles Darwin (1809-1882) (Bullough 1994: 50). According to historian Vern Bullough, "...the purpose of eugenics was... to increase from one generation to another the proportion of individuals with better-than-average intellectual endowment..." a very subjective -- and usually racist—endeavor (Bullough 1994: 50). Some, but not all, followers of eugenics, agreed with eugenicist Karl Pearson's (1857-1936) view that the "...higher races" should supplant the "lower" ones..." (Bullough 1994: 50). Bullough notes for example, that "...[a]lthough the [U.S.]-American eugenics movement, founded in 1905, initially adopted Pearson's view wholeheartedly..." other eugenic groups like "...the English Eugenics Society founded by Galton,

eventually opposed Pearson's racist views..." (Bullough 1994: 50).

Toledo de Aguerri did not subscribe to the more virulently racist expressions of eugenics nor to the language which differentiated between "higher and lower races". She generally used the term "race" to mean the human specie or to refer to Latin Americans as a group. Rarely, if ever, did she use the term to distinguish among Nicaraguans on the basis of skin color, ethnic background, or wealth. Toledo de Aguerri was primarily concerned with eugenics in relation to eradicating physical disabilities and illnesses.

Although she did not deal with "racial" differences (differences historians acknowledge to be socially constructed) among Nicaraguans in relation to eugenics, Toledo de Aguerri did address the issue in the educational policy context. Like many other Nicaraguan elites, she wanted to integrate the nation's highland Indians as laborers into the rural economy. What perhaps differentiated Toledo de Aguerri from other elites, however, was that she wanted to make the transition a peaceful one, accomplished through education. In order to instill the "habits of peace, order, cleanliness and work,"...on the Indigenous population, an *Escuela Normal de Indigenas* was founded in Matagalpa in 1925..." (López 1988: 73). There, teachers were to be specially trained to deal with Indians' "...false ideas, absurd preoccupations, indolence, superstition and mistakes... Tactfulness, perseverance... example and virtue..." would be the weapons teachers would use to achieve "victory" (López 1988: 74).

Toledo de Aguerri's racism most likely contributed to the destruction of Indian communities in northern Nicaragua, a thoroughly reprehensible act. Nonetheless, it seems unwise to dismiss her importance to Nicaraguan feminism or to the general history of Nicaragua because of this. Her racial prejudice might actually be another reason to further study her thought. Investigating the elite racial ideology of a nation which prides itself in its mestizo heritage (Gould

1993), can help us to understand how race has been theorized in the past, and how elitist conceptions of difference have molded current Nicaraguan identities, including feminist ones.

There is at least one more reason why studying Toledo de Aguerri's career is fundamental to understanding the history of feminism in Nicaragua. She is remembered today primarily as a teacher, not a feminist foremother. Analyzing why this is so can give us some clues into the dynamics of contemporary Nicaraguan feminism and the writing of history more generally.⁵

3. JOSEFA TOLEDO DE AGUERRI'S WRITINGS ON FEMINISM

Toledo de Aguerri had in mind concrete goals for women. She wanted feminism to resolve the problems women faced in society. In the late 1930s she wrote:

“...Feminist aspirations are manifested in three realms: the political, the legal, and the economic. The first has to do with the vote. The second refers to... the inequalities among the sexes endorsed by the legal code. The third covers primarily those issues related to employment, and women's free access to the professions...” (López 1988: 174).

One other area in which Toledo de Aguerri saw a great need for feminist change was education: "the problem of woman's education involves the matter of feminism. One cannot think of one without the other..." (Toledo de Aguerri 1940: 6). She believed women needed to be better educated and educated differently in order to confront the new set of economic circumstances the world faced: "...[t]he modern spirit of feminine education obeys an economic need..." (Toledo de Aguerri 1940: 7). Moreover, Toledo de Aguerri wanted women to use their time efficiently, be economically productive, and work under safe conditions:

“...[i]n earlier times, girls did needle work...wasting time, ruining their eyesight, bending their backs, all with very little economic gain... Today the new... manual arts open at [woman's] door a commercial opportunity ...” (Toledo de Aguerri 1940: 7-8).

