

“Like you entered you left, with nothing!”
Empowerment amongst Female Ex-Combatants in Nicaragua

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Maia Marie Reibo Dahl

Master's thesis in Peace and Conflict Transformation – November 2015

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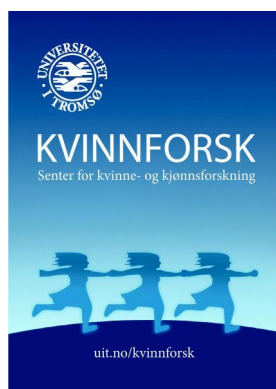
*-Empowerment amongst Female
Ex-Combatants in Nicaragua*

Centre for Peace Studies

Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education

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I want to dedicate this work to my beautiful son Gabriel Amadeus who without the fieldwork for this thesis would not have been in our lives, as it was in Nicaragua that I met his wonderful father.

Preface

In 2007/2008 I spent close to a year in Nicaragua. I had barely heard of the Sandinista revolution and knew little about the country's history. However moving through the streets of León where I was staying, the revolution was all I could see. Trees and lampposts were painted in red and black, the signature colors of the revolutionary party FSLN. There were murals commemorating martyrs of the revolution and monuments on practically every street corner. Revolutionary slogans and the symbolic hat of Sandino decorated both public and private buildings. Along the highway huge posters of the Sandinista president Daniel Ortega, was roaring above. Every other person I met seemed to proudly wear t-shirts or caps celebrating their allegiance to the revolution and FSLN flags and pins were for sale in the souvenir shops. From the bars and restaurants one could hear songs of the revolution, and in the backpacker hostels they sold postcards of powerful revolutionary images. One of these particularly struck my eye, and has stayed with me ever since. -The image of a smiling female soldier. Over her shoulder she had a rifle, and in her arms a nursing baby. – A loving mother and a potential killer at once. - A woman that was not a victim of war, but an agent of war. I was fascinated by how glorified and present the revolution was in the everyday lives of Nicaraguans, but more so I was intrigued by what I saw as the oxymoron of the massive female participation. There was a great contrast between the idea of the honored female combatant and the Nicaraguan women I observed in real life. This experience planted the seed that inspired me to choose Nicaraguan female ex-combatants as the subject for my master thesis some years later.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1. Introduction	1
Method	3
Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Clarifications	4
The Dichotomy of Machismo and Marianismo	4
Structure of the Thesis	5
Chapter 2. Methodology	7
Why Nicaragua?.....	7
Academic Background	10
Why Women?	10
Method Design.....	11
Field Work – Data Collection	12
Anonymity	12
Timing, Recruitment Strategies and Gaining Access	13
Gatekeepers and some Gendered Experiences	15
Snowball Method	18
Reflecting on the Interview Situation	19
Chapter 3. Historical Background	22
Sandino and U.S. Occupation	23
Women’s Lives under the Somoza Rule.....	24
Carlos Fonseca, the FSLN and the Inclusion of Women.....	24
The Rise of the People – The Fall of a Dictatorship.....	25
Female Participation	26
The Progressive First Years	27
The Contra War – Progress in Recess.....	28
Doña Violeta and the UNO's Gender Agenda	29
Regaining Power, at the Expense of Women	31
Women’s Lives in Contemporary Nicaragua	31
Chapter 4. Conceptual Framework.....	33
Previous Research on Gender and Revolution.....	33
Women’s Interests	34
The Oxymoron of Revolution.....	35
Empowerment Theory	36
Agency	37
The Opportunity Structure	38
Women’s Empowerment	39
Conscientization.....	40
Chapter 5. Analysis.....	42

Time in the Revolution	43
Empowered Women?	47
Being Women in the Guerilla Movement	49
After Triumph	53
Reintegration to Civil Life – Marias Story	58
The Past, the Present and Future Aspirations	64
Empowerment of the Poor	66
The Revolutionary Betrayal - Feminist Perspectives.....	69
The Legacy of the Revolution.....	72
Chapter 6. Discussion and Concluding Remarks	73

Chapter 1. Introduction

In 1979, after almost two decades of clandestine mobilization against the oppressive Somoza regime, the Nicaraguan mass urban insurrection managed to take control of the country. Social actors from marginalized sectors made up a significant part of the revolutionary forces. Over 30 % of the combatants in the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) were women and some of them were commanders in the implementation of key strategic operations. The mobilization of women for logistical tasks was also massive and many women who were not directly involved in combat, had indirect roles as messengers, weapons smugglers, or collectors of sensitive information etc. (Kampwirth, 2004). The massive participation of women in the Nicaraguan revolution stands in contrast with the widespread idea of Latin American women's subordinate status in society. According to scholars "*Violent conflicts often opens up both intended and unintended spaces for empowering women, affecting structural social transformations and producing new social, economic and political realities that redefine gender relations*" (Meintjes in Turshen et al., 2001: 7). At first glance this certainly seems to be the case in Nicaragua. In the years following the triumph, political measures were taken to improve conditions for women in Nicaragua. This transformation involved legal reform, the expansion of access to education, paid maternity leave, the nationalization of health care and the creation of state services like day care centers (Kampwirth, 2004: 21). However, in spite of these structural advances and decades of well-organized and collective mobilization for women's rights, Nicaraguan society has fallen victim to developments that to an increasing extent still favor patriarchal social structures (Babb, 2001; Ewing, 1999; Kampwirth, 1996; 2003). Many female ex-combatants of the Nicaraguan revolution have expressed positive and some times even nostalgic memories from their participation. Women and men were met with the same expectations. By virtue of their new roles as guerilla soldiers and common conspirators, these women experienced a higher level of gender equality in the guerilla than in society at large. However, the new won freedom of movement, admiration and respect that the context of revolution had offered many of these women, didn't necessarily transcend into peacetime. Rather, it seemed that their male colleagues expected for them to return to pre-revolution gender inequality upon the overthrow of the dictatorship and at the end

of the contra war (Kampwirth, 2004: 5). Recognizing this, it is likely that for some women, the transition from war to peace could be experienced as a disappointment. This development is far from unique to the Nicaraguan post war environment. One can easily draw parallels to the American society post World War Two, where women during the war had assumed responsibilities as leaders of households and industry workers. Yet women's employment was only encouraged as long as the war was going on. Once over, federal and civilian policies replaced women workers with men, and massive propaganda to facilitate women's return to the "kitchen" was spread through the media. However, the nature of revolutions is different than the rationale of an interstate war. In wars between states, the militaries are in fact defending their societies as they are. Although the implications of war require radical change to the status quo, this change is never meant as a permanent arrangement, and most certainly not a goal in it self. A revolution however is a process whereby traditionally subordinate groups attempt to transform the culture and structure of power relations within society (Moghadam, 1997). In the case of the Nicaraguan revolution, women's emancipation was even one of the explicitly formulated goal. Men and women that participated in revolutionary movements got extensive training, not only in the use of weapons and strategic warfare, but also social and political training. They were educated about dominance systems as they studied Marxism, the writings of Sandino, or the Cuban revolution. In fact, the responsibility of leading the political training of new recruits was often put in the hands of female participants. Something happened to these women during the course of the revolutionary struggle. Through their participation they gained greater organizing skills and new confidence in their abilities to act, even in ways that were not traditional for women. Gender inequality was not any worse after the revolution than it had been before, but women who had been mobilized into new ways of thinking were no longer as willing to accept such inequality as natural (Kampwirth, 2004: 5).

What specially interests me is the strong tension between the ambitions that were drawn up during the revolution, the new gender practices that were formed, and the conditions in which women in Nicaragua find themselves today. I want to know what reflections the female ex-combatants themselves made on this account. This master thesis aims to investigate if the participation in the revolutionary movement led to the

empowerment of these women. If so, how does this manifest in their contemporary lives? I have chosen the following problem statement to guide the study.

“To what extent has their participation in the Nicaraguan revolution had an empowering effect on the female ex-combatants?”

Taking into consideration that women’s subordination prevails in structuring the Nicaraguan society, my basic assumption is that many female ex-combatants may feel collectively failed by their own revolution. However, on an individual level they may have been empowered by the capacities gained through their participation in the revolutionary struggle. This sense of empowerment is likely to have had an influence on their personal paths and might have given them access to recourses and positions within society, that they otherwise would have had difficulties obtaining. It is also interesting why so many female ex-combatants have turned their activism away from FSLN and towards feminism, as previous research on women and the Nicaraguan revolution shows (see Kampwirth, 2004).

Method

To investigate the research question, I have applied qualitative methodology and conducted 11 semi-structured interviews with female ex-combatants in three different cities of Nicaragua. The age of my informants ranged from 45 to 65 and in spite of doing interviews in only three cities, their geographical origin was more diverse. I have approached the methodology drawing inspiration from constructivist grounded theory. This has allowed me the flexibility to let my empirical data be the ground from where theories are created, and considered useful to the analysis. It has required a continuous interaction between method, data and theory. While I have chosen to rely on personal testimonies, I have sought to interpret my findings on the basis of my general understanding of the larger socio-political context. This understanding is formed by extensive research in academic books and articles on the subject, from the ethnographic fieldwork at large, but also through embodying the experience of being a white foreign woman learning to know Nicaragua through various trips over the course of over 8 years. These experiences allowed me to make valuable connections with my informants and left me with a very rich data material.

Theoretical Framework and Conceptual Clarifications

In order to highlight the reflections of my interviewees in light of their participation in the Nicaraguan Revolution, I have decided to make use of empowerment theory. This conceptual framework has an irreducibly subjective element, and is loyal to the personal testimonies on which I have chosen to build this study. At the same time it facilitates interpretations of the interplay between the structural and the personal level. Empowerment in general terms is defined as “*the expansion in peoples ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them*” (Kabeer in Petesch et al., 2005). Women’s empowerment, however, encompass some additional unique elements that general empowerment doesn’t. These have to be taken into consideration. In order to analyze the empowerment of women then, it is necessary to introduce some categories that are constitutive for how the roles and relationships of gender are outplayed. The fundamental idea is that a person’s gender is a social construction and therefore it is learned and can be changed. How the gender is expressed and interpreted will differ within and across cultures and over time, and will result in different roles, responsibilities, opportunities, needs and constraints, for women, men, boys and girls (United Nations, 2004). Masculinity and femininity are situated based categories and negotiations of how gender can be performed in specific situations. These negotiated performances are done within specific restraints that are set by various means in different contexts. In the Nicaraguan society, gender roles are manifested locally through the dichotomy of machismo and marianismo. I find it useful to introduce these categories here, as they are referred to both in the methodology and history chapter that follows this introduction.

