

# THE POWER OF CIVIL SOCIETY

## WORKING PAPER SERIES

### RESEARCH SUMMARY

Social Movements and Citizenship  
in Central America:  
The women's movement and  
the struggle for their rights in Nicaragua,  
1998-2008

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# Social Movements and Citizenship in Central America: The women's movement and the struggle for their rights in Nicaragua

*Elvira Cuadra Lira and Juana Jiménez Martínez*

## INTRODUCTION

The belligerence with which the women's movement has defended its rights during the last ten years has made it to stand out as one of the main political actors of the country. Its level of development and articulation permitted the realization of systematic actions of denunciation, demands and mobilization on behalf of women's rights, in particular, sexual and civil rights all over Nicaragua's territory. Specially important has been the struggle developed during the last three years in order to avoid the abolition of therapeutical abortion by the Nicaraguan State and later for its restitution and decriminalization as a legitimate right of women.

The intensity and consistency of its actions has placed the movement in the national public agenda, earning recognition, legitimacy and public presence with its political standing regarding women's rights and the overall situation of the country. Furthermore, for the government it has become a political adversary to reckon with due to its capacity for pressure, confrontation and conflict. During these years the women's movement has experienced a process of identity building clearly based in two pillars: autonomy in relation to the State, political parties, religious groups and other actors; and a feminist position. It has gained strength in organization and politics, in such a manner that is one of society most active actors.

For these and other reasons, HIVOS and ISS of Holland, through the Knowledge Exchange Program on Social Movements and Citizenship in Central America, decided to make a case study to analyze Nicaragua's women's movement and the strategies developed during the last ten years to defend and extent women's rights.

The study took into account a broad participation of the movement's leaders through the different activities of knowledge exchange and reflections involved at national and local level. This exercise of an ample and frank debate allowed to go in deeply into some important aspects such as: the background of the movement, the strategies, the relationship with different social and political actors, the strength of the movement and the challenges for the future. It also incorporates the assessment and voices of the autonomous regions of the Caribbean Coast, in order to know their perspectives on the movement.

The researchers wishes to thank the leaders of the movement as well as the officials and researchers of HIVOS and ISS, for the opportunity to participate in this study, from a perspective that draws near the academy and the social actors.

*Elvira Cuadra Lira and Juana Jiménez*, Managua, October 2009

## **METHODOLOGICAL PREMISES**

This investigation is one of three case Studies that are being done in Central America as part of the Program on Social Movements and Citizenship in Central America, sponsored by HIVOS and ISS, from Holland. The perspective from which it has developed is known as “knowledge exchange” and is based in three premises:

1. Social participants are carriers of knowledge and learning that have the same value as knowledge and learning of academics. Each kind of knowledge and learning is different, but this does not imply superiority of one form of discourse over another.
2. The role of the researcher is to guide and stimulate an space for collective production of knowledge, by carrying out tasks of analysis, systemization, and socialization. She is expected to have extensive knowledge, experience and social engagement with the topic being investigated.
3. The objectives, the methodology and research outputs should be discussed and defined with the social partners, ensuring maximum participation and contribution of analysis and interpretations on the subject of study.

From this perspective, the research represented a major methodological challenge, as it breaks with traditional academic parameters. In this case, the biggest challenge was to create a space for dialogue and joint reflection with the participation of groups representing the women’s movement at the national and regional level.

For this purpose, a dynamic process was created, involving various tendencies and groups from the women’s movement, but particularly five participants at national level: the Autonomous Women’s Movement (MAM), the Women’s Movement, the Women’s Network Against Violence, the Northern Women’s Network and the Women’s Network of Matagalpa. Meanwhile, at the regional level, the participants were the Women’s Collective of Matagalpa, Venancia Group, the Women’s Movement of Chinandega, the Feminist Group of Leon, the Xochilt Acalt Women’s Center, the Rural Women’s Committee, the Foundation Between Women, Oyanka, and the Itza Collective, as well as individuals from the regional members like the Women’s Network Against Violence and the MAM.

From a political standpoint, the research was able to open an internal space for dialogue and debate on some sensitive issues for all groups. It has tried to respond to the participants’ interest in systematizing their experience and the recent history of the movement, it has contributed to the identification of strategic objectives and challenges that are common to the whole movement, and it has contributed to the theoretical discussion on the definition of new social movements based on three concepts: autonomy, identity and diversity.