Toledo de Aguerri's feminist vision was a wide one, focused simultaneously on the future of

women and the future of her country. She was not as interested in theorizing the origins of patriarchy as she was in making sure women would be able to play a central role in the industrialized Nicaragua she believed was about to emerge during the mid-twentieth century. Thus, she advocated a feminism compatible with what she perceived to be the larger economic and political goals of the nation and the Central American region. She urged each woman to embrace "...a *constructive* feminism which [would] help push her country towards progress, order, peace and liberty, while understanding its social problems..." (Toledo de Aguerri 1940: 7).

Criticism of U.S. intervention in Latin America was central to Toledo de Aguerri's concern with peace and liberty. While commenting on her 1920 visit to the Panama Canal she made the following sarcastic comparison between marriage and Latin American dependence on the United States:

"...The beautiful isthmus lost the liberty it previously had... becoming... passive, clean and calm. A fighting spirit [*"coraje"*] no longer exists, but there is health. How does relative wealth... compensate.... for [losing] the bloody liberty... in which democracy is forged? This [visit to Panama] made me remember the innocent conversation I had with a [female] acquaintance of mine, who told me: --When I got married I worried I would lose my freedom... but I was reassured as to my future; now I eat, drink and sleep peacefully. The master gives me everything... although sometimes in short supply. Even so, I live without worries..." (Toledo de Aguerri 1924: 50-51).

In addition to her preoccupation with international issues, Toledo de Aguerri was interested in analyzing what she considered to be the divisions within feminism. In her opinion there existed a very sharp differentiation between radical/theoretical/social and moderate/practical/ conservative feminists. Curiously, she identified with the latter, although she seemed to see a historical need for both groups. Whether in her view, the former disappeared as it evolved into the latter, however, remains unclear:

"...There are two types of feminism: a social kind which is radical and sectarian, which proclaims woman to be equal to men in everything; and an opportunist feminism [which is] moderate, conservative and practical. The first is the theoretical one, the second is the one which gets results [*"el de las conquistas de hecho"*]. The masculinized [social] feminism has given way to the opportunist feminism, where woman, without leaving aside the

prerogatives [already] conquered... acts today with the femininity which is inherent to her..." (Toledo de Aguerri 1940: 9).

In her published works and in her speeches, Toledo de Aguerri made great efforts to stress the importance "femininity" (those physical and behavioral characteristics she felt differentiated women from men) had for feminism, and vice-versa.⁶ She wanted Nicaraguan women's femininity to be "injected with feminism" (Toledo de Aguerri 1940: 29). Ideally, there would be a "transition" (Toledo de Aguerri 1940: 13) from femininity to feminism with a "blissful duality" (Toledo de Aguerri 1940: 30) of both as its end result. Toledo de Aguerri's definition of femininity dealt with two interrelated issues: women's morals and their behavior. She wished women would realize the importance of excelling in those activities which were "noble and worthy" (Toledo de Aguerri 1940: 20). And she implored women to refrain from imitating "men's vices and liberties"⁷ (drinking and smoking) and dressing like them (Toledo de Aguerri 1940: 11).

Most importantly, femininity for Toledo de Aguerri was about heterosexuality and the complementarity of the sexes. In 1938 she warned women about the dangers of lesbianism, "what in Germany is being called the third sex" (Toledo de Aguerri 1940: 12).⁸ She also assured her readers that "[f]eminism is not contrary to matrimony. It is said that the stronger woman's personality is, the greater her love for man will be" (Toledo de Aguerri 1940: 12). Even though Toledo approved of heterosexuality, she advised couples to de-emphasize sexual attraction.⁹ She believed "...[t]he foundation of a home is love, not desire..." (Toledo de Aguerri 1940: 12). Moreover, it was women's duty to make sure men combined "real love" with "physical love": "...the educated woman will... conduct man to the heights of a noble and disinterested affection..." (Toledo de Aguerri 1940: 12).