The Dichotomy of Machismo and Marianismo

The socialization of men and women in Nicaragua is heavily influenced by the bipolar concept of Machismo and Marianismo, which is common throughout Latin America (Ellsberg et al., 2000; Lancaster, 1992). Machismo is a term that by far has found it’s way into the everyday speech and is used to explain various forms of male domination. As an ideology, machismo highly values male aggressiveness and sexual prowess. Differences between men and women are exaggerated, emphasizing male moral, economic and social superiority over women. In contrast, *Marianismo* has religious

connotations and is meant to describe how the female ideal is connected to the idea of the “suffering mother”. Steaming from the devotion of Virgin Mary, who is considered simultaneously to embody the ideals of maternity and chastity (Ellsberg et al., 2000), marianismo also entails a form of purity that only can be ensured by being a subordinate woman of the house. In her role as a mother, the Nicaraguan woman enjoys certain status, and the more she endures on behalf of her children, the more value she is attributed as a woman by local society. This stands in a dichotomic relationship with the concept of machismo, already described. The more a woman suffers from the man’s irresponsibility, abuse or abandonment, the better she performs motherhood, and the more status she gets as a “good woman”. While the tradition of Machismo defines masculine identity in terms of dominance and aggression, Marian devotion encourages women to be dependent and submissive (Ellsberg et al., 2000). A woman that makes use of public space more than absolutely necessary face the risk of falling into marianismo’s counterpart category of womanhood, which is that of the prostitute. The macho man has to control his woman within this parameter to ensure his masculinity and honor. There is a contradiction between these ideals, and reality, however. A big percentage of Nicaraguan households are headed by females. This means that the women of these households take on social and economical responsibility that is not recognized within these parameters of gender identity. In fact, there is certain stigma connected to having been abandoned, as it culturally tends to be perceived as the woman’s fault for not being good enough. Nicaraguan society was and is still dominated by these roles and patterns for male-female interaction, but the revolution offered an opportunity and a necessity to redefine these premises. Within the revolutionary groups women have claimed to experience a higher level of equality, than in society at large (Kampwirth, 2004).

Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into six chapters. The next chapter reflects on the methodological design and the process of data collection. In chapter 3 I will present some developments in Nicaraguan history leading up to the revolution, and important elements of the aftermath, emphasizing women’s lives. Subsequently, chapter 4 introduces relevant previous research on the field of gender and revolution, and gives a presentation of the conceptual framework for this thesis. Chapter 5 focuses on the

informant's testimonies and analysis of the data material. Finally a discussion and concluding remarks will be offered in chapter 6.

Chapter 2. Methodology

In this chapter I focus on the methodology that has guided this MA investigation. I will present the strategy of data collection, as well as give an introduction to the more long-term experiences I have with the Nicaraguan society. These experiences have influenced the level of trust I gained in relation to my informants within the interview situations, and are also part of my insight and interpretation tool. Because my research aims to investigate the experiences of a specific group of women, I found that the dynamics of qualitative methodology served as an appropriate point of departure. Central to qualitative research methods is fieldwork and interviews, or participant observation, but also the notion that knowledge is produced in the intersection between researcher and informant, and not abstracted from an objective reality. By choosing qualitative methods I also acknowledge one of the epistemological pillars that has had a great influence on the field of gender research; namely that all knowledge is situated (Lykke, 2010; Thagaard, 1998). Recognizing that I am using myself as a means to create situations where stories are told and where my presence is part of the knowledge-productions, I aim to be open and transparent about the research process. I will therefore start this chapter by situating myself, presenting my academic background and my personal interest in the subject I have chosen to investigate. Further I will reflect on some gendered aspects of my fieldwork, and discuss some of the challenges I encountered in the interview situations.

Why Nicaragua?

Like illustrated in the preface, my love and fascination for Nicaragua, its history and its people is not new. In 2007/2008 I spent one year there, first studying Spanish and Latin American studies and later working in a multicultural school as a language teacher. During this time I lived in a small barrio in the town of León, trying to get an impression of the ways and traditions of my neighbors. Although I was not doing any form of research at that time, it was important to me to try to learn as much as I could about Nicaraguan culture. I wanted to have a more integrated experience of Nicaragua, than that of hostels, beaches and international backpackers. Although I lived half of the year with my mother and sister that had come to be a part of my adventure, I got “adopted” by a Nicaraguan family as well. I didn’t live with them, but given that I

was in a relationship with one of the sons in the house, I spent more than half my time there. This was a renowned family within the lines of the Sandinistas, and in their house the walls were alive with historical testimonies from the revolution. I absorbed everything I could about this admirable “David vs. Goliath”-revolutionary struggle. At this point my fascination with the revolution was quite naïve and uncontested. I knew the slogans of the FSLN and in spite of my limited Spanish at the time I could already sing revolutionary songs by heart. With my Nicaraguan “family” I participated in political rallies, and on the annual celebration of 19 of July in 2008 I found myself standing only meters away from historical figures like presidents Hugo Chaves (Venezuela), Mel Zelaya (Honduras), Evo Morales (Bolivia), Daniel Ortega (Nicaragua), and representative Carlos Fonseca Teheran (the son of Carlos Fonseca the funder of FSLN, Nicaragua). Looking at the overwhelming popular support that the revolution enjoyed on this day, I almost felt like a Sandinista. There was red and black for as long as the eye could see, and it was almost impossible to imagine that there could be Nicaraguans opposing. Going back to Norway after nine months in this spirit, I brought a lot of books to keep digging deeper into Nicaraguan culture and history.

In January 2010 I returned for one-month fieldwork for my bachelors degree on the subject of local development and the influence of international aid-organizations. Judging from the streets of León where I had lived a few years back, the country seemed to be developing for the better. Many people in the poor neighborhoods that I had frequented had humbly upgraded their houses. -New roofs, color on the walls or tiles instead of dirt floors. New businesses had emerged in the city and more supermarkets had appeared. The formerly bumpy highway to the beach was now better than most roads in the north of Norway where I come from, and the national treasure and great Cathedral of León was under massive renovation. It seemed like president Daniel Ortega was doing something right. However, in spite of the visible improvements, I was no longer as convinced as before. One of the reasons was a book that I had read; “El país bajo de mi piel” written by an impressive Nicaraguan author Gioconda Belli. Her autobiography took me deep into the experiences of a female conspirator and combatant of the Nicaraguan revolution. It made me realize how important the women’s contributions had been for the outcome of the revolutionary struggle, but also how neglected their effort was experienced in the aftermath. Her

description of Daniel Ortega and his wife Rosario Murillo, amongst others, did not correspond with the image presented by the massive political propaganda that I had seen. In her autobiography she described how in the aftermath of the triumph the power was concentrated in that hands of a group of men, while women mostly were given administrative positions. She even admitted being naively compliant in not obtaining a rightfully deserved position her self, as she was in love with a male commander and accepted working under him in order for them to stay close. Gioconda Belli was initially a poet, and still uses her poetry and prose to celebrate the strengths of the female body and creating awareness around many gender specific challenges that women face. She is also widely known for her outspoken criticism of Daniel Ortega's government, through interviews, news chronicles and election activism. Through reading testimonies from other women, I got the impression that a lot of them had turned away from the revolutionary party. Many of these, including Gioconda Belli, were now doing some form of activism against the government and some of that in the name of feminism. Had the revolution disappointed its women?

Apart from being a dedicated student I am also a musician. My band and I play Latin American Trova. This is a music tradition that is often associated with revolutionary movements due to the social commitment incorporated in the lyrics. This music tradition is still strong in Latin America and Nicaragua today. I initially fell for this this type of music in Nicaragua, and coming back to Norway I sought out people with this common interest and formed a band. During my fieldwork in 2011/2012 I participated in numerous concerts and music festivals with the guitarist in my band that spent a few months in Nicaragua with me. One of them was the annual international festival of female singer/songwriters (VI Encuentro Internacional de Cantautoras, 2011), where apart from concerts, we participated in seminars about violence against women, and sexual violence against minors. The focus was on committing as artists to creating awareness around these problems through our art. My musical link to the trova tradition served as an alternative entry point, and gave me an unexpected insight in the cultural movement in Nicaragua. Getting to know various Nicaraguan artists that had been explicitly supporting the revolution through their music or their poesy in the past, I found that many of these now opposed the FSLN-government. Some of them were even reluctant to play certain of their own

most popular songs, because over time the songs had come to represent the FSLN, which was no longer acting in line with their ideals.

When the time came to choose the subject for my master thesis I wanted to make use of my experiences from and interest in the Nicaraguan society. I considered it an advantage that I was well aquatinted with customs, language and the local terminology. However, my many encounters with different parts of the Nicaraguan society, that in in the years after the fieldwork also include getting married with a Nicaraguan man and starting a family, enhances the need for situating the knowledge produced. In many ways I am now a participant in the field that I am partly investigating. The “silent” knowledge that has become embodied in me through my experiences with and in Nicaragua (and other places) is now a part of my apparatus for interpretation.

Academic Background

My academic background is of an interdisciplinary character. Rooted within social sciences my bachelor’s degree in Social Planning and Cultural Understanding and equally the masters in Philosophy of Peace and Conflict Transformation draw from academic traditions like history, sociology, social anthropology, psychology, political science, international relations, and philosophy. Through combining elements from different academic traditions, I believe one has a better chance of reaching new and exiting knowledges. While it is still important that scholars specialize into defined academic disciplines, there is also a need for scientists that can draw from multiple perspectives.

Why Women?

Within peace and conflict studies, as well as in mainstream media, women are often projected as merely victims of war, rather than actors. Although wars tend to affect women differently than men, the picture portrayed is far from nuanced. Much of the current literature on war and post war reconstruction still perpetuates a kind of gender blindness that identifies men as the sole actors, and fail to question the assumption that men’s experiences and perspectives of war are universal (Thompson, 2006: 343). However, women that live through war and conflict do not constitute a single group

of faceless victims (Gjelsvik, 2010). Many of them remember their time in the revolutionary movements in positive terms as a time of unity and meaning. Recognizing this, it is also likely that for some, the transition from war to peace can be a disappointment. This is what academically motivated me to investigate the experiences of Nicaraguan female ex-combatants, in the transition from a war-torn to a more peaceful society. Over the years I have come to define myself as a feminist, and this personal characteristic have most likely also had an influence on my chose of topic.