From the methodological point of view, the main challenge was to design methodologies that allow fluid dialogue and exchange between the movement leaders and researchers, seeking to balance the role that each actor must play in the research process. The second challenge was to reconcile the expectations the different participants in the research process had about it. In this case, the participants were the various groups and organizations in the movement at different levels (national and regional), and researchers and regional coordinators of the Knowledge Program. An additional challenge was to

incorporate all the richness of the discussions during the working sessions, interviews and regional workshops, especially with the usual time constraints in the research agenda.

This report on the results has tried to respond to these challenges and reflect the wealth of discussions in the best possible way.

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT**

The participation of Nicaraguan women in the political processes of the country has been a historical constant; however, their actions have always been covered by a veil of machismo and patriarchal domination that only recognizes the role of men in the public sphere. The struggle of women to be recognized as subjects goes back to the time of independence, but the emergence of the women's movement as such is much more recent, dating from the beginning of the twentieth century. From that time to this day it is possible to identify at least four big phases: the suffragettes, the revolutionaries, the autonomous ones, the politically persecuted.

The origins of the women's movement in Nicaragua date from the beginning of the twentieth Century. Between its main demands was the exercise of traditional activities related to education and charitable services, and reproductive roles. Its political demand was the right to vote. Its principal spokesperson at that time was a teacher named Josefa Toledo de Aguerri. These early expressions of the movement were shaped by women who belonged to the middle class and had a good level of education. The movement underwent a generational change between the '50s and the '70s, when a new group of women took charge of the actions. Women who were called "the first ones," because they were the first ones to have access to education, to hold public office, and participate in politics. At that time the movement grew with women coming from two groups: the educated upper and middle classes and those who came from the popular sectors. Most of these women were linked to the Liberal Party which they supported mainly on the electoral process.

The second phase of the movement initiates with the active incorporation of women to the struggle to overthrow the Somoza dictatorship in the 70's and their participation in the revolutionary process in the 80's. At that moment, the women's movement became a broad and populous movement that was able to incorporate the popular sectors. The fundamental basis of the identity that united them was the Sandinista ideology, which was supposed to make the emancipation of women possible through revolution. The moderate socialist model established rested on a extensive web of organizations, where women were fully integrated. In this context, participation of women was not considered a discursive strategy, it was actually a space they themselves gained to access their rights. As the war worsened, the needs and priorities of women moved into second place on the political agenda of the state, so that groups of women started to criticize it. The FSLN's electoral defeat in 1990 marks the beginning of yet a new phase for the women's movement, an stage that took them to autonomy from the party and to walk their own path.

The third stage, the autonomous one, has two moments, the first of them between the years 1990 and 1997, when the country lived and enormous eclosion of NGOs, many of them women's organizations coming from popular organizations affiliated to the FSLN, looking forward to construct their own space. During that time they focused in the search

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of the identity of the movement and the autonomy of the organizations in relation to political parties, particularly the FSLN.

Out of this decision emerged several spaces, thematic networks and NGOs, nationally and locally. The intention was to allow even women who were not associated with any organization to have a space for feminist activities. That led to a vigorous debate among the different expressions of the movement on the organizational models at the time: networks, NGOs and the movement. This discussion did not reach a consensus and the movement continued to develop under different organizational forms.

Despite their differences, expressions of the movement were actively involved in the defense of women's rights, the formulation of laws, the provision of health and education services, the attention to victims of violence and the demands to the State for the impact of adjustment policies and economic reform on women. They also engaged actively in forums, conventions and international conferences.

Between 1998 and 2006 there was a consolidation of the autonomy process undertaken by women and organizations of the movement at the beginning of the decade. In addition, a series of events occurred that made it visible as an aggressive social movement in the struggle for women's rights and civil rights. Most of these events are directly related to a context of violence against women, restrictions on the exercise of sexual rights, and the political context of the country.

During this period emerged several groups and organizations of the movement, nationally and locally, that are the actual setup of the movement. These groups and organization entered fully in the public sphere and politics in reason of their work and standing on violence, health and education policies, local development with a gender perspective and women's rights. They also participated actively in political mobilizations promoting the vote in electoral processes, monitoring transparency in public expenses, auditing social policies, denouncing the illicit arrangement between Aleman and Ortega, reporting cases of corruption and promoting the massive mobilizations of citizens during the year 2005 in defense of democracy and citizens rights.

