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HOW ONE MIGRANT COMMUNITY IS ORGANIZING FOR CHANGE

It is difficult to gauge the size of the Nicaraguan population in Costa Rica since much of the migration is irregular, but the International Organization on Migration estimates that, as of '99, between 300,000 and 340,000 Nicaraguans lived in Costa Rica, representing approximately 8% of the total population. Many Nicaraguans cross the border into Costa Rica hoping to escape poverty. UNICEF reports that 45% of Nicaragua's population lives on less than a dollar a day, and that the country's gross national yearly income is \$910 per person, compared with \$4,590 in Costa Rica.

Although Costa Rica relies on Nicaraguan labor in agriculture, construction, private security and domestic employment, Nicaraguan immigrants encounter a high level of prejudice in Costa Rica, and undocumented workers are subject to exploitation. Nicaraguan immigrants often have to leave their children behind. The community suffers from high incidents of domestic violence, probably in part due to elevated levels of stress experienced by Nicaraguan migrants.

The following is a vignette—a brief story—about a group of very poor Nicaraguan women living in Costa Rica who are organizing to improve their own lives and the lives of their families. The article is based on personal interviews conducted by the author in Costa Rica at the Center for the Social Rights of Immigrants in San José and at the Bajos Tejares Co-op near San Ramón, between 31 Jan and 6 Feb '07.

Eighteen years ago, Melvina Alvaro Martínez and her husband made a pilgrimage undertaken by thousands of Nicaraguans each year, crossing Costa Rica's northern border and heading south without work-permits, looking for higher-paying jobs.

Melvina, 33, is the mother of eight. Dark curly hair frames her wrinkleless, brown face and heavy, dark eyes. The line of her mouth at rest forms a slight frown. She lives with her family in Bajos Tejares, an impoverished settlement of makeshift homes on municipal land on the outskirts of San Ramón, about an hour-and-a-half west of Costa Rica's capital, San José. A web of cable and electric lines that community members have strung from bamboo poles hangs over the village of tin and wooden shacks at the base of a steep hill. In the rainy season, dirt roads turn to knee-deep mud, and during the summer months the ground is parched and cracked, erupting in clouds of dust from foot-traffic.

Melvina takes care of the kids, while her current companion, the father of her youngest child, takes whatever jobs he can get, usually doing construction work or picking coffee. She left her husband and father of her other children five years ago because, she says, he was no good. He used to drink and sleep with other women while she worked at a yucca packaging plant. Work is now harder to find than when she first arrived.

Resources in the area are limited, but Melvina and other women from the *barrio* have started working together to pull their families out of poverty. On a hot day in Feb, a group of women gather under a tin roof covering the dirt patio of a small wooden house at the end of the road. A fence made of rusty pieces of corrugated metal surrounds a sun-baked yard behind the shack that is sculpted into terraces, which the women shaped when the ground was soft. Twenty women have invested about \$20 each—not a small sum for their families—to form a cooperative farm.

The Bajos Tejares Co-op was born after the members took free classes in small-business administration offered by a non-profit in San José, called the Center for the Social Rights of Immigrants (CENDEROS). At first, the group considered starting a sewing business, but the members realized that agriculture was their common strength. All of the women grew up raising food in Nicaragua, and farming was what they all knew how to do best.

Because of space limitations, the women decided to grow vegetables using hydroponics, a method of cultivating plants in water without soil. Although most of the members do not read, they learned about the process from books, helping to educate one another. In a corner of the terraced yard, 10 tables that the women have built are ready to be lined with plastic; filled with a mixture of small rocks, rice hulls, fertilizer and seeds; and arranged on the earthen steps to maximize exposure to the sun.

They will start planting this week, and the women are planning their crops: carrots, radishes, sweet peppers, cabbage, lettuce and cilantro.

“You don’t get anything for cilantro. It’s too cheap,” one woman argues.

“But it grows really fast; we can grow a lot of it,” another shoots back.