Method Design

Deciding on the method design was rather challenging. Knowing that a master thesis is a project that constantly evolves during the different research stages and that multiple changes most likely would be made during the course, I wanted to apply a method design that acknowledged this process, and allowed for the flexibility necessary. I found the answer in *Grounded Theory*. As a methodological approach grounded theory has been adapted to fit with a variety of ontological and epistemological positions, such as constructivism, feminism, critical thinking and postmodernism. My research design is guided by constructivist grounded theory as presented by Mills et al. (2006), and attempts to meet the following requirements: *The first* is creation of a sense of reciprocity between participants and the researcher in the co-construction of meaning and, ultimately, a theory that is grounded in the participants' and researcher's experiences. *The second* is the establishment of relationships with participants that explicate power imbalances and attempts to modify these imbalances. *The third* is the clarification of the position the author takes in the text, the relevance of biography and how one renders participants' stories into theory through writing. Drawing from grounded theory allows for some methodological flexibility where my empirical data can decide what theory is used for analysis. The sources of empirical data are not limited to the interviews and participant observation, but also include documentaries, letters, fictional literature, relevant music, as well as the personal experiences of the researcher. This inspires academic creativity.

Field Work – Data Collection

The most important empirical material that comes together in this master thesis was gathered in Nicaragua between the 1 of October 2011 and the 12 of June 2012. I conducted 11 semi-structured interviews with female ex-combatants in three different cities and all the interviews were audio-recorded. I chose to record my interviews for 3 main reasons. First it enabled me to be more present in the situation and concentrate on the informant's answers. Being interested and attentive creates a better relation between researcher and informant. Second, as a researcher one is not just interested in what is said, but also in how it is communicated. Being able to observe the mimics, reactions, and the emphasis of the informant was thus important to me. Having to take notes along the way may have come in the way for such interaction. Third, I did my interviews in Spanish. Although I communicate very well in Spanish, listening, translating, analyzing, and choosing what to emphasize in the notes, is a lot to focus on all at once. In order not to miss out on valuable information, I found it better to record. I structured the interview questions into three main categories; life before entering the revolution; life during years of active participation in the war; and life after the war (including the present and hopes for the future). The research question that defined my method design, fieldwork and interviews was *“is there is a relation between the capacities that the Nicaraguan female ex-combatants gained during their time in the revolution and/or contra-war, and the fact that many of them have turned away from the revolutionary party FSLN?”* To better reflect my informant's testimonies, and the choice of applying empowerment theory as the theoretical framework for the thesis, the problem statement was slightly changed after fieldwork.

Anonymity

The principles of confidentiality and anonymity were early established as a convention within the qualitative methods, and are designed to protect the privacy of informants and the security of the researcher. Classic ethnographies invariably conceal the identities of informants, and often also the detail of location where fieldwork was conducted (Kevin, 2012: 9). To ensure the principle of anonymity, my interview recordings were first stored as audio files and then word files when transcription was done. Information about the informant's real names was coded and kept separately from the interview files. Each informant was given a number and all

information obtained has been treated confidentially throughout the process. The data has been kept password protected, and in the master thesis I use fictive names to keep the informants apart. All the interviews are now deleted, apart from one, which the informant in question asked to keep as testimonial proof for her self and her family. I agreed to this, as I considered this to be the least I could do to pay my gratitude for her time. My copy, however, has been deleted as proclaimed.

My first intention had been to interview women that had gained the position of “comandante” (commander). The participation of female combatants in the Sandinista armed forces during the revolution reached up to 30 %, but the number of female commanders was not equally high. Many of these ex-commanders now hold important and publicly visible positions in Nicaraguan political or civilian life. This meant that talking about their individual experiences would be almost impossible without risking revealing their identity. This, in combination with the fact that commanders were generally harder to recruit to interviews, made me revise the desired interview selection. I decided to interview female ex-combatants of different rank and status, including commanders and foot soldiers, as well as two women that were not involved in direct combat, but played an important supporting role. Common to them all was that they had been very integrated in the revolutionary process and/or in the following contra war. Although initiated by this reflection of anonymity and access, my decision to change the interview selection was also made on the basis of the adversity in data material I imagined this would result in. Amongst the informants I also included one woman from the contra-forces, and although her testimony proved very interesting, it did however fall on the outside of the themes I wanted to highlight, and thus, I do not make use of it in this thesis. It might be an interesting comparative study for the future, to investigate if and how female ex-combatants from the opposing side of the conflict experienced their time as participants of war differently.

Timing, Recruitment Strategies and Gaining Access

I arrived in Nicaragua during election time. This meant that there were a lot of European journalists and election observers doing investigations in the political sphere while I was trying to recruit informants. My experience is that Nicaraguans in general (and maybe more so the supporters of FSLN) tend to distrust the intentions of

foreign journalists. These assumptions were often confirmed when in normal conversations people would ask me if I was really there to cover the elections. Having that the relation between researcher and informant in qualitative research methods has to be based on trust, I therefore found it best to use the first few months to absorb the impressions of a Nicaragua at elections, and to expand my strategic network. In an effort to collect material that would allow me to make sense of the Nicaraguan gender relations and the return to conservatism after the revolution, I visited institutions like public health centers and universities, attended a women's conference on a potential law reform of the law on violence against women, and participated in cultural events.

During this time I lived with a poor Nicaraguan family in a Sandinista "barrio"(neighborhood). I was involved in political campaigning (as an observer), training-sessions for the local election boards on the countryside outside León, and almost all the activities that my "Nica-family" was engaged in. This period was important for my fieldwork because it gave me a different experience with Nicaraguan social life. Family life also provided me with a deeper understanding of how it is to be a woman in Central America today. Having that I was not a real member of the family, independent, and from a European country, my Nicaraguan family let me go out to concerts and bars at night. If I were to bring my Nica-sister Tania of 25, we would also have to bring her brother, Juan. Knowing Juan, prone to the bottle and not a stranger to trouble, one would question how he could serve as the moral alibi, when Tania obviously was the responsible one. But this was just one of many examples of how machismo manifests itself in the Nicaraguan society. When I was out alone, I would often come home to a family that already knew where I had been and with whom, as it was common that people sent messages informing.

Gaining access to the "right" informants is a critical part of doing research. You may have your research design and questions in order, but whom you end up talking to, and how the interview situation is set up, will have direct implications for what knowledge is produced. For my bachelor's thesis in 2010, I came to learn a valuable lesson on that respect. I did interviews with participants in a local community affected by the work of an international aid organization. Having that this was in a remote area in Nicaragua, and my network there was very limited, I chose to use the organization itself as a door opener. At first I was very happy with all the positive responses and

the way all the participants seemed to enjoy and benefit from the projects. It was only after the fieldwork that I came to reflect critically about how the interview situation was loaded with power dimensions that most certainly affected the way the inquired answered. The informants were poor peasants without many resources that through the programs they most likely thought I represented potentially had something to gain. This did not exactly inspire for critical answers. Not only was I probably interpreted as a representative for the organization, but also during some of the interviews the local manager stayed around, as if to control the situation. This experience made me painfully aware of the many pitfalls a fieldwork is exposed to if conducted without creating conditions for trust between the interviewer and the interviewee. Learning from this experience I made the decision not to recruit informants for my master's fieldwork through any formal institutions of the FSLN. Although that might have been an easier strategy in terms of gaining access to more informants faster, there is a fair chance that the information provided by these would be colored by the way in which they were recruited. The structure of the FSLN is of a hierarchal nature, and to stay within the ranks and more so to advance, one must demonstrate loyalty before anything. By recruiting interviewees through alternative channels, and assuring that anonymity could be guaranteed, I sought to avoid this problem.

Gatekeepers and some Gendered Experiences

My original recruitment strategy was using people from my social and cultural network in León and Managua as gatekeepers. According to scholars “*gatekeepers are people in positions of giving or denying permission to researchers and others wanting to investigate or obtain information about a certain population*” (Feldman et al., 2003). I did get a hold of my first interviewees this way, but during this process I had some gendered experiences of my own with male gatekeepers.

One example was a very old man that I had to interact with because he was the owner of a house I was going to rent. He was a widower of around 80, a renowned lawyer and a professor at the University. When he heard about my project he said he could get me in contact with a lot of female ex-combatants and if I wanted I could also come work at his office, because they had access to all kinds of government statistics that could be useful to me. This sounded almost too good to be true, and it sure turned out to be. In this case, the old man started crossing the lines of a professional

relationship just after I had signed the contract as a tenant. He started pursuing me romantically and offered that I could stay in the house for free if he could live there with me. I told him straight forward that I was not interested in him in any romantic way, but he kept insisting, suggesting and insinuating. At times it became really uncomfortable for me. At one point he actually asked me straight out if I could be some kind of girlfriend to him. He said we didn't have to "be intimate", but we could go out to dinners together, hold hands publicly, and maybe kiss. Now at this point, I was in a contract twist with him. As it turns out, the Swedish woman that I rented with and had signed the contract with didn't have enough money to pay her part. I only had enough for my part, and the old man held me accountable for everything. Having that I "owed" him something, he pressed on with obscene suggestions, insisting that going out to dinner and holding his hand was rather innocent. Of course I never accepted his offer, not to be his girlfriend nor to come work at his office, and I never got a hold of any ex-combatants through him. But I did learn a first hand a lesson about how it is to be a woman in Nicaragua. It is of course different being a "rubia" (blond, white, woman), than a local woman. In my case the power relation was evened out a bit by the fact that I was white, foreign and had, or at least had the opportunity to mobilize, resources to get out of the legal twist. A young local woman may have found herself in a much more difficult situation. This experience made me identify with how one's options as a female in the Nicaraguan society, often can be limited to one's body as currency. This, and actually a big part of my other encounters with men during the fieldwork was in many ways defined my female body, with the outcome determined by my willingness to share it or not. I should specify that the words "my willingness to share my body or not", are not meant to be interpreted exclusively in a sexual manner, but equally for other types of social transactions.

Another example was Carlos, the son of a very famous female commander from the time of the revolution. His mother was one of the women I had set my heart on interviewing when I first left for fieldwork. I met Carlos in a social setting with other friends, and told him about my project. He said that he could facilitate a meeting with his mother, so I gave him my number. We met a few times to talk about the project, but he didn't get around to arranging the interview with his mother and said that his mother didn't like that he gave her contact info to people. He also said that if I managed to contact her by other channels, it was very unlikely that she would accept

the invitation, because she had this kind of inquiries all the time. He assured me that the best way was through him, and that he was going to do it soon. One time, I was going from León to Managua on the same day as him, so he offered me a ride to split the gasoline bill. In this almost two-hour ride, where he also picked up two colleagues of his, the tone was relaxed and casual. However, when we got to the hotel where we had planned to eat together before I got along with my projects in Managua, the receptionist asked me if I was his wife staying with him. Apparently Carlos had booked a double room just in case I would need somewhere to stay, which he also offered me at a later state during lunch. This and other insinuations like inviting me to swim with him in the pool, looks that he gave, physical contact that he initiated, made me interpret his interaction with me as a romantic pursuit. At this point I had started to become uncomfortable around him, because I felt like he saw me as an attractive woman that needed something from him, and my currency was my body. Subsequently I distanced myself from him, and as follows, he never got around to arranging the interview. In a sense he turned out to be a gatekeeper that denied me access to an important informant.