In this context, two actors emerged as antagonistic adversaries of the movement: the government and the religious hierarchies. The peak moment of this antagonism occurred between 2006 and 2007 when the legislature approved the abolition of therapeutic abortion as a woman's right and months later, criminalize it by approving the country's new criminal code. This decision, made on the basis of political interests of the FSLN, the PLC and the Catholic hierarchy in the context of Presidential elections, has had disastrous consequences for the country's women by exposing them to certain death and, even worse, depriving them of the right to life. Since then, the women's movement has kept up a strong campaign for the decriminalization of therapeutic abortion and has used all resources at its disposal to reverse this situation.

The four stage begins in the year 2007, when the movement's political assertiveness earned them the enmity of the government, other political parties and the catholic hierarchy. In that sense, the return of Daniel Ortega to the presidency in 2007 began with the complaint filed by an organization of the Catholic Church against women who were leaders of the movement. They were accused of having broken the law and practiced an illegal abortion on the girl from the "Rosita" case.

This event inaugurated a new period that has been marked by political persecution of prominent leaders and organizations of the movement by State institutions and the government. Almost one year after, in October 2008, the authorities of the Attorney General Office raided the offices of the Autonomous Women's Movement (MAM) and threatened to do the same with other women organizations such as the group Venancia, accusing them of laundering money and promoting abortion. This action produced a tidal wave of rejection and a major campaign of domestic and international denunciation by the movement. The response of Nicaraguan society and the different expressions of the women's movement worldwide were immediate, so that several months later, the government had to abandon its intentions and close the investigation.

Government persecution, far from diminishing the political assertiveness of the movement, increased it. Different groups have actively mobilized to defend their rights, denouncing the persecution and the government's authoritarian intents. This has earned them the recognition of the rest of civilian society organizations and several political parties in the opposition. Such is the is the assertiveness and legitimacy of women's movement that the government quickly tried to organize a counter-movement with a group of women's organizations tied to the ruling party. The different movement groups agree that a new political era has begun for the movement, which requires new strategies and possibly new organizational forms to continue fighting in defense of women's rights.

## THE STRATEGIES

The milestones that marked the recent history of the women's movement in Nicaragua and the political context of the country gradually defined the major objectives of the struggle and strategies for action from 1998 to 2008. Analyzing the movement's events and actions in this time, we can identify two major objectives of struggle:

1. The exercise of full citizenship for women as the overarching strategic goal, given that women can not exercise their rights in authoritarian contexts, but also that a democratic system offers more and better opportunities for recognition, extension and enforcement of women's rights, as well as possibilities to influence the public sphere in favor of women.
2. The right to live without violence and the right to decide are conceived of as specific objectives and the doorway for women in the movement to fight for their rights as citizens.

The identification of these objectives was not an a priori exercise, but rather was done in light of the evolutionary process of different groups in the movement and its changing relationship with the state.

The strategies were also not the result of a deliberate process from the beginning, but rather, they were spelled out and implemented as the country context, the political process and the strength of the movement evolved. It was not until recent years that some groups consciously defined their areas of focus and strategies for struggle.

However, according to the analysis of the movement leaders, the strategies do not belong to a specific group, but have been used by all of them at different times, and in many cases, according to their own experience. In that sense, the movement has developed permanent



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strategies, while other had been defined in response to specific contexts. Another feature of the movement's strategies is that some of them are national and others that are locally defined, depending on the realities and the strength of the groups and organizations in the territories. Whether permanent or short-term, national or local, these strategies have revolved around four ideas that are important enough to be considered programmatic:

- Promoting women's political participation and their influence on the state and the political system.
- The struggle against violence.
- The strengthening of the movement itself.
- A cultural and ideological change among women and society in general.

### **(a) Political participation and influence over the state**

Strategies to increase women's political participation and influence over state actions respond to two situations: a) the way in which the country's political context has evolved, especially the movement-state relationship, and b) the actual situation of the exercise of women's rights in the country.

In that sense, one of the most important strategies has concerned the framework of laws guaranteeing women's rights, from watching the preparation of bills and lobbying on their writing and approval in legislature, to watching implementation and developing training processes for women so they can take ownership of their rights.

Another strategy used is the active participation of women's organizations in the various spaces of dialogue and consultation with the state created during previous governments, as well as taking advantage of all institutional mechanisms for the defense of women's rights. This has included the opening of specific areas of coordination and dialogue with certain state institutions with the purpose of defending these rights. The thematic networks were once some of these areas. These spaces for coordination and dialogue have functioned more effectively when the organization functions as a substitute for the state, assisting the victims of violence or covering services for which state institutions have no resources.