Although she did not approve of men's "vices," or of the way in which women were raised to act, Toledo de Aguerri did believe men and women could benefit from some of each other's characteristics. "The ideal" in her view was "...the moral masculinization of woman and the moral feminization of men..." a combination which would bring together the complementary and

"opposite qualities" the sexes had (Toledo de Aguerri 1940: 11). Because she felt men and women were opposites, Toledo de Aguerri distanced herself from feminists who wanted to erase differences and "be like men" (Toledo de Aguerri 1940: 27). On the other hand, because she felt they were each other's complements, Toledo de Aguerri strongly disapproved of those who proclaimed woman's superiority to man or supported a war between the sexes:

“...An active, crude, and rude feminist struggle between man and woman took place in the world. As a result, some fell to ridiculous levels and others to flawed ones. Now that the atmosphere is calm, one is able to notice that arguing over a supposed masculine or feminine superiority is unproductive. Given that the sexes are formed in different ways, their functions cannot be compared... Woman is not inferior or superior to man; she is simply his counterpart ...” (Toledo de Aguerri 1940: 6).

As mentioned earlier, Toledo de Aguerri was highly influenced by the eugenics movement.

In 1938 she stated:

“...Eugenics is very important for strengthening the [human] race. [Nonetheless] in Central America... the word eugenics twitches the nerves of the ignorant [and] makes hypocrites holler... When these ideas [finally] flower in the mind, fervent campaigns will be waged in eugenics's favor throughout 'the media, the schools, the universities and the pulpit.' This will purify the current of social life, which today exhibits symptoms of decay...” (Toledo de Aguerri 1940: 15).

In Toledo de Aguerri's view, eugenics would serve an admirable purpose. It would prevent unhealthy children from being born and unhealthy adults from breeding:

“...In order to have better selected descendants, among both vegetables and animals, vigorous types are chosen. Among mankind however, the biological laws are not applied, due to ignorance and hypocrisy. This allows man to procreate, even though sick or corrupt, frail, crazy, epileptic, abnormal creatures... who are a burden on the family and on society...” (Toledo de Aguerri 1940: 15).¹⁰

Because eugenics required planned parenthood, increasing the population's awareness of the reproductive process was a central goal of the movement. Toledo de Aguerri wanted to institutionalize this awareness by teaching sex education in public schools. For her, sexual

instruction was part of the modern, scientific education children needed to receive. It would help prevent unwanted pregnancies as well as sexually transmitted diseases at a time when both were rampant.

Toledo de Aguerri was widely criticized however, for her endorsement of sex education, particularly by the Catholic Church. But she did not remain silent against her enemies. She responded to those who opposed her plan by arguing that, unlike her critics, who merely "...pretended to be honest...", she was actually doing something to prevent "...the advance of secret [sexually transmitted] diseases..." (Toledo de Aguerri 1940: 14). Her foes, on the other hand, "...remain[ed] passive... and... cruelly critique[d] those who attempt[ed] prophylaxis campaigns..." (Toledo de Aguerri 1940: 14). They were wrong, she believed, because "...hiding certain knowledge... [from the population could only] ...harm... individuals and the [human] specie..." (Toledo de Aguerri 1940: 14-16).

In addition to encouraging humanity's evolutionary progress, when it came to sex and sexuality, Toledo de Aguerri had at least six interrelated concerns. She wanted to deter homosexuality, curtail heterosexual desire/expression, promote the nuclear family, implement sex education, prevent unwanted pregnancies and diminish the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. It is important to note that the three issues she was concerned with the most, institutionalizing sex education, providing wide access to birth control, and preventing STDs, have still not been fully addressed in Nicaragua, or hardly anywhere else in the world for that matter.

In spite of her homophobia, Toledo de Aguerri espoused quite radical ideas about sex for her time.¹¹ Proof of this is the fact that she suffered greatly because of her expressed beliefs on the topic. Toledo de Aguerri was often singled out by individual priests for criticism, and even her physical appearance was used against her in Sunday sermons. A Father Moreira for example, insinuated that Toledo de Aguerri's prematurely gray hair and decorous manners masked her true (deviant) nature. As part of a sermon he once noted that Toledo de Aguerri had "...a white head,

but a green stem, like an onion..." (López 1988: 83).

