

The logo for American Jewish World Service, featuring a white circular emblem with two curved lines inside, set against a red background.

AMERICAN  
JEWISH  
WORLD  
SERVICE

A close-up portrait of an elderly man with deeply wrinkled skin, wearing a light-colored cap and a blue shirt. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be a wooden structure.

PROMOTING  
HUMAN RIGHTS IN  
**NICARAGUA**



## Inspired by the Jewish commitment to justice, American Jewish World Service (AJWS) works to realize human rights and end poverty in the developing world.

*AJWS advances the health and rights of women, girls and LGBT people; promotes recovery from conflict, disasters and oppression; and defends access to food, land and livelihoods. We pursue lasting change by supporting grassroots and global human rights organizations in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean and by mobilizing our community in the U.S. to advocate for global justice. Working together, we strive to build a more just and equitable world.*

**IN NICARAGUA,** AJWS currently makes grants to nine extraordinary grassroots organizations that are striving to build strong movements for human rights. We have worked in Nicaragua since 1999 and are focused on two of the most pressing issues facing the country's most marginalized populations today: the struggle for land, food, water and resources critical for the survival of indigenous people; and human rights violations against women and LGBTI people. As Nicaragua's grassroots activists mobilize and organize to effect change on these critical issues, AJWS stands in solidarity with our partners by providing financial support and an unwavering commitment to their human rights.



# AJWS GRANTEES IN NICARAGUA



*AJWS has been working in Nicaragua since 1999 and currently supports nine grassroots organizations promoting human rights.*



# BACKGROUND: WHY WE PROMOTE HUMAN RIGHTS IN NICARAGUA

Nicaragua is a country currently undergoing rapid change. After years of political unrest—including a bloody revolution in the 1970s and civil war in the 1980s—the country is now experiencing economic growth and greater political stability. Unfortunately, many of Nicaragua’s citizens have yet to fully benefit from these changes. Despite its recent economic growth, Nicaragua is still the poorest country in Central America, with 48 percent of the population currently living below the poverty line.<sup>1</sup>

The Nicaraguan government and local authorities have welcomed the influx of companies eager to mine the country for its bountiful natural resources. While this has led to profits for the elite, the new development has had an especially detrimental impact on Nicaragua’s poor and indigenous populations. The government, under economic pressure and riddled with corruption, allows the land of indigenous people to be sold or mined without their consent, displacing communities and families from land they depend on for both income and survival.

And although the country has made significant strides to overcome the war era’s legacy of oppression and violence by ratifying new laws and a Constitution that are intended to protect human rights, widespread discrimination still pervades society. This is particularly true for women and LGBTI people, who are treated as second-class citizens in a traditional culture. The prejudice they face—and the violence that often comes with it—prevents them from fully participating in their societies.

To effect change in Nicaragua, AJWS supports groups that are addressing the displacement and impoverishment of Nicaragua’s indigenous people due to the rapid spread of development, logging and industry; and the pervasive discrimination and violence perpetrated against women and sexual minorities.

## COUNTRY SNAPSHOT

- 48 percent of Nicaragua’s total population lives below the national poverty line—and in the north Atlantic region (the RAAN), where the indigenous population is centered, the poverty rate is as high as 70.9 percent.<sup>2</sup>
- 38 percent of Nicaragua’s indigenous rural people lack official titles to the land they have lived on and farmed for generations, making them vulnerable to having their land sold without their consent.<sup>3</sup>



A farmer uses stored rainwater to irrigate crops during Nicaragua’s intense dry season. Photograph by Neil Palmer.

- It is estimated that 60 percent of women in Nicaragua have been victims of domestic or sexual violence, and yet only three percent of cases of sexual violence have been prosecuted.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>“Country Programme – Nicaragua (2008-2012).” World Food Programme. Web. 27 Feb. 2013.

<sup>2</sup>“Nicaragua Data.” World Bank. Web. 13 Feb. 2013.

<sup>3</sup>“USAID Country Profile: Property Rights and Resource Governance: Nicaragua.” USAID. Web. 6 Mar. 2013.

<sup>4</sup>“Country Reports of Human Rights Practices 2006: Nicaragua.” United States Department of State. Web. 13 Feb. 2013.





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“You are not required to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it.”