In both the case of the old man and Carlos I have used the expression romantic pursuit. In Carlos' case I might as well have used the word "sexual pursuit". However, although I felt like there was a sexual or romantic tone that underpinned their interest in "helping me", it is of course also possible that it was equally about power and status. Carlos had a wife and a child, but had no problem with being seen with me by his colleagues and male friends. Nicaraguan society is typically interpreted as imbued with machismo where having more women equals more status. To me it felt like he was proud to be seen with me and that he "staged" situations where we would bump into people he knew. In our encounters with others, he would make jokes, be playfully physical with me, so that it seemed that we were closer than we actually were, and at first I let him, because I didn't want to jeopardize the potential interview. What this "staging" tells me is that it could in fact have been more important to him that other males assumed that we had something going on, than actually being with me physically, and that he was using the situations to assert his masculine and sexual status. In the Nicaraguan context, a woman's (and maybe more so a white woman's) movement into a male dominated space is read as an invitation to articulate sexual or romantic interest. Women are being gendered in a particular way, in which their

capacity as for example a researcher, politician, or even combatant, has to be negotiated into the relationship.

The old man was more direct and although not sexual, his romantic intentions were outspoken. However in his case I also think that status and confirming his masculinity was part of the equation. The ideals of machismo are connected to aggressiveness, sexual prowess, and public space, and become harder to live up to as a man grows older. There are fewer ways to effectively confirm one's masculinity. He was a widower, who wanted to go out publicly and hold hands for everyone to see, and tried to use his power as a lawyer in the contract twist with me, to force me to comply. I later learned from a law student at his faculty, that he often used these kinds of tricks with the female law students of his liking. She told me he would invite them to help censoring papers from other students at his office after class to get to know them better. Later he would suggest eating out, as to show gratitude for their help, but then he would typically use his power over them as the one who would grade their work, to obtain the results he wanted.

Snowball Method

In the end the most effective strategy for recruiting informants for my interviews, was the “snowball method”. This is when informants who one has already interviewed suggest or introduce the researcher to further eligible informants. I recruited 8 of my informants this way. With the snowball method there is always a danger of ending up recruiting the “same kind” of informants, and thus not getting a representative selection of the population you want to investigate. I did reflect on that and came to the conclusion that the interviewees had such different backgrounds and present lives, that I seemed to have avoided this problem. I had also used very different channels to recruit the first four. The first interview I organized was through the cleaning lady at an NGO working with peasants, where I had acquaintances. The boss at the organization put me in contact with her because he knew she came from a family of Sandinistas. Being too young at the relevant time, she had not been in combat herself, but she put me in contact with a group of female ex-combatants that spent their time occupying land, promised them during the 90ties' peace accords. Another was recruited from the cultural scene of León where I frequented. She was not an artist herself, but was often present at poetry nights, concerts and other local cultural events.

The third woman was a neighbor of some friends I was visiting in Ocotal. They suggested I contact her because of her feminist activism in the aftermath of the revolution. The fourth woman, I found through a Save the Children in Ocotal, where I entered, explained my ambition and asked if they could put me in contact with a female ex combatant. A man that was there overheard my inquiry and gave me the number of two of his sisters that both lived in Managua. One of them agreed to do the interview.

Reflecting on the Interview Situation

One important element to take into consideration when doing interviews is the power relation between interviewer and interviewee. There are many aspects that can influence how the informant and the researcher experience the interview. This in turn is likely to have an effect on how they choose to communicate. It is important to create an atmosphere of trust, and location is thus essential. I chose to let my informant decide where it was more convenient for them to do the interview. Mostly I went to their offices or houses, but in two cases the interview was conducted in the private house where I was staying in Ocotal, and one in a public café in Managua. I still made sure that we were as far away from other people as possible, so that talking openly would be facilitated.

As a researcher it is my responsibility to be aware of and try to modify power imbalances during my encounters with my informants. My own experience of the power balance during my interviews varied with the type of woman I had in front of me. Some of the women were poor peasants with few resources. Our differences seemed to define the first impressions. They expressed certain excitement that someone “like me” from another country found their experiences interesting. One of them was a very outspoken and cheerful lady, and the interview took more and more shape of a conversation, where I let her elaborate what she wanted to tell me. I tried to outbalance the differences between us by focusing on what we had in common. Even if we were from different generations, countries and cultures, we seemed to find some common ground in the everyday experiences of being a woman in a man’s world. This “common ground” however, must be problematized, as it does not entail the same for me, with my somewhat privileged background, as it does to her, a poor peasant

Nicaraguan woman. A more correct analysis would maybe be to see the common ground as being how the gendered struggles that she wanted to express, resonated with me as a woman with a special interest for these subjects. Although it did nothing for the power balance, certain reciprocity existed in that I showed interest in her story, recognized her experiences as impressive and important, and in how I tried (authentically) to applaud her for her agency facing the struggles of extreme poverty.

Although the power relation between interviewer and interviewee often is considered to go in the interviewers favor, there were some cases where I felt it to be almost on the contrary. Some of my informants were very strong and impressive women that made me feel quite humble in their presence. I usually met them in their own element, like at their office or at their home. They were well educated, clearly had experience in giving interviews and knew what they wanted to emphasize. I was younger than them, a student and not a professional, from a foreign western country. For certain populations, like for the woman described above, some of these very social attributes might come across as impressive and culturally be interpreted as superior. In her case, she was new to interviews, and I was (as far as she knew) the experienced one. I was the one in control of the situation. With the “high status” interviewees, however, I found myself at the opposite side of the table. They were typically ex-commanders, public figures and activists, with stable positions within civil society. These women knew what they had been a part of. They knew how impressive their revolutionary agency had been. I came from another time, not to mention another place, and I imagine that they thought that I couldn’t even relate to the reality they had lived, with my protected western background. They were the ones with experience, and I was the amateur. Reflecting on this, one woman even said to me before we got started that she wasn’t going to do any more of these interviews after mine, “...because what was the point? You come here with your young and naïve enthusiasm, and go back to write a paper and then what? It changes nothing” (Monica, 28.05.2012). Starting the interview on this note was rather challenging, and the fact that it took me some time to get my recorder to work, didn’t exactly help the situation. In this particular case, one might conclude that my aim to create a sense of reciprocity in the interview situation radically failed, and to some extent it did, but even here there was some common ground to be found as we got on with the interview. We were both feminists, and through the conversation it became clear that some of my perceptions of the

challenges that Nicaraguan women had faced in the aftermath of the revolution, coincided with hers. - Or rather, my questions resonated with her experiences. In spite of me not being a professional, I had some relevant insights that could be mobilized in the encounter, where also moments of similarities and trust could be performed. This way the interview gave meaning at least as a conversation between someone with a common interest in highlighting the experiences of female ex-combatants, which happens to be the main objective of some of her professional work as well.

Being from another country and culture is bound to have an influence on the creation of new knowledge in an interview situation. So is one's personal background and other social attributes. Following the ideas of grounded theory "*reality is always already interpreted*" (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2009). Some examples of this I have already presented in the section above, where my foreign-ness and other social attributes, were interpreted in different ways by different interviewees, and the power balance of the situation changed accordingly. In the interview where I clearly came across as another foreign, naïve, researcher-wannabe, my foreign-ness and social attributes seemed to work against me. Being young, blond, blue-eyed, and even the fact that I was female only seemed to contribute to this unflattering image. However, this impression was not caused by my social attributes alone, but rather in the meeting between hers and mine.

Being foreign can be seen as both an advantage and a disadvantage. The most apparent disadvantage is language. Spanish is not my mother tongue and there might have been words, concepts and slang that I didn't understand at the time of the interview. In fact, this became apparent to me when I did the transcriptions and discovered one word that I continuously had misunderstood throughout more than one of the interviews. In spite of the disadvantages, I think being a foreigner might also have helped in giving me access to information that for example a Nicaraguan student wouldn't have gotten. Having that the political situation in Nicaragua is rather hostile, especially so for women, it is plausible to think that least the interviewees that still operate within the FSLN system might have been reluctant to speak so openly against their superiors. Judging from the answers I ended up with, we managed to create a sense of trust, where even strict critics of the political party that they felt loyalty towards, came across as important for them to express.

Chapter 3. Historical Background

Nicaragua is a fairly small country, located in Central America. With a total population of about 5.8 million, it borders with Honduras in the north, and Costa Rica in the south. Separated by one of Central America's largest rainforests, Nicaragua has two coastlines, to the Atlantic and to the Pacific Ocean. In the Pacific area the population is often referred to as *mestizo*, or Spanish speakers of mixed European and Indian descent. The term *mestizo* suggests a unified national identity, but in fact the term also serves to mask the cultural and ethnic differences among the urban and the rural people who live in this region. The cultural diversity is more apparent on the broad but less populated Caribbean side, where indigenous peoples, cultures, and communities continue to have a significant presence. From 1987, the Caribbean side of Nicaragua was divided into two autonomous regions, but still today it suffers from political marginalization at national level (Babb, 2001: 4).

Nicaraguan history, like that of many Latin American countries, has been dominated by colonialism, foreign occupation, class polarization, civil war and social upheavals (Haase, 2012; Knizer, 1991; Lancaster, 1992). During the dark colonial time, the Spaniards shipped thousands of indigenous people into slavery and slaughtered countless more. The Central American countries gained independence from Spain in 1821, and continued as a union until 1838. As they fell apart, the independent Republic of Nicaragua was born. However, the young state would not be left to find its own path by the greater world powers. Nicaragua's modern history is that of repeated U.S. intervention, political and cultural dependency controlled from Washington, and sporadic and usually defeated rebellions against imperialism. The most extravagant example is that of the American adventurer and filibuster William Walker. With the help of a group of U.S. mercenaries, he invaded Nicaragua in 1855 and soon had himself inaugurated as president. Walker ruled Nicaragua for two years, declared English the official language and tried to reinstate slavery. Nicaraguans took up arms against him, and were joined by soldiers from the neighboring countries who feared his expansionist ambition. William Walker was executed in Honduras in 1860, but his bizarre campaign to build a personal empire in Central America had fed a strain of anti-Americanism that was to become a permanent part of the Nicaraguan character (Babb, 2001: 5-7; Knizer, 1991: 23; Lancaster, 1992: 1).