Insinuations and accusations about Toledo de Aguerri's integrity were made throughout her life and even after her death. When conservatives fired her from her post as director of the *Escuela Normal de Señoritas* in Managua in 1910, Toledo de Aguerri was accused of stealing a piano, an allegation she always denied (López 1988: 55-56). After her death, a particularly offensive rumor gained strength. Her detractors claimed that during the early twentieth century, Toledo de Aguerri had saved the prettiest virgins among her students to satiate liberal President José Santos Zelaya's sexual hunger.¹² Other rumors continue to circulate today. It is said that she also offered her students to Anastasio Somoza García (Schneegans 1996). Moreover, she is accused of having been an intellectual fraud (Schneegans 1996). According to this last rumor, Toledo de Aguerri did not personally write the books and articles she signed, they were all ghost-written by her protégés (Schneegans 1996).

Clearly, Toledo de Aguerri put her sexual integrity on the line by advocating the institutionalization of sex education and birth control, even though her sexual (particularly her marital) life was by most accounts impeccable and very traditional.¹³ Her example demonstrates the hazards feminists (even today) encounter when they attempt to talk about sex in public.

4. JOSEFA TOLEDO DE AGUERRI'S FAMILY LIFE

As a teenager studying in Granada during the 1870s, Josefa "Chepita" Toledo Murillo was made fun of for being from Chontales, an agricultural region in central Nicaragua. The teasing intensified her identification with her hometown of Juigalpa, the capital of the Chontales province, although she would spend most of her life away from the area. Her pride in her origins achieved such legendary proportions that it came to form the basis for the local culture the "Chontales Intellectual Clan" attempted to foster in the 1980s (López 1988: 17). It was in fact the Chontales Cattle Ranching Association (ASOGACHO) which financed Margarita López Miranda's biography of Toledo de Aguerri in 1988, the most rigorous biography currently available.

Ironically however, Toledo Murillo seems to have been a first generation Chontaleña. Her father was originally from Guatemala, and her mother was from León, a city located on Nicaragua's Pacific coast (López 1988: 8).

During her early years, "Chepita"'s family was financially well-off. Legend has it that her father brought the first sewing machine to Juigalpa from one of his many trips to Europe (López 1988: 8). But his untimely death when Toledo Murillo was only three years old led the family to difficult times (López 1988: 8). Her mother's remarriage did not better their financial situation, making it eventually necessary for Toledo Murillo to accept a state scholarship to the *Colegio de Señoritas* in Granada (López 1988: 9-11). Toledo herself did not marry until 1900, at age thirty-four. Not much is known about how she and her husband, Juan Francisco Aguerri, met, but letters indicate they had a loving relationship (López 1988: 55-56). After Aguerri died, in the 1930s, Toledo de Aguerri intensified her feminist activism. Whether or not her husband had restricted her participation in feminist activities however, is unknown.

Toledo de Aguerri had to deal with the deaths of her mother, husband and daughter in the course of only a few years. Her daughter Esperanza's death of tuberculosis in 1930 was particularly hard to confront. In its aftermath, Toledo de Aguerri took charge of raising Esperanza's daughter as her own (López 1988: 105). Toledo de Aguerri's other daughter, Inés, was actively involved in many of her mother's feminist and cultural organizations. In the early 1970s Inés was still active in the American Women's Union (UMA), one of the women's cultural associations Toledo de Aguerri had founded decades earlier (Rodríguez 1995).¹⁴ Undoubtedly, Toledo de Aguerri's family was proud of her. Nonetheless, she was very severe at times and was often referred to --by family and friends alike-- as a "benevolent dictator" (López 1988: 143). In order to last as long as she did in the public limelight, Toledo de Aguerri must have had a forceful personality. Not surprisingly however, many of those around her were not very accepting of this characteristic in a woman. Even those who esteemed her considered her to be somewhat of an anomaly. One admirer called Toledo de Aguerri an "*ilustre varona*" (López 1988: 140), indicating

he perceived a certain incongruity between her achievements and her gender. Rosita Mencías, a former student and her private secretary between 1948 and 1960, perhaps summarized Toledo de Aguerri's public life best when she commented that "Niña Chepita" was never completely understood by Nicaragua's traditional politicians (López 1988: 142). A woman who proclaimed "God was the first feminist" was bound to be misunderstood (Whisnant 1995: 409).