—Ethics of our Ancestors 2:16

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Members of AJWS grantee Grupo Safo, a collective of lesbian, bisexual and transgender women, work to defend LGBTI rights in Nicaragua. Photograph by Stefanie Rubin.



# OUR ISSUES

## DEFENDING LAND RIGHTS IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Five percent of Nicaragua's population is made up of indigenous people<sup>5</sup>—traditional communities that are native to the country and have a special tie to the land, which they have protected and owned communally for centuries. But their homes are now in jeopardy, because the government allows the sale of indigenous land to speculators, or *colonos*—often without the consent of the communities. The government also authorizes foreign companies to log and mine for the land's valuable resources. These activities displace indigenous people and render the land unusable for future generations.

In recent years, indigenous communities have organized and persuaded Nicaragua to pass laws that formally guarantee their right to use, manage and own their land. Unfortunately, these laws have not been fully implemented, followed or enforced by state governments around the country, and many indigenous people are unaware that the laws exist at all.


At the root of this problem is a lack of representation of indigenous people in forums where decisions are made about their communities. Indigenous leaders are not consulted when the government makes land deals with developers. Women and youth are particularly left out of the conversation, even though they play a major role in the cultivation of land and in the community's future. And while some indigenous groups are able to elect representatives to work with the local government in meeting their communities' concerns, the government often interferes with the election process and appoints representatives that they know will support the government's agendas.

Indigenous communities face further challenges due to geography, as populations are spread across the country. For instance, small isolated communities are highly susceptible to land grabs. This geographical spread also limits communities' ability to communicate with each other, organize protest efforts and develop a unified voice to advocate for their rights.

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### Grantees Effecting Change

AJWS supports organizations that are working to defend indigenous peoples' rights to the land and the natural resources they depend on. For example, **The Center for Justice and Human Rights of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua (CEJUDHCAN)** won a landmark case for an indigenous community against the Nicaraguan government that led to the creation of Nicaragua's Law 445, which guarantees indigenous communities in the Atlantic region the right to legal land titles. Another organization, **Coordinadora Chorotega**, trains local leaders to take legal action against the government's sale of indigenous land. Both groups work to establish youth networks to empower future generations to defend land rights and assume leadership roles in their communities.



Wilmer Gutiérrez Gómez (right), a leader of AJWS grantee Coordinadora Chorotega, works to defend the land rights of indigenous communities. Photograph by Stefanie Rubin.

<sup>5</sup>Index Mundi. Nicaragua Demographic Profile 2013.





Members of AJWS grantee Asociación Nicaraguense de Transgeneras (ANIT) work to stop stigma, social exclusion and discrimination against transgender people. Photograph by Stefanie Rubin

## ADVANCING THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN AND LGBTI PEOPLE

Violence against women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people is one of the gravest—and most prevalent—human rights issues in Nicaragua today. An estimated 60 percent of Nicaraguan women have been affected by physical or sexual violence, and most of these cases of abuse go unpunished or, worse, unnoticed.<sup>6</sup> The rate of violence is particularly high for LGBTI people. Because of stigma and discrimination, they rarely receive protection from police or the law.

Tragically, health care workers and institutions discriminate against women and LGBTI people. Doctors and hospital staff tend to blame women who report that they have been sexually abused. LGBTI people who express their identities openly experience discrimination in accessing health services.

The challenges that women and LGBTI people in Nicaragua face are exacerbated by the fact that they lack a voice in making communal decisions that affect their lives. In rural and indigenous communities, men hold virtually all of the decision-making power about the use of land and resources, even though women play a major role in agriculture. And while the Nicaraguan government has established laws to address women's rights, such as the Comprehensive Law against Violence Toward Women and the Law of Equality of Rights and Opportunities, they are seldom enforced by police or the courts because of lack of resources and support

from local governments and communities. Moreover, these laws were written without input from LGBTI people and indigenous communities and do not adequately address their needs.

Finally, sex workers are another population experiencing similar stigma, discrimination and violence in Nicaragua. They have some of the highest rates of HIV transmission in the country, because they have no power to require their clients to use condoms and health centers often bar them from accessing prevention and treatment services.