Sandino and U.S. Occupation

For about forty years after the defeat of William Walker, the conservatives ruled Nicaragua, but in 1893 a liberal revolution put national visionary and social crusader José Santos Zelaya to the presidency. His sixteen-year rule was a period of great progress for Nicaragua. He built roads, bridges, and government buildings. He encouraged foreign trade, poured resources into public education and extended political rights to all citizens, including women. Zelaya was also the first Nicaraguan president to defy the United States, and for that he would come to pay dearly. In 1909 the US government encouraged the Nicaraguan Conservatives to rebel against his liberal government and sent U.S. Marines to ensure conservative victory. Zelaya knew what was in his best interest and resigned, but soon a civil war broke out. When the liberals and some discontented former conservatives joined forces, the U.S. Marines landed again. Apart from a small break in 1925 the U.S. Marines occupied Nicaragua from 1912 to 1933, instating one conservative president after the other. The political upheavals still continued strong, however, and in 1927, the liberals and the conservatives were forced by the United States to sign a new agreement. Of all the rebel groups, only one general refused to sign. General Augusto César Sandino and his irregular army of peasants and workers kept on fighting, forcing the U.S. Marines to withdraw a final time in 1933. Before they left they had managed to organize, train and equip a national army, the Guardia Nacional. The head of this national army was the future dictator Anastasio Somoza García. On his orders Sandino was assassinated in an evil ambush after leaving peace talks with president Juan Sacasa. In 1936 Somoza seized power and with substantial U.S. aid, his family maintained dictatorial control over Nicaragua for over forty years to come. Although general Sandino was now dead, his anti-imperialist legacy reshaped the Central American consciousness. Sandino became the very symbol of national resistance against foreign interference and would later give name to the Sandinista movement that enabled the Nicaraguan revolution to succeed. With the Sandinista triumph in 1979, the circle of brutal atrocities committed by the Somozas, starting with the assassination of Sandino, was closed in his very name (Babb, 2001: 6; Knizer, 1991: 27-30; Lancaster, 1992: 1-3).

Women's Lives under the Somoza Rule

Nicaragua was already one of the poorest countries of Latin America, and the problems were aggravated by the brutality and corruption of the Somoza dictatorship. With money, resources, and political power concentrated in the hands of a very small minority, the vast majority of the population lived in extreme poverty. Women bore a disproportionate share of the hardships, with the worst paid jobs, limited access to social services, and the burden of maintaining house and families under desperate circumstances. Illiteracy rates were high for everyone, but more so for women. Officially calculated at 51 % nation wide, it reached up to a 93 percent among rural women in certain areas (Stephens, 1988: 1). The Somoza legal system institutionalized discrimination against women, as the husband had the right to collect the salary of his wife, and exercised total economical control of the family. 75% of Nicaraguan mothers were not married and the fathers had no legal obligation towards illegitimate children (Stephens, 1988: 1-2). Divorce laws allowed for men to end matrimony on the grounds of his wife's adultery, but did not penalize a man's infidelity. The Nicaraguan machismo culture, that to a great extent still prevails today, allows for informal polygamy, and it was not uncommon for men to abandon their wife and family, when things got hard. In 1970, over 48 percent of Nicaraguan households were headed by women alone, burdening them to cope with all the economic and social disadvantages of being abandoned (Stephens, 1988).

Carlos Fonseca, the FSLN and the Inclusion of Women

Maybe the most important historical figure for the development of the Nicaraguan Revolution is Carlos Fonseca. He was the illegitimate son of a wealthy businessman working for the Somoza government, and a female house servant of the poorest kind. He grew up in a household where he, his mother and his siblings were granted only a small a corner of his aunts house. All tough his father was an influential man of substantial wealth; he never assumed economic responsibility towards the mother of his son. He never gave her a penny to help with their living conditions. In spite of the obvious socioeconomic challenges, Carlos Fonseca was an exceptionally dedicated student, and was granted scholarships to continue his education on higher level. Having grown up in extreme poverty he could identify with the struggles of the majority of the Nicaraguan population, and through his studies and in radical political networks

where he frequented he found inspiration in Marxism. All though a firm believer in non-violent methods in his younger years, he soon became more radicalized in his quest for social and political change in the Nicaraguan society. To oppose the ever more brutal dictatorship, Carlos Fonseca led a small group of revolutionaries to establish the FSLN (Sandinista National Liberation Front) in 1961 (Zimmermann, 2000). They fused Sandino's ideas and tactics with those of more recent revolutionaries like Che Guevara to create a moderate sort of Marxist ideology, 'tinged with a radical Christian element' (Molyneux, 1985: 247). Carlos Fonseca's visionary thought included recognizing women's subordinate status in the Nicaraguan society, and promised that women's emancipation would be one of the goals of the revolution. The FSLN Historic Program, first presented in 1969, clearly stated that the Sandinista people's revolution would aim to establish economic, political, and cultural equality between men and women, and listed seven specific reforms to reach this goal. These reforms included eliminating prostitution, ending discrimination against children born outside matrimony, establishing day care centers and maternity leave, and lifting the political, cultural, and vocational levels of women through their incorporation of women into the revolutionary process (FSLN, 1984). Under the banner of FSLN, students, workers, and peasants emerged to protest the poverty and injustices experienced by the vast majority of Nicaragua's population (Babb, 2001: 6-7).

The Rise of the People – The Fall of a Dictatorship

The Sandinista movement entertained close ties to the increasingly radicalized Christian base communities. Christian activists, radical priests and ordinary people came together to reinterpret the bible from the point of view of the poor. This new *liberation theology* provided both a powerful language for talking about injustice and a moral paradigm for those who acted as revolutionaries (Lancaster, 1992: 4), and thus bible meetings became an excellent source of recruitment to the ever-growing clandestine movement. While students, young visionaries, and poor peasants had been mobilizing underground for over a decade; the upper middle class had been more reluctant, - until 1972. On the 23rd of December an enormous earthquake struck out the entire city center of Managua. From one day to the next, two thirds of Managua's already poor population had lost everything. With death rates up 10.000 and the

human catastrophe that followed, aid money was streaming in by the billions. Instead of contracting Nicaraguan companies for the reconstruction work, Somoza and his inner circle plundered much of the foreign aid in order to enrich themselves. This misappropriation of the relief funds even made conservative upper class businessmen join the fight (Babb, 2001: 7; Knizer, 1991: 33). The earthquake and its aftermath was the final push that united most Nicaraguans against the dictatorship, transcending differences of class, age, origin and gender. The undisputed, intellectual and strategic leader of the FSLN, Carlos Fonseca, was killed in battle in 1976, and was never to experience the triumph of the revolution that he had started.

In 1979, after almost two decades of clandestine mobilization against the oppressive Somoza regime, the Nicaraguan mass urban insurrection had brought key cities under the control of the revolutionary forces. Finally, 43 years of brutal dictatorship was about to come to an end. On the 19 of July, the soldiers of the National Sandinista Liberation Front (FSLN) could take to the streets of Managua celebrating the fall of the Somoza family dynasty, as the Guardia Nacional was fleeing across the border.

Female Participation

The triumph of the Nicaraguan popular revolution could not have been achieved without its incorporation of a wide cross-section of the general population. Social actors from marginalized sectors, many of which were women, made up a significant part of the forces. The participation of women in political activity was certainly part of the wider process of popular mobilization, but it was entered into from a distinctive social position than men, one crucially shaped by the sexual division of labor. For many poor urban women, entry into political life began in the aftermath of the earthquake, when neighborhood committees were organized to care for the victims, feed the displaced and tend the wounded. Many experienced the transition from relief worker to participant in the struggle as a natural extension (Molyneux, 1985: 228). Young women and girls of middle class families, however, were often recruited in to the revolutionary struggle through institutions of education and/or religion, on the basis of their personal merits and social involvement (Kampwirth, 2004). Approximately 30 % of the FSLN forces were women, and many others who were not involved in organized politics provided vital logistical backup support. Others

contributed silently by refusing to denounce their revolutionary neighbors or by hiding fleeing combatants. With the revolutionary struggle, thousands of women gained the opportunity to break the constraints of their traditional roles. They attained new organizing skills and new confidence in their ability to act, even in ways that was not traditional to women. For many, the time in the guerilla struggle was also one where they were treated more equal by men, than ever before (Kampwirth, 2004).

The Progressive First Years

Just two days after the last Somoza dictator fled, a national directory (Dirección Nacional, DN) of nine commanders, lead by Daniel Ortega, assumed control of governing Nicaragua. Although the National Directorate consisted of only men, women did find them selves in senior positions in the newly established state, as ministers, vice-ministers, and regional coordinators of the party (Molyneux, 1985: 237). The overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship did lead to a dramatic expansion of women's rights. These gains included pre- and postnatal benefits, equal custody rights, alimony, more equal salaries, and decriminalization of abortion (Kampwirth, 2004: 21-23; Neumann, 2013: 838). Day care centers were opened, and rural women benefited from laws establishing women's right to land ownership. Much of this work could be attributed to the mass woman's organization, AMPRONAC that had formed within the FSLN during the guerilla years. Since 1979 it was known as the Nicaraguan Women's Association Luisa Amanda Espinoza (AMNLAE), named after the first woman to fall in combat (Babb, 2001: 25). AMNLAE's work included advocating for legal changes to help women, and providing services through "Casas de la Mujer", which by the end of the revolutionary decade numbered over 50. These houses offered some health services, psychological counseling, legal counseling and workshops within areas such as sexuality and contraception, as well as job training (Kampwirth and SpringerLink (Online service), 2011: 5-6,21-23). Policies targeted to benefit the poorest section of the population, also ended up benefiting women disproportionately. During the five first years in position the Sandinistas doubled educational institutions, increased school enrollment, eradicated a number of fatal diseases, provided the population with basic healthcare services and achieved more in the government housing program than Somoza had done in his entire rule (Molyneux, 1985: 248). In the poorest category in Managua at this point in time, reached 354

women for every 100 man. These women (and men), by virtue of their class position, were the direct beneficiaries of the Sandinista redistributive efforts (Molyneux, 1985: 248).

One of the most impressive events that the Sandinistas initiated after the overthrow of the dictatorship was the massive alphabetization crusade of 1980. Schools were closed and both students and teachers were spread around the country to teach people to read and write. During the Somoza era, illiteracy in Nicaragua had been over 50 %. With the crusade it was reduced to slightly less than 13 %, and women were disproportionately helped, since more women than men had been illiterate to begin with. More women than men also participated in the alphabetization crusade, and in similarly organized national health campaigns where they went throughout the country to vaccinate children and offer basic health services. In this way many girls and young women that had not been involved in the clandestine warfare, were introduced to a world beyond the constraints of their homes (Kampwirth, 2004: 24-25; Neumann, 2013: 803).