One of the movement's most important strategies has been permanent mobilization, demonstrations and public protests. These actions, together with political pressure and international outreach, have been the backbone of the defense of women's rights, especially when events have come along such as the "Rosita" case, discussion of the Equal Opportunity Law, and more recently, the criminalization of therapeutic abortion. Many of these demonstrations and public protests have not been massive, but they have been loaded with strong symbolism for both women and for the rest of society.

Strategies to broaden political participation and influence over the state have a good reason to exist for the movement, especially in the current context of the country, when the political system is closed to the influence of any civil society actor, but particularly the women's movement. In that sense, although there are positive experiences at the local level in terms of dialogue and consultation with government and state, at the national level, confrontation has been open and violent, especially since the criminalization of therapeutic abortion, because of the authoritarianism of the government and influence of religious fundamentalism.

## **(b) The struggle against violence**

Another group of strategies has been directed to transform situations of violence that women live in, understood as a component that runs through everything, not only sexual violence and gender violence. In this regard, the strategies have been aimed primarily at achieving access to justice for victims of violence, and for that some of the most important actions have been about accompanying the victims in the reporting and judicial process, as well as attending to them in an integral sense.

The movement also has relied on mass media to raise awareness in society in general and women in particular about this situation, but also to put pressure on state institutions related to this issue. Work has also been done to build spaces between movement organizations and groups to facilitate the building of consensus around the political discourse on violence and the dimensions of the problem. Despite the differences between different groups, this strategy has made it possible for the movement to present a coherent position to the public and the state on this issue.

Another strategy has involved actions and local networks to address situations of violence against women. In many cases, women's organizations provide resources and work in coordination with state institutions to help victims.

In the case of decriminalization of abortion and the persecution of women leaders of the movement, the strategy has been developed both nationally and internationally. The actions have included legal actions, public denunciations, and mobilization. To do this, they have used all available resources, such as forums, debates, statements, public statements, consciousness-raising, accusations, etc. The objective was to pull the topic out of the field of health care and bring it into the field of politics and rights.

The fight for the decriminalization of therapeutic abortion also posed a challenge to the movement in relation to their strategies, because they had to use all the creativity and resources at their disposal to confront the State.

The strategies to combat violence have been some of the most effective, despite the setback that the criminalization of therapeutic abortion has apparently meant and the influence of religious fundamentalism, which add complexity to the issue. This effectiveness is due to the movement succeeding in putting the issue of violence (and its rejection) on Nicaraguan society's agenda, so that there is a public position challenging and denouncing the problem, and beyond that, claiming the right of Nicaraguan women to live without violence and have a say over their own bodies.

## **(c) Internal strengthening**

One of the ideas into which the most efforts and resources have been invested in recent years has been the internal strengthening of the movement, in the sense of strengthening the collective identity that gives meaning to different groups and organizations as well as the autonomy developed in recent years. These are core elements of the strategies used.

Most movement groups have invested in reflection to strengthen that identity from a feminist focus, and the result has been the construction of a thesis and a counterthesis with much greater clarity on a variety of issues, such as the right to one's body, sexuality, the issue of the separation of church and state, democracy among others.

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Another strategy has been to strengthen the autonomy of different groups and organizations in the movement against the state and other political and social actors. This has meant conducting intense internal debates, and in some cases has led to the development of political programs where different groups have established their position on key issues for the movement, for women and for the country.

Some groups and organizations have developed actions to strengthen the organizational structures of the movement. This has been a particularly important strategy in the interior of the country, and even more so in rural areas where women's organizations have been created through empowerment processes begun by NGOs linked with the movement. This has meant the extension, expansion and diversification of the movement in different geographical regions of the country.

The struggle for women's rights is complex and the movement cannot do it alone, so one of its most important strategies has been to establish alliances with different social and political participants, locally, nationally, and internationally.

Another successful strategy of the movement has been the relationship established with national and local media. In fact, of all the actors in civil society, the women's movement has some of the most extensive media coverage of its activities, which has been key in defending women's rights, particularly in those controversial cases like Zoilamérica Narvaez's accusation, the "Rosita" case, the criminalization of therapeutic abortion, the defense of democracy and civil rights, and the political persecution of movement leaders and the MAM.

The weight of this relationship is double, primarily because the different groups and organizations in the movement have unequal access to new information technologies, especially the Internet. So, they have had to develop alternative forms of communication to spread their messages and ideas, such as the use of entertainment: cultural activities, games, film forums, concerts, etc.