Somebody suggests growing tomatoes, but the idea is quickly dismissed.

“Tomatoes are too delicate, we need more experience.”

Not all of the members are at the meeting. It is still coffee-picking season and some of them have to work. School starts soon, and they need to buy uniforms for their children. Seven women sit on chairs they have carried from their nearby houses or on an old blue couch with its cushions replaced with boards. Their workplace is a one-room shack made of rough wood and tin, the former home of a co-op member who had to go back to Nicaragua for awhile. The little house has become a shed, filled with waist-high bags of rice hulls and boxes of chemicals, secured with a padlocked screen-door.

Wilma Colindres, an organizer from CENDEROS with a small round face, sing-song voice and soft hands that conduct as she speaks, helps facilitate the meeting. Next week, a group of students from San José will go help the women work and teach them more about hydroponics, and the co-op needs to have its first batches of seed germinated in time for the visit. Wilma takes notes and lists off the tasks that need to be done. She meets with the group weekly and will continue until its production is underway.

CENDEROS’ mission is “to improve the quality of life of Nicaraguan immigrants, especially women.” (The acronym sounds like *senderos*, which means paths in Spanish.) The organization grew out of a project called the Nicaraguan Women’s network, founded in ’01 by a group of women who had worked on a program for Nicaraguan immigrants in San José sponsored by the Nicaraguan Popular University in Managua. Adilia Solis, a psychologist and co-founder, says that they saw a need to organize for the human rights of female immigrants, and the project grew rapidly by word of

mouth. The organization focused its initial work around ensuring workers' rights, reproductive options, healthcare and helping victims of domestic violence.

In '05, CENDEROS acquired office-space—a large, slightly dingy room with several long tables and windows facing a busy street, above a mechanics school in downtown San José. Funded by two international NGOs, TRoCAIRE of Ireland and Caritas of New Zealand, CENDEROS employs three full-time and several part-time staffers. Many volunteers contribute their time and skills to CENDEROS.

The organization focuses on the most vulnerable women—the very poor, the undocumented, and those with substance abuse problems. Supporting human rights is still the crux of CENDEROS' work, and the organization has developed specific programs to provide healthcare, education and economic support. In a recent project, the organization is working with men who have been perpetrators of domestic violence and want to break the cycle, providing psychological treatment and preventative education. Last year, CENDEROS offered a workshop on self-esteem and xenophobia.

Economic development is a strong component of CENDEROS' work. It provides training in small-business administration, basic accounting and developing business plans. The organization supports individuals as well as cooperatives with very low-interest loans and assistance with licensing and development. The Bajos Tejares Co-op and the CENDEROS Co-op, a group of men and women in San José who plan to produce and sell typical Nicaraguan food, were formed as a way of sharing resources. Many workers are not able to open their own businesses because their undocumented status prevents them from securing the necessary licenses. By working in co-ops, legal residents can apply for permits, while other workers contribute in different ways. Sharing expenses makes starting a business much more feasible for very low-income workers.

Since the women of Bajos Tejares began organizing last May, they have found support from CENDEROS as well as their community. A local business owner, who Melvina and some of the other women know from church, is helping them plan, strategize and divide the work. Thanks to her connections in San Ramón, the women were able to buy the huge pile of rocks that they needed for about half of the retail price, and her daughter plans to help market the co-op's produce. In addition to the money that each woman has invested, the co-op has borrowed about \$400 from CENDEROS. Weary of assuming debt, the women asked for a loan to cover only the most critical expenses.

A local farmer has offered to lend the group a plot of land for two years, where they can do traditional farming. This weekend, the co-op members will clear the ground. With sticks and shovels, they will break the dry, packed earth, pull up weeds and prepare the soil for seeds. Harvest is still a long way off, but the women take pride in the work that they are doing for themselves, anticipating not only income, but healthy food for their families.

For Melvina, the co-op's potential represents survival for her and her family. "This is my dream," she says.

—*Honna Veerkamp*