The Contra War – Progress in Recess

The Sandinista revolution was undermined by massive challenges on many fronts, most of which came from external interference from the United States of America. Economically, a US embargo deprived Nicaragua of its historical markets for agricultural products, and prevented Nicaraguan farmers access to spare parts to US-manufactured machinery. On the diplomatic front, any economic relief that Nicaragua might have received from international lending agencies, were vetoed down by the U.S. More destructive yet, was the contra threat lurking in the shadows. Almost immediately after the Sandinistas came to power, the CIA began organizing remnants of the defeated Guardia Nacional into nucleus that was to become the Contra revolution. With the entry of the Reagan administration in Washington in 1981, the U.S. involvement also came to include training, arming, equipping, financing and supplying these Contra Forces. *“Contra attacks targeted schools, clinics, electrical facilities, bridges and farms, traumatizing the country’s economic infrastructure and disrupting social services”* (Lancaster, 1992: 104). In addition, the United States of America has been convicted in the International Court of Justice for having

committed 9 direct attacks on ports and naval bases on Nicaraguan territory during the contra war, as well as for laying mines in the internal or territorial waters of Nicaragua (ICJ- Nicaragua vs. The United States of America- Judgment of 27 June 1986). This ensuring that the Sandinista revolution had little chance of bearing the fruits of opportunity that people had fought for (Knizer, 1991: 27-30; Lancaster, 1995: 135; 1992: 1-3). The feminist activism that AMNLAE had been advocating was soon discouraged on accounts of the importance of avoiding controversy within the revolutionary ranks, and explicit gender interests became increasingly subordinate to party interests. By the late 1980s, defense was consuming over 60 % of government expenditures, and an obligatory military draft was introduced (Lancaster, 1995: 135). Because of the economic embargo, and government focusing on defense rather than continuing social reform, the poverty was ever growing, and so was people's discontent. By the time of elections in 1990, frequently repeated campaign advertisement warned that voting for the FSLN would result in the continuation of obligatory military service and the suffering of mothers. Although the leadership of FSLN didn't see it coming people were tired of war and violence, and didn't want to send their sons out to war against other Nicaraguans. With 54.7 percent of the vote, Doña Violeta Chamorro won the 1990 election, and became the first female president in Nicaraguan history.

Doña Violeta and the UNO's Gender Agenda

"I am not a feminist, nor do I wish to be one. I am a woman dedicated to my home, like Pedro taught me."-Violeta Chamorro (Kampwirth, 1996: 69).

During her presidential campaign, Doña Violeta Chamorro projected the image of a traditional mother unattained by political experience. Always dressed in white, widow to one of the most important martyrs of the revolution, and mother to children on opposite sides of the conflict, she arose a symbol of peace and reconciliation. If she could keep her politically polarized family together, maybe she could reunite the "Nicaraguan family"? Doña Violeta and the UNO coalition (Unión Nacional Opositora, The National Opposition Union) did have plans for the Nicaraguan family. In their program of unity they promised *"a moral and social recovery of the traditional nucleus of the Nicaraguan family"* (Kampwirth, 1996: 70). The return to the traditional nucleus meant re-imposing traditional patterns of parental, particularly

paternal, control. More women than men voted for Violeta (Babb, 1996: 32). She appealed to the conservative women and men from the privileged class, who had suffered financial losses due to Sandinista policies, and who felt threatened by the Sandinista changes in family policy. More surprisingly, however, she also appealed to a large segment of the Sandinistas themselves. - Middle-aged women, who had not directly benefited from the liberal changes, at the same time as they had been disproportionately burdened by the hardships of keeping their households together, when the resources became ever more scarce as the war advanced. - The same women whose sons were drafted against their will for military service (Kampwirth, 1996).

The strong gendered symbolism of Doña Violeta's election campaign was soon to be manifested in policy. As soon as she took office she set out to recover the Nicaraguan family. New textbooks, financed by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), aimed to reshape education. At every grade level, texts and images presented "proper" family values, displaying mothers in the kitchen and men relaxing with the newspaper or engaged in paid work. The text emphasized the value of legal marriage, and the evils of abortion. Many of the progressive reforms that the Sandinistas had implemented while in power, was quickly overturned by the neoliberal and conservative UNO coalition. "*Day care centers were closed down outright or economic support for centers was drastically reduced. Support services for battered women, marriage counseling and workshops to prevent domestic violence were all eliminated by mid-1991*" (Kampwirth, 2004: 49). With the encouragement of the US government and international lending agencies, a plan to reduce the state sector was implemented, awarding 2,000 US\$ to state sector workers to give up their jobs. The purpose was reducing the state bureaucracy. The intended or unintended consequences were the reduction of Sandinistas in the bureaucracy and the return of women to their traditional roles as housewives (Kampwirth, 1996: 74). The structural adjustment policies of the UNO government carried particularly hard consequences for women, as they struggled to maintain households, without the jobs and the social services that they had come to rely on. The following conservative governments followed similar gendered ideas and policies, and the Sandinistas were eager to regain power. However, this time, women's interest was no longer part of the equation.

Regaining Power, at the Expense of Women

In Nicaragua the Catholic Church had always been an active political figure in strong opposition to the revolutionary Sandinistas. Normally they worked with right wing conservative politicians in promoting the traditional gender and family roles that served the church's interests. Especially important for the Catholic Church was the question of abortion. In an effort to gain support from the Catholic Church for his campaign to regain the presidency in 2006, the leader of the FSLN, Daniel Ortega, abandoned his ideological roots and formed an unlikely alliance with Cardinal Obando y Bravo (Kampwirth, 2008: 124-125). In spite of earlier being fierce opposing parties in the constant power struggle of Nicaraguan post revolution politics, this unlikely alliance allowed the Catholic Church to push through further restrictions in an already harsh abortion law. Thus, reinforcing social and political structures of gender discrimination, hierarchy, patriarchy and unequal access to education, health services, or jobs and positions of power, in order to secure and enhance their personal positions and interests. This, and a pact with the former opponent and ex president Bolaños, that involved a series of political changes that helped to concentrate the personal power in the hands of the two leaders, helped the FSLN and Daniel Ortega to win the 2006 elections.

Women's Lives in Contemporary Nicaragua

Family and household organization in Nicaragua is still marked by sexual segregation. The tradition of Machismo and Marianismo, based on a submissive female caring for the household, while a dominant male conquers the public sphere, still prevails as gender ideals in Nicaraguan society (Ellsberg et al., 2000; Lancaster, 1992). However, to what extent varies according to socio-economic status and other factors. In upper class and some middle class families, some women avoid working outside the home in order to preserve family status, honor, and virtue as was the ideal communicated throughout the presidency of Doña Violeta, for example. Women from lower class and lower-middle class families often hold jobs outside the home or work in the fields to contribute to the family's subsistence (Babb, 2001), seemingly giving them a greater degree of equality, or at least an expanded access to public space. Male familial roles are relatively constant across economic classes, and men are not expected to help with childcare or housework.

The FSLN's return to power has done little to improve women's situation in Nicaragua. Ortega have abandoned many of the Sandinistas' former revolutionary ideals as he slowly has consolidated power (Neumann, 2013: 803). More and more women have become dissidents, or have been forced out of the party for expressing discontent with the power concentration of "the pact", and the criminalization of therapeutic abortion. What has caused the most controversy between Daniel Ortega and the Nicaraguan women's movement, however, is the revelation of decades of sexual abuse of his adopted stepdaughter (Neumann, 2013: 804). In 1998, Zoilamerica Narvaez had filed a complaint for repeated sexual abuse, rape and harassment, claiming she was molested starting at age 11 until she got married. As a teenager, the daughter of the President had nowhere to run to, threatened to keep silent not to jeopardize the success of the revolution (Picq, 2011). In spite of Ortega admitting to having had "consensual" sexual relations with her, his wife and mother of the victim, Rosario Murillo, stood by her husband and so did the Supreme Court. In addition to bringing up the statute of limitations to invalidate the charges, the courts granted Ortega immunity from legal prosecution as a member of the legislature (Ibid). While Ortega's alleged sexual abuse may seem particularly gruesome, the tolerance of sexual abuse that people showed through his re-election echoes broader inequalities of power that perpetuate violent societies in the region (Picq, 2011). The Nicaraguan society is also rife with domestic violence and gendered jealousy crime. So much so, that a new expression has emerged to describe the multiple murders of women by men they are or have been in a relationship with. Femicidios, or femicide is used to describe these gendered murders, and in the course of 2014 feminist organizations in Nicaragua has recorded 75 incidents, although there are bound to be unreported incidents as well (La Prensa, 2015).

The formal rhetoric of the government is still preaching gender equality, and in 2014 Nicaragua came out on very top of the scale of female representation in government, with 58 % of ministers being women (ONU Mujeres and UN Women, 2014). The power of these women to make changes to promote gender equality remains contested, however, as the political environment is dominated by rigid patriarchal structures of hierarchic loyalty.

Chapter 4. Conceptual Framework

In the formulation of the previous three chapters, I have attempted to introduce the reader to some basic insights about the Nicaraguan reality relevant to this study, and to clarify from what position this interpretation is formed. Before proceeding to the main objective of the thesis, it is necessary also to provide a short introduction of the conceptual framework on which the analysis will be built. I start by presenting some useful perspectives from previous research on gender and revolution.

Previous Research on Gender and Revolution

“A revolution is the attempt by subordinate groups through the use of violence, to bring about (1) a change of government or its policy, (2) a change of regime, or (3) a change in society, whether this attempt is justified by past conditions or to an as yet unattained future ideal”
(Zagorin in Moghadam, 1997).

Major theories on revolution have linked revolution to the dynamics and contradictions of modernization and to struggles over configurations of state power. Scientists generally agree that revolutions should be studied in terms of the interaction between economic, political and cultural developments, within national, regional and global contexts. However, the extensive sociological scholarship on revolutions has to an extent failed to incorporate the concept of gender as a constitutive category (Kampwirth, 2004: 2; Moghadam, 1997: 133-136). *“While the presence of women in revolutions is often mentioned, this presence is far less likely to be analyzed”* (Kampwirth, 2004). According to Moghadam (1997), the basic premise of any revolution is the explicit goal of upheaval of the previous system, and its replacement of a new system. In many cases, the revolutionary rhetoric includes the promise that previously disadvantaged groups will see improvement in their situations. The new society should look as different, economically, politically and culturally, from the previous as possible, thus the system of social stratification often changes, and relations of domination and subordination are sometimes reversed. All revolutions also entail downward and upward social mobility, the disempowerment of some (political and economic elites) and the empowerment of others. Gender specific outcomes are very much influenced by these aspects of revolution. Women will

experience the effects of revolutionary upheavals differently by class, race, ethnicity or/and other categories (Moghadam, 1997: 135).