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### Grantees Effecting Change

AJWS's grantees in Nicaragua are working to help women, LGBTI people and sex workers overcome these tremendous obstacles. For example, an organization called the **Association of Entrepreneurial Women of Waslala (AMEWAS)** is working with police and other officials to improve their response to violence against women. A women's advocacy organization, **Grupo Safo**, recently opened the first health clinic in Nicaragua specifically for lesbian, bisexual and transgender women, which provides them with comprehensive care and ensures that they are treated with respect. **Las Golondrinas**, a collective of sex workers, is working to advance the rights of sex workers by conducting trainings on how to prevent rape and other acts of violence and infection with HIV.

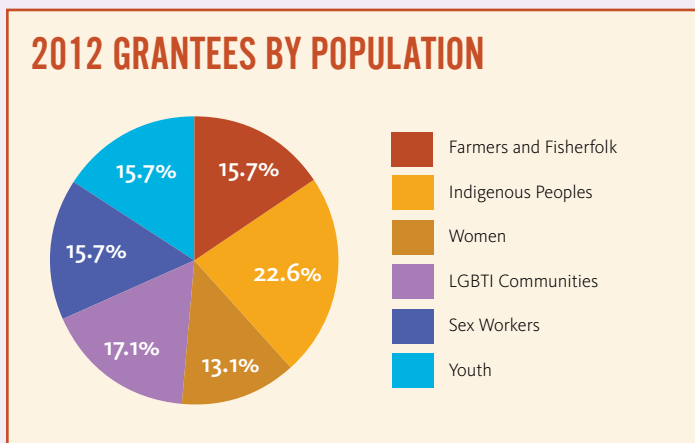
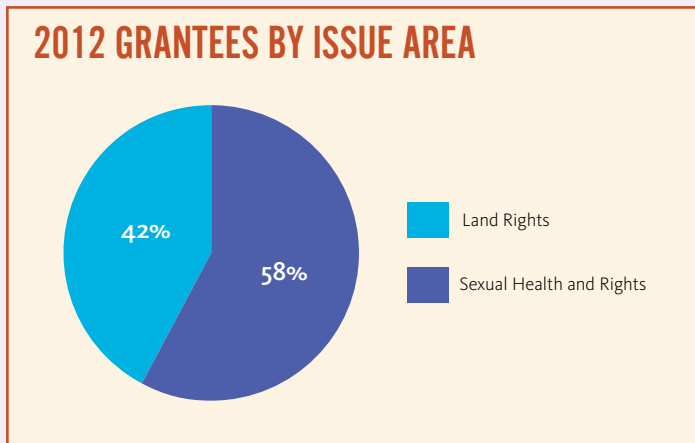
<sup>6</sup>United States Department of State, Country Reports of Human Rights Practices 2006: Nicaragua. Web.

# OUR COMMITMENT IN NICARAGUA

AJWS is committed to supporting the growth of a strong grassroots movement within Nicaragua's indigenous communities, in order to protect the land and natural resources that local people depend on for survival.

## Our grantees are:

- Organizing and mobilizing indigenous communities to take action against land sales conducted illegally or without the inhabitants' consent
- Providing legal training for community leaders to understand Nicaragua's existing land rights laws so that they can effectively advocate for their rights
- Bringing together indigenous communities across the country to share tactics and unite their efforts in advocating for land rights
- Empowering indigenous women and youth to participate in and lead the movement for promoting the rights to land and natural resources in their communities



**AJWS has granted \$1.57 million to promote human rights in Nicaragua.**

AJWS is committed to ensuring that Nicaraguan women and LGBTI people can realize their human rights and live in health, safety and dignity.

## Our grantees are:

- Training police and community leaders to prevent violence against women, LGBTI people and sex workers and advocate for legal justice after violent incidents
- Building a base of women from diverse backgrounds to advocate for women's rights and a greater voice in local and national policies
- Providing LGBTI people with healthcare, education, psychosocial support and training to advocate for their rights
- Empowering sex workers to protect themselves from violence and HIV by conducting workshops on sexual and reproductive health, legal rights and how to prevent and address abuse
- Connecting women across indigenous communities to wield greater influence in a culture dominated by men

**RIGHT** This farmer is working with others in her community to build an oven for women to bake bread and sell it at their local market, with the support of AJWS grantee COOPAD in Los Chilamos, Nicaragua. Photograph by Eitan Sufian.