### **(d) Cultural and ideological change**

Movement organizations that recognize themselves as feminists have bet on a cultural and ideological change that will transform the power relations that subordinate women. One of the most important strategies for this has been the promotion of processes of empowerment of women at all levels.

This process of empowerment that starts from the individual, subjective level, for many women, especially rural women, has meant a profound transformation of consciousness and its constitution. To accomplish this, the organizations working in this field have developed programs that include literacy and adult education with a gender perspective, creating educational materials aimed specifically at women to take ownership of their rights and promote processes of empowerment and citizenship-building, gender training programs to build gender identity, autonomy, and independence, and to deconstruct traditional gender roles.

In addition, support has been given to productive programs for economic empowerment, to making women economic agents, and to political empowerment for the construction of new leadership and organizational structures specific to women. Special emphasis has been

given to working with young women, who constitute a seedbed for new leadership for the movement.

From the point of view of some leaders and others related to the movement, strategies aimed at these types of changes must be reinforced and improved, given that the influence of religious fundamentalism is one of the biggest obstacles in the struggle for women's rights. In that sense, it is believed, for example, that the struggle for a secular state should include not only actions that target the state itself, but society, because there is a hegemony of religious thought.

## **THE MOVEMENT AND OTHER ACTORS**

In their struggle for women's rights, groups and organizations that make up the women's movement have established relationships with other social and political actors. In some cases, these have been relationships of conflict, and others, collaboration.

### **(a) The movement and the state**

Because of its role in ensuring women's rights, the state is a key player for the movement, so many of its actions are directed toward influencing it to ensure the full exercise of those rights. The relationship with the state has almost always been contentious and difficult, considering the nature of the country's political system which is closed to the influence of the different civil society actors and the patriarchal character of the state.

The various governments between 1998 and the present, and even earlier ones, have put aside women's demands. Instead, they have closed off spaces of participation and influence to women, using co-optation as well as control and persecution, as was the case in Arnoldo Alemán's government and now with Daniel Ortega's government.

The clear interference of religious fundamentalism in public policies affecting women has played a key role in this behavior, especially in those policies related to sexual rights and reproductive rights. In that sense, the movement has been one of the most aggressive participants, virtually the only one, calling for a secular state to end the church's influence over public actions.

Locally, the relationship has been nuanced. Generally, there has been distrust of state institutions on the part of movement organizations in the territories. However, advocacy work in local participatory processes, as well as the assistance and provision of social services by women's NGOs, has allowed for a certain level of coordination and improved relations between the two sides.

Between 2007 and 2008, relations between the state (particularly President Ortega's government) and the movement deteriorated rapidly with the criminalization of therapeutic abortion and the persecution of the movement's leaders and their organizations. From the point of view of one of the leaders of the movement, this is partly due to the support the movement gave Zoilamérica Narvaez when she accused the current President of sexual abuse, and because he wants to symbolically put the movement's head on a platter and deliver it to the religious fundamentalists.

Locally, the relationship between movement organizations and state institutions and local governments has deteriorated because of the control that the Councils of Citizen Power, which are para-state structures, have over opportunities for citizen participation. This has meant that women's organizations that were active in areas of public coordination have retired and women have had to seek new ways to influence public policy.

### **(b) The relationship with other social actors**

Relationships with political parties have also been marked by conflict more than cooperation, and this is because they have always had the intention to co-opt and control the social movements, and especially the women's movement. The more authoritarian the political party, the more it seeks to co-opt and control the movement.

Their ability to dialogue with the movement has been very poor, because they lack a platform for action for transforming inequalities of power and because they are essentially patriarchal.

Usually, they approach the movement during election season to get women voters, one of the great majorities in the country, along with youth. However, their election platforms and programs do not include the interests of women. What's more, they do not even make reference to equal rights and opportunities, the importance of women, and the movement or its leaders. When women are included in party posts, they are ones who do not challenge the status quo, do not criticize the rules of the game, and are willing to defend the party's interests first, rather than strategic gender interests.

As part of civil society, the women's movement has kept an strong and close relationship with diverse actors. The assessment of the movement's leaders and other movements in relation to their actions, indicate that there is a recognition and legitimacy from civil society. For some, the movement has a coherent proposal for transformation, and they recognize that there has been consistency between the movement's words and actions in the defense of women's rights. They respect the movement's work and ability to organize, mobilize, and build alliances.

Other movements and organizations in civil society do not always agree with the women's movement's approach, but there is recognition of, and legitimacy in, their struggle. From the point of view of some leaders of other social movements, the women's movement needs to move closer to other social movements and even to some parts of the movement that do not openly recognize themselves as feminists, or who work more in other areas, such as labor rights and the maquilas.