Feminist scholarship has produced prolific research on the role of gender in the revolutions of France, Russia, China, Vietnam, Cuba, Algeria, Iran, Nicaragua and elsewhere. Standing out among these, is the work of Valentine Moghadam, Maxine Molyneux, and Karin Kampwirth. Moghadam begins building a global theory of gender and revolution, classifying revolutionary movements in two categories. One group that is patriarchal, tying women to the family and stressing gender difference rather than equality. The other one is modernizing and egalitarian, with women's emancipation as an explicit goal. She includes the Nicaraguan revolution in the latter category (Moghadam, 1997).

Women's Interests

It is fair to assume that women may have certain common interests in virtue of their gender, but women's subjectivity is not structured uniquely around their gender. As Molyneux (1985) puts it "*a theory of interests that has an application to the debate about women's capacity to struggle for and benefit from social change must begin by recognizing difference rather than assuming homogeneity*". Women are positioned within their societies through a variety of different categories, like class, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, and so is their identity. Although common grounds may be found, the interests of poor women and middle class women are most likely not coherent. Molyneux distinguish between *women's interests*, *practical gender interests*, and *strategic gender interests*. **Women's interests** are specific to class, ethnic, and age groups within a given society and entails how various categories of women might be affected differently and act differently according to the particularities of their social position and chosen identities. On the other hand, **strategic gender interests** are derived from the analysis of women's subordination, that in turn become ethical and theoretical criteria in the formulation of strategic gender objectives to overcome this subordination. The strategic gender interests are what feminists often identify as women's real interests, and include the abolishment of the sexual division of labor, the alleviation of the burden of domestic labor and childcare, political equality, and the fight against male violence and control over women. The last category, **Practical gender interests**, is defined as interests that arise from the concrete conditions of

women's positioning within the gendered division of labor. That is, they are usually a response to an immediate perceived need, and although they arise directly out of challenges of prevailing forms of gender subordination, they do not directly challenge them. Molyneux uses these concepts to explain how the Nicaraguan revolution's legal reforms, redistributive policies, and political mobilization positively affected women's practical and strategic gender interests, while not resulting in the dismantlement of fundamental structures of gender inequalities (Moghadam, 1997; Molyneux, 1985: 232-233).

The Oxymoron of Revolution

While Moghadam categorizes the Nicaraguan revolution as modernizing and egalitarian, with women's emancipation as an explicit goal, Molyneux shows that this as an outcome is not a natural successor. In her work deriving from the anti-colonial wars in Africa, Aronette M. White (1992) concludes that revolutionary warfare may well be a contradiction in terms. She claims that progressive ideological goals that inspire revolution are diametrically opposed to the tactics taught to achieve victory in warfare.

“The values and brutal tactics associated with effective warfare (authoritarianism, elitism, secrecy, tight control of information for fear of spies and leaks, and torture to get information from enemies) contradict the values and practices associated with revolutionary social transformation (egalitarianism, freedom of expression, consensus, dissent, and transparency in government decisions and policies)” (White, 2007).

By privileging hierarchy and rule by command, authoritarianism works against democratic values such as free expression, consensus, egalitarianism, and transparency in decision-making. Authoritarian values are important to military organization because war is strategic, aimed at gaining and exercising power. Authoritarianism molds a soldier to obey orders without thinking and will internalize unquestioning loyalty to his superiors in ways that minimize the chance that he will flinch in combat. However, by fostering blind compliance military values work against the autonomy of the soldier, regardless of gender, complicating any sense of agency. This blind compliance works against women's sense of agency in particular, because prewar gender inequalities often are exacerbated by a predominantly male

military leadership. Despite egalitarian slogans, best intentions, and just causes for going to war, such contradictions may explain why some of the most visionary revolutionary organizations and their leaders have over time come to mimic the authoritarian elitist, and violent characteristics of the regimes they overthrow (White, 2007). While the work of White argues that the patriarchal nature of revolution is antithetical to gender equality, the extensive work of Karen Kampwirth, aims to explain how the revolutions of Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Chiapas, actually played an indirect role in the rise of strong and influential women's movements.

Empowerment Theory

To find out if *the revolution has had an empowering effect on the female ex-combatants*, I needed a theoretical framework that connects developments on a structural level with developments on a personal level. Because of this I have chosen approach the experiences of my informants through the lens of empowerment theory. The conceptual framework of empowerment theory has in recent years come to dominate the international discourse on sustainable development, as it is seen by many to be a crucial means for poverty reduction. As an analytical tool it is also often applied in studies about women and other socially disadvantaged groups (Narayan, 2002; 2005). The focus of this study is not on general development or poverty reduction, but both these terms are interrelated with the concept of gender inequality, and are relevant variables in the lives of the women I have investigated. Poverty is also known to affect women on a larger scale than men, and the burden of development is often put on the shoulders of women as they serve as the household's shock absorbers in times of trouble.

Empowerment, in general terms, refers to the expansion of freedom of choice and action to shape one's life and implies control over resources and decisions. Empowering men and women, thus, requires the removal of formal and informal institutional barriers that prevent them from taking action to improve their wellbeing, individually or collectively (Narayan, 2002; 2005). Looking at these elements of empowerment theory one can detect a certain resonance with the Nicaraguan revolution's goal to overthrow a repressive government, redistribute wealth, and make

social change that would enable the poor to take (back) control over their lives. They also coincide with the explicit goals of a more gender equal society.

There are multiple definitions of empowerment. Naila Kabeer (in Petesch et al., 2005) asserts that empowerment is “*the expansion in peoples ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them*”. This definition highlights the actor’s ability to make choices and the process of change in the achievement of this ability. Empowerment is perceived as a product of the interaction between the capacities of people and groups to make purposeful choices, - that is to exercise agency, and the social and institutional context in which actors live, which affects the likelihood that their agency will achieve favorable outcomes. This can be explained further with the help of a model of the Causal framework for Empowerment in state-society contexts, as presented by Patti Petesch (2005):

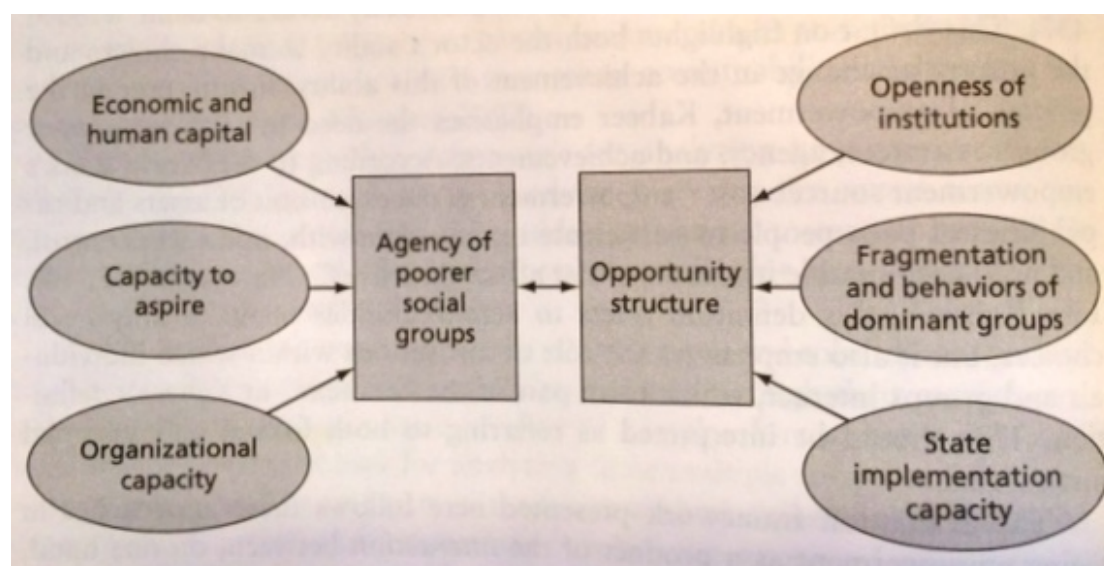


Figure 1 Empowerment Framework As showed here, empowerment is a product of the interaction between the agency of these groups and the opportunity structure in which this agency is exercised (Petesch et al., 2005: 41-42).

Agency

Agency is at the heart of many conceptualizations of empowerment, and encompasses the ability to formulate strategic choices and to control resources and decisions that affect important life outcomes (Malhotra and Schuler, 2005: 73). Individuals behave as agents when they can pursue purposeful courses of action that further their goals. The capacity to act as an agent implies that the actor is able to envision alternative

paths of action, decide among them, and take action to advance the chosen path as an individual or collectively with others (Petesch et al., 2005: 42).

As illustrated in figure 1, the exercise of agency is dependent on three key factors. *Economic and human capital* is typically the possession of economic resources, skills, and good health. *The capacity to aspire* refers to a culturally formed capacity for groups and individuals to envision alternatives and aspire to different futures. The capacity to aspire is typically unequally distributed but can be influenced or produced by group-based interaction, mobilization and alliance building. *Organizational capacity* is the ability to participate in formal or informal organizations and enlarges people's access to ideas, information, and camaraderie. This strengthens their capacities for planning, decision-making, problem solving, collective action, and conflict negotiation and expands their ties to other networks and resources (Petesch et al., 2005: 43). These three conditions of agency interact with each other and are of course affected by wider forces. The exercise of choice can therefore only be evaluated in relation to the alternatives that are perceived to be available for those who must choose (Petesch et al., 2005: 45).

The Opportunity Structure

People do not exercise agency in a vacuum. Their capacities and the probability of effecting change through their actions are fundamentally also products of relations within the broader social and political systems. In the empowerment framework figure above, we see the social and political context organized into an *opportunity structure* that can be seen as the product of three main influences.

The first is *the openness or permeability of institutions*. Institutions are here understood as the “rules of the game” whether they are formal (laws, explicit and enforced by an actor formally recognized as assessing such power) or informal (social norms, habits and routines) (Petesch et al., 2005: 45). The dynamics of institutions have a significant influence on whether people are able to influence government policy in their favor. Formal and informal institutional structures that reduce the prospects of influence by poor people and other subordinate groups include; clientelistic political structure, deeply entrenched patterns of unequal gender and social relations, and top-down corporatist forms of inclusion (Petesch et al., 2005: 45-

46). The second influence is *the fragmentation and behaviors of dominant groups*, in the given social context. A fragmented elite can facilitate the exercise of agency in subordinate groups because fragmentation weakens the elite's ability to oppose, repress or neutralize the claims of challengers. A fragmented elite may also look for support in new places, and this may in turn favor the subordinate groups, as it expands the number of potential allies. In addition to the elites, other important groups, like the middle class, can also oppose or support the increased empowerment of subordinate groups (Petesch et al., 2005: 48). The third dimension of the opportunity structure is *the state implementation capacity* and refers to the effectiveness with which government authorities carry out policies that have been adopted. This includes the ability to administer public resources effectively, to control corruption, to guarantee rule of law, to ensure citizen security, and to protect civil and political rights. State implementation capacities, are also determined by the specific ties that social groups establish with the state. Understanding the dynamics of the opportunity structure requires exploring how the three elements interact with each other to hinder or support the agency of weak actors (Petesch et al., 2005: 48-51).