**CONCLUSION:
JOSEFA TOLEDO DE AGUERRI'S LIFE AS A WINDOW INTO NICARAGUA'S
FEMINIST PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE**

Josefa Toledo de Aguerri was literate in a country where most people were illiterate; she was married in a country where many people were not; she lived a very long life in a country with a low life expectancy rate. She also had access to money and men in high places in a nation where most people were poor. And yet, she also had a lot in common with the vast majority of Nicaragua's population. In the first place, she was not from Managua, the capital, or from León or Granada, the nation's other prominent cities. Instead, she was from Juigalpa, Chontales, and would even today be considered a "hillbilly." Moreover, Toledo de Aguerri did not belong to any of the long-established moneyed families of her time. Like most Nicaraguans, she did not inherit a surname which on its own carried recognition or power. Most importantly, perhaps, what Toledo de Aguerri had in common with a great percentage of the population was that she was a mother in a country where most women have children.

Toledo de Aguerri, however, did more than expand the traditionally "private" mothering role into the public world. As her feminist magazine logo proclaimed: "for woman" she wanted "everything" (Whisnant 1995: 89). And "everything," in her view, meant women should be able to choose if and when they wanted to become mothers. Moreover, regardless of their marital status, or whether or not they had children, Toledo de Aguerri believed women had a right to participate in all areas of society, including politics. Attempting to enact these feminist convictions was what

led Toledo de Aguerri and her generation of feminists to forge a tenuous relationship with Nicaragua's Nationalist Liberal Party, a party open to feminism during the early twentieth century.¹⁵

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NOTES

¹ This brief essay is part of a larger study of Josefa Toledo de Aguerri's life and the history of feminism in Nicaragua, my Master's dissertation: *Josefa Toledo de Aguerri (1866-1960) and the Forgotten History of Nicaraguan Feminism*. New Mexico: M.A. Thesis, University of New Mexico, 1996. For more information on Toledo de Aguerri's involvement in the struggle for female suffrage see my Ph.D. dissertation: *From Feminism to Somocismo: Women's Rights and Right Wing Politics in Nicaragua, 1821-1979*. Indiana, Ph.D. Dissertation in History, Indiana University, 2002.

² It is possible that the Colegio might have been the third in the country, and the second only in Granada. Sara Cifuentes founded a *Normal de Señoritas* in León in 1880 (Noguera 1974: 6).

³ Toledo de Aguerri at times received state funding for her school, but it was minimal.

⁴ Other of Toledo de Aguerri's students went on to achieve national and international recognition. Among her former students we find the former President of Nicaragua's Red Cross, Esperanza Bermudez.

⁵ I address this issue elsewhere in my work.

⁶ Other scholars have extensive discussions on the importance of femininity in Latin American feminist thought (Lavrín 1995).

⁸ Her emphasis.

⁹ Although she does not mention it explicitly in her writing, it is probable that Toledo de Aguerri meant to prevent both rape and prostitution by down-playing heterosexual sex in society. Several scholars have discussed these issues in a U.S.-American context (Dubois and Gordon 1983).

¹⁰ The question of who would decide which persons would be allowed to bear children was left unanswered. Undoubtedly, those persons who were considered "sick" or "corrupt" would have no say in the matter.

¹¹ There is evidence that gays and lesbians have been actively persecuted throughout the twentieth century in Nicaragua. In 1916, for example, Felix P. Paniagua was sentenced to fifteen days of hard labor for sodomy. See "En actos de sodomía" in *El 93* Año. 1, No. 19 (León, miércoles 30 de agosto de 1916). The role feminists like Toledo de Aguerri have played in upholding not only stereotypes but the imprisonment of lesbians and gays can of course not be disregarded or excused. My point is that it is unrealistic to expect that a feminist (born in 1866) who wanted to curtail heterosexual sex would support homosexuality.

¹² I thank historian Jorge Eduardo Arellano for bringing this point to my attention.

¹³ There are rumors however, that Toledo de Aguerri dated a married man for many years before marrying Aguerri.

¹⁴ In Spanish the name of the organization is *Unión de Mujeres Americanas*. "American" in this context means North, Central and South American.

¹⁵ I address this relationship extensively elsewhere in my work.