# ON THE GROUND WITH AJWS GRANTEES



AJWS's grantees in Nicaragua are making significant progress against tremendous odds. Each grantee's story demonstrates how grassroots solutions are bringing about change in the country.

**ABOVE** Women can seek shelter from domestic abuse in this facility run by AJWS grantee Association of Entrepreneurial Women of Waslala (AMEWAS), which works to stop violence against women. Photograph by Stefanie Rubin.



# THE CENTER FOR JUSTICE AND HUMAN RIGHTS OF THE ATLANTIC COAST OF NICARAGUA (CEJUDHCAN)

When indigenous land is at risk, a grassroots organization pursues justice.

In 1996, Nicaragua issued permission for a corporation to cut trees on land owned collectively by an indigenous community known as the Awas Tingni, without the consent of the people. The Awas Tingni, only 630 people strong, have occupied their rich and fertile land on the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua for generations, and have tried for decades to obtain titles to the land so that they could protect it from just this kind of exploitation. The community tried to negotiate with the government to stop the licensing of its land to private speculators. When the government refused to listen, they brought their case to the national Supreme Court—to no avail.

## Making history with a precedent-setting legal case and a new law to protect land rights

The Center for Justice and Human Rights of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua (CEJUDHCAN), an advocacy organization that AJWS supports in Nicaragua, helped the Awas Tingni people bring their case forward to the Inter-American Court on Human Rights, an autonomous, transnational judicial institution located in Costa Rica that seeks to uphold human rights in the Americas. The case marked the first time the court had addressed indigenous collective land rights as a matter of international law—and achieved a landmark victory for the community and for indigenous people throughout the country. The Court concluded that Nicaragua had violated the rights of the Awas Tingni and ordered the government to halt logging on their land, delineate the borders of land held by indigenous populations in the country and implement a system to register the lands so that the Awas Tingni have clear legal rights in the future.

In 2003 the decision led the government of Nicaragua to work with CEJUDHCAN to establish Law 445, which officially grants indigenous people in Nicaragua's Atlantic region the ability to obtain collective titles to their land and natural resources. This new law has been instrumental in setting up a legal framework to support advocacy efforts for local land rights in the region and has set a precedent for other countries. Still, CEJUDHCAN and AJWS's other grantees must advocate continually to make sure that the law is implemented and enforced. With AJWS's support today, CEJUDHCAN is working with indigenous communities throughout the Atlantic region to defend the rights guaranteed to them by the law.

## Building the movement for the next generation

By and large, the conversation around land rights in Nicaragua excludes youth. However, the advocates AJWS supports believe that young people must be involved in this work if the indigenous community is to retain its land and identity into the next generation. To increase youth's participation, CEJUDHCAN is building a youth network in the indigenous territories in the Atlantic region. By leading workshops on how to develop leadership skills, establishing a youth council and supporting young people to organize their own advocacy initiatives, CEJUDHCAN is imparting the skills that youth need to protect the land and rights of their communities. Moreover, CEJUDHCAN engages indigenous youth in efforts to ensure the survival of their unique culture and way of life.

**Location:** Puerto Cabezas, RAAN region

**Website:** [www.cejudhcan.org](http://www.cejudhcan.org)

**Organizational Budget:** \$284,000

**AJWS Funding History:** \$30,000 annually since 2013

# COORDINADORA CHOROTEGA

## Indigenous people organize to defend rights to their land.

In Totogalpa, in the Center-North region of Nicaragua, the indigenous people known as the Chorotega have cared for their land and managed their natural resources collectively for generations. Until recently, they had no need for formal land titles or sales, since everything was shared for the benefit of the community. That all changed in the late 20th century, when the government divided, sold and privatized much of the Chorotega land for use in agriculture, logging and other industries.

In recent years, Nicaragua has made significant efforts to publicly recognize the communal rights of indigenous people, but this has not translated into enforced legal protection in all parts of the country. The country's Constitution recognizes indigenous peoples' existence and their right to collective land ownership and Law 445 grants these rights to indigenous communities in the Atlantic region. However, no legal recognition has been established in the Center-North region, leaving indigenous people there vulnerable. Their land titles are not fully recognized by Nicaragua's law, and illegal sales of indigenous land continue to take place and are sanctioned by local government, which stands to profit from logging and other industries.