Throughout this period, groups and organizations in the women's movement in Nicaragua have maintained a very close relationship with the international expressions of the feminist movement in Central America, in Latin America, and globally. This relationship has been built through participation in international campaigns, denunciations, expressions of rejection or resistance to religious fundamentalism and political authoritarianism, legal action to defend human rights, discussion and reflection sessions, and international conferences and conventions.

Those links have had an special importance for the movement's struggle during the last years, since they have provided support and endorsed their standing amongst the different expressions of the movement internationally.

### **(c) The movement and cooperating agencies**

The relationship of the movement with international cooperating agencies has been strong, but also very critical, especially recently. One of the strongest debates in the country has been whether cooperation funds should go to strategic gender interests or only practical interests, and whether participants who receive support are those really going to promote a major change in the situation of women and the exercise of their rights.

In the assessment of the movement's leaders, there have been moments of dramatic change in the relationship. Throughout the '80s, there was a very close relationship and a steady flow of cooperation, but this had more to do with the idea of revolutionary changes than the strengthening of the movement as such.

The next decade was a time of accelerated change for the two sides: for the movement, because of the new political context of the country, and for cooperating agencies, because it had to adapt to the new neoliberal approach. The way the two actors found to relate was the founding of NGOs, and that produced the phenomenon known as the "NGOification" of the movement in order to gain access to funds. The flexibility of the organizational forms of the movement then had to change and assume legal institutionalization in the form of NGOs.

The results were: a) relations between cooperating agencies and the movement became increasingly structured and contractual, b) short-sighted work structures, c) resources to promote women's rights, d) institutionalization of organizational structures, and e) attempts to replace the social movements.

There was a loss of the perspective that major changes in gender relations and the huge inequalities suffered by women can only occur through processes, and that cooperation resources should be invested in generating citizenship for women.

Also, though many small collectives formally became NGOs, they kept the culture of a social movement, and were unable to compete with larger NGOs and agencies for cooperation resources. This situation is most acute in the case of local organizations and those working with rural women.

Government persecution of the organizations and leaders of the movement and the attempts to limit the flow of cooperation for those social actors who take a critical position have always posed a complex challenge for cooperating agencies that has been committed to supporting the movement in the defense of its rights. This has forced the agencies to review their procedures and requirements for the granting of funds. However, the picture is not clear.

## **THE STRENGTH OF THE MOVEMENT**

From the perspective of various actors in Nicaraguan society, the women's movement stands out for its strength, its ability to call for mobilization, and the assertiveness of its

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actions. The strength that the movement projects rests on its own inner strength, which is the result of a long and complex process crisscrossed by intense debates, internal contradictions, and intense work to build structures and spaces.

That has resulted in a movement composed of different groups or tendencies, with differing proposals in organizational terms, but shared visions, positions, strategic objectives and strategies for action. Some aspects still under discussion between the different groups are: organizational models, leadership, internal democracy within each group.

The internal debate on organizational models of the movement is not new. It goes back to the early '90s, and has always taken place in the shadow of the days of partisan subordination and the quest for political autonomy.

The search has always focused on maintaining hard-won autonomy, building inclusive spaces for women that are also horizontal and democratic. This search for an appropriate model led to the construction of a number of organizational models, such as networks and more or less formal structures; however, the main objective of all of them was to advance the struggle for women's rights from a position of autonomy.

Currently, we can identify at least three types of organizational structures within the movement: the networks, such as the Women's Network Against Violence Network and the Network North of Matagalpa; somewhat more formal structures, like the case of the MAM; and more flexible organizational forms, such as the Feminist Movement which has no organic structure as such.

There is no rigidity or exclusivity about participating in one organization or another, so there are women involved in both the Women's Network Against Violence and the MAM, or in the Feminist Movement and the Women's Network Against Violence. This flexibility is also prevalent in the regions. So, the public image projected by the women belonging to different groups of the movement is that it is a single movement, with a single organizational structure. Additionally, the movement has the participation of numerous NGOs organized by women and working with women in different areas: developmental assistance, aid to victims of violence, etc.

Each model has been selected for the way it has evolved in the country's socio-political context, and the way the movement itself has been maturing. The opinions that the different leaders of the movement express about these organizational models are positive, in the sense that they believe each of them has contributed to the movement in general and to the struggle for women's rights, according to their own characteristics. But there also exists an implicit consensus concerning seeking new forms of coordination between the various groups that would allow their actions to be more coherent and effective, while still accepting the differences between them.