Further complicating this issue is the fact that the voices of many within the indigenous population—particularly those of women and youth—are not heard, as adult men hold 90 percent of the community's decision making power and women and youth are largely excluded from participating on local leadership councils. The advocates that AJWS supports believe that the exclusion of women has been detrimental to the indigenous movement, arguing that without a strong, united front representing the interests of the entire population, indigenous people have less power to prevent human rights violations by governments, companies and other interests that seek to take over their land.

## Mobilizing to protect the land for all of its people

With AJWS's support, an organization called **Coordinadora Chorotega** works with the indigenous community of Totogalpa to advocate for greater enforcement of existing land laws and strengthen the community's ability to participate in making decisions about the use of and sale of its land. Coordinadora Chorotega trains local community leaders to understand Nicaragua's legal system and other institutions that determine land use. The organization seeks to enforce the land titling laws and systems that do exist by advising communities on how to advocate for registering their plots of land, and by running workshops on the rights of indigenous people.

Coordinadora Chorotega also works to strengthen the role of women and youth in the region's indigenous peoples' movement, by training them to advocate for their rights, creating avenues for them to participate in local governance structures, and organizing the first ever indigenous peoples' youth network in the municipality of Totogalpa. While in its beginning stages, Coordinadora Chorotega has already reported a marked increase in the diversity of the movement for indigenous peoples' land rights so that it represents the voices of all of its people.

**Location:** Madriz

**Website:** [chorotegasdelnorte.blogspot.com](http://chorotegasdelnorte.blogspot.com)

**Organizational Budget:** \$139,500

**AJWS Funding History:** \$20,000 in 2012



# ASSOCIATION OF ENTREPRENEURIAL WOMEN OF WASLALA (AMEWAS)

## Women and youth stand up against domestic violence.

In Nicaragua, it is estimated that 60 percent of women have been victims of domestic or sexual violence, and yet only three percent of sexual violence cases have been prosecuted. Violence against women is on the upswing: in 2011, 60 percent more women were murdered than in the previous year. Sexual violence has become the gravest human rights violation in the country, and yet, women and girls often don't report abuse to the local police for fear of retaliation from perpetrators, or even attacks from the police themselves.

**Location:** Waslala, RAAN

**Budget:** \$68,000

**AJWS Funding History:** \$12,000 - \$25,000 annually since 2008

In an attempt to address this problem Nicaragua approved the Comprehensive Law Against Violence Towards Women on June 22, 2012; however, the police and local courts do not adequately enforce the law. This is especially true in remote regions, such as Waslala, where national laws and regulations are often unknown or unenforced in local communities.

## Stopping violence through education, advocacy and the law

A women's rights organization called **AMEWAS** is working to ensure that laws protecting women from violence are enforced in the remote municipality of Waslala. AMEWAS conducts trainings with police, justice officials and ministers of health that have a history of looking the other way when women report violence. AMEWAS educates these leaders to understand the need for protecting women's rights and inspires them to become partners in ensuring that these crimes are brought to justice.

AMEWAS also works to protect women's rights through the legal system. Thanks to its advocacy, the government appointed a public attorney in Waslala responsible for taking on cases of domestic violence and other women's rights issues, making it clear to women in this community that their reports will be taken seriously by the courts. AMEWAS also convinced the government to invest increased resources in the region to aid the community's response to violence. Women in Waslala now have a way for their complaints to be heard in court, and they have AMEWAS's advocates to support them as they work to hold their community, government and police accountable for stopping sexual violence.

## Teaching women how to defend their rights

Even as it makes progress in putting legal and judicial structures in place to address violence, AMEWAS knows that for change to take place women must understand their own rights and be empowered to stand up for them. To bring this about, AMEWAS coordinates a youth network focused on gender equity and a weekly radio program that educates listeners about issues ranging from women's health to the country's new anti-violence law. It also provides counseling services for victims of rape and assault, understanding that women who have had a chance to heal will be better able to assert their rights. Through these initiatives, women are gaining the tools they need to stand up against violence.



# GRUPO SAFO

## Nicaragua's lesbian community refuses to accept violence and discrimination against LGBTI people.

In early 2012 in León, three brothers murdered their younger brother, Eddie, because he was gay. The police had been warned repeatedly that Eddie was being threatened by his family and Eddie's partner had called the precinct five times during the attack, but the police refused to respond, claiming that "they didn't want to get into further problems." Unfortunately, this was not an isolated case, as violence against LGBTI people is very common in Nicaragua. According to advocates, most attacks go unpunished because of weak implementation of the few laws that protect LGBTI people's rights. Unfortunately, police and public officials tend to turn a blind eye to the LGBTI community's struggles.