The issue of leadership and internal democracy is one of the most sensitive issues in the debate on the non-public area of the movement, and has generated some of the strongest contradictions from 1990 through today.

Despite the differences between the movement and other political organizations, and the efforts to build a new kind of politics, it is clear that all groups still suffer from labor

practices and styles inherited from the struggle against the Somoza dictatorship and from party structures during the time of the Sandinista Revolution. But also, the movement and its leaders are involved in the political culture prevailing in the country.

Although their leadership is recognized, in most cases, questions remain about their strength and representation. There are those who think that leadership is exercised with authoritarian features such as verticalism and rigidity, and some groups point to the existence of “single thought,” which restricts internal debate and the possibility of dissent.

This affects the groups’ internal democracy, leading to fragmentation and alienation among some of them at times. It also prevents the recognition of the legitimacy of “the others”.

One of the most interesting internal processes, which is positively influencing such practices, is generational turnover. Indeed, all movement groups and organizations are experiencing numerical growth, but also a generational change with the integration of young people, both locally and nationally. Many of them come from empowerment processes in rural areas and/or universities, and this has led to the emergence of a group of young feminist leaders with new practices and visions for the movement, politics and women’s rights.

## THE REMAINING CHALLENGES

The process experimented by the women’s movement from Nicaragua, allows the identification of a number of conclusions and challenges for the immediate future.

### (a) Conclusion

#### *A rich, diverse, strong movement*

The women’s movement is made up of different groups and organizations that share a clear collective identity defined by its feminism and political autonomy. In that sense, rather than a “character,” the movement is a framework, or system of relationships between groups with a shared identity, perspectives, objectives, interests and strategies, but with diverse organizational forms, ways of working, and emphases of action.

The discussion on the topic of identity, homogeneity and diversity, and conflicts that have arisen around this, largely have to do with the lack of recognition of the movement’s fundamental nature and characteristics by different groups, and with certain underlying ideas about culture and political practices, learned in earlier, more partisan times, that are still in the collective imagination of most of their leaders.

All groups are defined as political actors, in that sense their actions and strategies are influenced by the political process in the country and its main actors. In fact, the women’s movement has always been a political movement, both by definition and in practice, as can be seen by the path of its evolution. But its actions are not limited to it.

Within Nicaraguan society, the women’s movement has emerged with great strength as an assertive actor in the struggle for women’s rights, but also in the struggle for civil rights. That has won it trust, respect and credibility from various participants in civil society and



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the enmity of the government and the traditional political parties, which promote the closure of political spaces.

It is the movement that has led the most lively and symbolically powerful protests in recent years. They have also developed a greater capacity for publicly questioning the state, the political system and the rest of Nicaraguan society than any other social movement in the country.

### *From partisan subordination to full autonomy*

The movement's path of evolution has led it from elitist origins through partisan subordination to becoming a diverse, broad, pluralistic movement with organizational expressions throughout both the country and Nicaraguan society strata.

It has also gone from objectives or ideas like women's right to vote and access to public office to demanding broad civil rights, specific rights for women. In that sense, the ideas and strategic objectives of the struggle have evolved over time along with the movement itself, the political process of the country, and the way the state and society have reacted to its proposals. But above all, it has evolved in the light of the process of maturing experienced by the movement from its origins to today.

Over the past, the maturing of the movement as a political actor has developed on a collective identity build on political autonomy, feminism, milestones, and shared strategies. This has been a complex process in itself, in which different groups have had to define their relationships with the government, the state, political parties (particularly the FSLN), the rest of civil society and other social movements, cooperating agencies, and between the movement groups themselves. But in addition, they have faced conflict, confrontations and controversy, both within groups and between them and with other social and political participants, to reach this level of maturity. The experience accumulated so far is vast and has put the movement, more than any other social movement, in the public arena and on the national agenda

### *Confrontation with the state and the link with society*

The quest for "full citizenship" for women necessarily means questioning the state not only about rights such as freedom from violence and the right to decide, especially about one's own body, but also the exercise of civil and political rights for women. This has put a strong emphasis on the relationship between the state and the movement, and most of the strategies and actions have been aimed at influencing the political system and public policies on these topics. Because of this, many of the most important collective actions aim at the state and political system.

In the case of the government and the state, the relationship has been openly contentious at the national level, due to closure of spaces in the political system, the authoritarian nature of the groups in power, and the influence of religious fundamentalism. That has blocked any real chance for the movement to influence the political system, the state, and public policies to demand and broaden the exercise of specific women's rights.