**Location:** Managua, Somotillo, León, Estelí

**Website:** [gruposafodoblementemujer.org](http://gruposafodoblementemujer.org)

**Organizational budget:** \$28,000

**AJWS grantmaking history:** \$12,000 - \$15,000 annually since 2011

### Bringing hate crimes to justice

After Eddie's murder, AJWS grantee **Grupo Safo**—a collective of lesbian, bisexual and transgender women—worked in collaboration with other Nicaraguan LGBTI organizations (including AJWS grantee Asociación Nicaragüense de Transgeneras) to make sure that the tragedy wasn't covered up or forgotten. Through marches and press conferences they organized their community to denounce the incident. As a result, for the first time in Nicaragua's history, an LGBTI case was officially addressed as a "hate crime" by the courts. Two of the perpetrators have already been sentenced and the increased public pressure and media attention have persuaded the Nicaraguan government to consider a proposal for a national gender identity law, which would provide specific protections for LGBTI people against violence and discrimination.

### Creating a safe place for accessing health care

According to AJWS's grantees, LGBTI Nicaraguans—particularly lesbians, bisexual and transgender (LBT) people—often face difficulties in getting adequate healthcare, even after they have been attacked or abused, due to discrimination by health providers and fear of having their sexual or gender identity exposed. Determined to create a safe place where lesbian, bisexual and transgender people could access care, Grupo Safo submitted a proposal to Nicaragua's Department of Health and

campaigned to establish a health clinic specifically designed for them. On July 3, 2012, after years of advocacy and research documenting the severity of the problem, Grupo Safo finally convinced the government to open an LGBTI clinic. It is the first of its kind in Nicaragua—and all of Central America—providing holistic, non-discriminatory care to people of all sexual orientations and gender identities.

### Inspiring a movement for LGBTI rights

In addition to serving as a national voice for the LGBTI community, Grupo Safo empowers LGBTI people to organize and advocate for *themselves*. It provides trainings, legal aid and support so that individuals can organize their communities, demand services from the government, seek justice in the courts and gain a voice in politics. As a result, more LGBTI Nicaraguans are beginning to stand up for their rights.



**LEFT** Grupo Safo members march in a parade for LGBTI rights. Photograph courtesy of Grupo Safo.



# TRAVEL AND ACTIVISM

AJWS sends groups of Jewish leaders, rabbis, activists and philanthropists on delegations and activist trips to meet our grantees and support their work in action. After these life-changing experiences they return home to become ever stronger advocates for global justice and tikkun olam—the Hebrew phrase for “repairing the world.”

AJWS has sent over 600 volunteers through our past programs to Nicaragua, where they have worked closely with many of our grantees. From learning about human rights to contributing their skills to grassroots human rights efforts, these volunteers made a difference in many ways and in many lives.

Today, AJWS’s trips are designed to inspire leaders and activists to become strong advocates for global justice when they return to the U.S. For more information about opportunities to travel with us, visit [www.ajws.org/travel](http://www.ajws.org/travel).



## Learn more about Nicaragua.

For a list of suggested books, articles and resources about human rights in Nicaragua, visit [www.ajws.org/nicaraguaresources](http://www.ajws.org/nicaraguaresources).

**ABOVE** A volunteer tours an agricultural training center run by AJWS grantee Denis Ernesto González López Foundation (FDEGL), which helps small-scale indigenous farmers succeed. Photograph by Stefanie Rubin. **FRONT COVER** AJWS grantee COOPAD teaches local farmers like this man how to sustainably grow crops, so he can earn a living and sustain his resources for the next generation in his community of Los Chilamos, Nicaragua. Photograph by Eitan Sufian. **BACK COVER** Nicaraguan girl. Photograph by Joshua Adam Nuzzo.



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*Since 2004 AJWS has received an "A" rating from the American Institute of Philanthropy and a top rating of four-stars from Charity Navigator. AJWS also meets all 20 of Better Business Bureau's standards for charity accountability.*



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