The conflict has worsened over the past two years due to the assertiveness shown by the whole movement in the struggle against violence and for the decriminalization of

therapeutic abortion, and the public questioning of the state, the government and the political parties.

Locally, this relationship had been marked by local variables, such as the strength of regional groups and the openness of municipal governments to the movement's actions. One significant factor has been the role played by women's NGOs, who have provided the resources necessary to fulfill social functions the state has disengaged from.

The movement has helped to build citizenship among women, but also in society in general. The processes of women's empowerment, active participation in local areas, and monitoring of electoral processes have generated a wealth of knowledge and ownership of rights both in women and in groups and social actors linked to the movement.

Many organizations have done very important work with women at the regional level, especially with rural women, as they have built an organizational fabric throughout the country that has been interwoven with the country's other social fabrics. Though it is not always easy to measure the impact of these processes, it is clear that major changes have occurred in a significant group of women in cultural, ideological and political terms.

That is a topic the movement should look into more, because many times, the success of actions is measured by political impact, and not necessarily from the changes in culture and political culture that are generated.

### *Maturation of internal democracy*

The movement is diverse, in that it houses different schools of thought, ideology and action, but "the others" are not always given recognition and legitimacy. The context in the last two years has brought together some groups, there is a consensus regarding the movement, its banners and struggles, but not on the organizational models and certain practices of internal democracy. There are also differences in relation to autonomy and alliances with other political actors; differences that arise due to the links that some members of the movement still maintain regarding political parties, in particular, the FSLN.

An important number of organizations and groups have oriented their efforts to organizational strengthening, nevertheless, this is thought in function of identifying objectives and strategies and the confrontation with the government, but not for the movement itself. Therefore, many of the actions are addressed to influence public policies and the state and to prepare conditions for the movement to respond politically to the strategies of other actors, such as the government and political parties, among others.

The actual political context of the country obliges the different groups of the movement to include in its agenda the issue of civil and political rights as a base for the exercise of the rights of women, due to the closing of the political system and the intolerance by the government to critics and auditing from civilian society.

The support for building alliances between themselves and with other social participants is still weak. This is a challenge for the immediate future, as the context requires partnerships with different actors to resist the persecution of the state and keep up the fight for the rights.

Another view that prevails in some groups and cooperating agencies is of a homogenous movement. They claim to recognize diversity, but they demand homogeneous strategies from the movement for women's rights. In that sense, it is obvious that the cooperating agencies focus on assistance programs for victims of violence and sexual rights; so, they talk about the movement, but they're really referring to NGOs that provide these services.

### **(b) The challenges ahead**

The challenges ahead for the women's movement appear to be quite clear, considering the unfavorable scenario that their leaders identify for the short term. This scenario is characterized by significant restrictions on the exercise of fundamental rights for all citizens of the country, but particularly for the women's movement, namely: freedom of association, freedom of opinion, freedom of mobilization, etc.

With that in mind, the first and biggest challenge is to make sure the movement endures and grows stronger. The leaders believe that by achieving this, it will be possible to sustain the struggle for women's rights and the struggle for democracy. For that, however, we need to strengthen autonomy and feminist identity as a basis for collective action, rather than building "unity" or "homogeneity."

That will require a profound debate to recognize diversity and the aspects shared by all groups, namely: ideas, objectives, strategies, actions, concerns and adversaries. Changes can already be seen in perceptions of some women; however, it is important to think about the movement more as a system of actions and ideas that are consistent with the shared identity than as a "character" or a single organizational structure. The debate should also consider the issue of strategies for struggle, doubtlessly in the light of changes in context and expected scenarios. This means finding new and creative ways to enable the movement to support the struggle for women's rights. It also means expanding and strengthening partnerships and alliances between groups in the movement itself, and then with a variety of actors in Nicaraguan civil society.

One area that must be improved and strengthened is the link between national expressions of the movement and local expressions, whether municipal, departmental or regional. In that sense, one of the main challenges for women in the autonomous regions is to recognize their own multiculturalism and multiethnicity to be able to generate their own agendas and strategies. It is also important to build new bridges of understanding between women in the autonomous regions and the rest of the country.

But this requires developing a set of actions ranging from strengthening processes of debate, feminist education, and training, to continued political mobilization and in depth examination of organizational models, leadership, internal democracy, and the role of NGOs.

## Participants

- |     |                           |                                           |
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