Women's Empowerment

The theoretical framework presented here is of course applies to women as well as to other socially disadvantaged groups. However, it is important to acknowledge that women's empowerment encompass some unique additional elements (Malhotra and Schuler, 2005). *First*, "women are not just one group among various disempowered subsets of society, but rather a cross-cutting category of individuals that overlap with all of these other groups" (Malhotra and Schuler, 2005: 71). Women can at the same time be poor, part of an ethnic and/or sexual minority, and thus face a double multileveled marginalization. *Second*, household and interfamilial relations are central locus for women's disempowerment in a way that is not true for any other disadvantaged groups. This means that efforts at empowering women must take into consideration the household implications (or the lack of such) of broader policy action (Malhotra and Schuler, 2005: 72). *Third*, women's empowerment does not just require any institutional transformation, but specifically a systematic transformation of those who favor patriarchal structures (Malhotra and Schuler, 2005: 72).

Literature on women's empowerment gives great importance to the aspect of agency and empowerment as a *process*. Improvements in gender equality may come by various measures, but if women are merely the beneficiaries it cannot be interpreted as empowerment, but just a desirable improvement of outcome. For it to be empowering it implies an involvement of women as agents of change. This is because women's empowerment is considered a process of change towards greater equality, or greater freedom of choice and action. It is not a given that a change in legal status leads to change in practice for example. Nor is it automatically so that a female political leader will always work to promote women's interests (as the presidency of Violeta Chamorro was a perfect example of). Without women's individual or collective ability to recognize and utilize resources in their own interests, resources alone can not bring about empowerment (Malhotra and Schuler, 2005: 73).

In this lies the idea that fundamental change in a person's consciousness is a necessary impetus for engaging in empowering action (Carr, 2003: 8). Scholars aiming to synthesize empowerment perspectives with feminist thought have reached the conclusion that conscientization, understood as an intensive reflection of oneself in relation to society, is a necessary precursor to engaging in social change, and thus an intrinsic part of the empowerment process.

Conscientization

Carr integrates feminist conceptualizations of consciousness, identity and agency, into his understanding of empowerment, highlighting the idea of praxis. It is widely assumed that the point of departure for an empowerment process is a "position" of disempowerment or powerlessness. Powerlessness can be understood as an attitude that results from the incorporation of past experiences, ongoing behavior, and continued patterns of thinking that are embedded and reproduced by inequitable power relations (Carr, 2003). This also includes powerlessness as a manifestation of institutional and structural sexism. In terming powerlessness a position, Carr hopes evoke the idea of multiple possible locations that corresponds with the diversity of peoples lived realities and suggests the changeable nature of positionality. The cyclical nature of empowerment ensures that this position shifts as people move through the empowerment process. Hart (1996) has marked that new experiences or special challenges often can serve to spark the empowerment process. In the

Nicaraguan context examples of such life events can be the atrocities committed by the Somoza regime that affected many directly or indirectly or/and the extreme living conditions that many poor people faced. For others it may have been the earthquake that suddenly put them in a new social category as they left everything, or was internally displaced. What follows this spark, according to Carr, is the conscientization process. Feminists have suggested that through consciousness-raising, women can connect their experiences of oppression with those of other women, and thereby see the political dimensions of their personal problems (Carr, 2003). The process of conscientization, is a process of discovery in which one begins to see one's position, and moves towards other possible positions, and can be said to involve several sub processes. The first is a *group identification*, where individuals select a group with shared culture and norms, and their membership in this group becomes part of their self-concept. Second, is the development of *group consciousness*, in which individuals begin to understand the political dimensions of their problems and blame the "system" instead of the group. And finally the development of individual and collective efficiency and a *mobilization* towards action (Carr, 2003: 15).

Chapter 5. Analysis

As presented above, a revolution is by definition an attempt by subordinate groups to bring about a change of government or its policy, a change of regime, and/or a change in society, whether it is justified by past conditions or a yet unattained future ideal. The Nicaraguan revolution shares all of these elements. We have also seen that a revolution entails a goal of an upwards/downwards social mobility, through the empowerment of subordinate groups, and the disempowerment of others. However, the empowerment of subordinate groups can not be seen only as a goal, because a revolution can not come about without these very same people being able to aspire a better future, and to use their human and social capabilities like the capacity to organize in groups or to exercise leadership, in order to make that change. That is to say, it can not happen without a massive and collective exercise of agency. I will argue that a revolution should therefor also be interpreted as an empowerment *process*. This empowerment process might be sparked by a change in the consciousness of the marginalized groups, through the reflection of oneself in relation to society. In other words, through conscientization, subordinate groups might realize that the opportunity structure in which they operate is too limiting for them to shape and improve their own lives. This conscientization can lead to mobilization and action to create changes in that opportunity structure, for example in the form of an overthrow of a destructive regime. This way empowerment, understood as the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied them, is both the goal *and* the process. The Nicaraguan revolution serves as a good example. Drawing from the testimonies of the 11 female ex-combatants that I interviewed for this thesis, this chapter is dedicated to analyzing if and how their participation in the revolution was empowering to them. If empowerment is seen as the interaction between people's agency and the opportunity structure in which this agency is exercised, it is also likely that the empowerment process will have different manifestations at different times for these women. I aim to highlight the strong tensions between the ambitions that were drawn up during the revolution, the new gender practices that were formed, and the conditions in which women in Nicaragua find themselves today. Although I am investigating women's experiences, it is wrong to assume that gender is the only constitutive category that defines their opportunity structures. They are bound to have things in common, but they are women of different

social positions, with varying social attributes, roles and statuses, and thus the extent to which they can be said to be empowered will also vary accordingly.

Time in the Revolution

As described in the history chapter, times were hard for Nicaraguans under the Somoza rule, and the vast majority of the Nicaraguan people lived in poverty. Access to education and health services was limited, analphabetism was soaring, and people had little or no way of influencing the political environment, as channels of communication were few, and the elections merely symbolic. If we look at the pre-revolution years through the empowerment framework presented above, we clearly see that the people of Nicaragua had a very hostile opportunity structure in which to shape their own lives. The Somoza rule was highly clientelistic in its form, and stretched all the way to the political elites of the U.S.A., while Nicaraguan social life was marked by deeply entrenched patterns of unequal social relations. In order to influence political policies you had to belong to the political elite. In other words, the openness of institutions, both formal and informal, was close to non-existent. As the government was imbued with corruption it showed no will or ability to effectively administer its resources to benefit the public good. Poverty is disempowering in itself, but in addition, almost any attempt of public agency, like mobilizing in demonstrations or opposing government policies in any way, was met with brutal retribution and military force. Instead of ensuring citizen security and protecting the civil and political rights of the population, the dictatorship in fact were responsible for brutal atrocities against its people. Young people were especially marginalized as they risked being persecuted just for being in that age group.

“Just because you were young they looked at you with suspicion. Young was a synonym with rebel, someone that you can’t hold down with a foot. ..Being young, obligated you to be in a group. You either were one that wanted to live, being able to defend yourself, or you could be someone that was slaughtered like sheep, without saying anything” (Silvia, 2012).

Silvia, then a young girl in a catholic high school, got to experience the persecution of the Guardia first hand. Living in the urban area of Managua, she frequently witnessed or heard about people disappearing in the night and felt obligated to do something. Together with fellow students, she formed a cell. She recalls it as very dangerous,

because you could never know who was going to report you. Some people received benefits from the Guardia in return for information about rebel groups. After a short time, this was also what happened to her cell. This in turn pushed her into clandestine life, as her peers from school were brutally massacred in a Guardia attack.

“...One of the cells from my school, in a place close to here, was massacred by the Guardia, in 1978. Someone reported them and all of them died. From this cell only I survived. And after that, knowing that we were involved, some neighbors reported me and my sister too, and we had to leave the house. They burned our things; they threatened the lives of our parents, and destroyed and robbed what they could find in the house. –Because the Guardia didn’t just attack people, but they also took whatever they liked on their way.” (Silvia 2012)

Things were not much different on the countryside. Bertha (2011), a young girl from the rural outskirts of León, recalls similar situations for the poor farmers.

“...the respect for human rights was non existent... They came to your house and they killed you. That’s what we saw. Over and over that’s what we saw, -the Guardias. -There was a bus, they separated the young from the rest, and they killed them. ...Practically I felt obligated, as a young person, as a woman. I really felt compromised to go join the struggle. In any other case we didn’t have anything secure either. ...and given that we were from the countryside, they would have killed us too.”

The impeding structures of inequality hardly left any freedom of choice and action for the Nicaraguan population. Considering that the majority of the people were poor, their assets were few. How come then, that in spite of the extreme limitation of physical and material assets, and a constraining opportunity structure, could the Sandinistas mobilize a whole population to create change? Although a closed opportunity structure and lack of assets severely constrains people’s capacity to take action to improve their lives, it does not guarantee its failure. The interaction between agency and the opportunity structure goes both ways. For empowerment to happen, a process of conscientization during which individuals and groups come to understand the political dimensions of their personal problems and act accordingly, is necessary. This can come about in many ways, but especially important in the Nicaraguan context was the ability to make use of preexisting networks, the creation of alternative channels of communication, and the sudden break in the opportunity structure created by the earthquake in 1972.

What the Nicaraguan population already had going for them was their ability to organize. They were high in social capabilities and organizational capacity. - Especially so collective capacity. Social organization existed on all levels of the Nicaraguan society; although many of the formal and informal networks initially had little or nothing to do with the revolution. In fact, most of my informants from upper and middle class homes told me that they were involved in some organization, often religiously oriented or to help the poor, before they became integrated in the revolutionary movement. It was through these networks they had first become aware of the conditions under which poor people lived, and where they first heard about the underground struggle. For many poor groups, a strategy to cope with poverty is to maintain close ties and high levels of trust with others like themselves. That is why these groups often are rich in social capital. Organizing themselves by informal norms and networks increases their access to resources, economic opportunities, and services. This was also true in Nicaragua. Bertha remembers her childhood on the countryside as the best years of her life. Being the only girl with nine brothers, she climbed trees, went to school, played and knew nothing of problems. The only thing was that there wasn't always enough food, she recalls. But even so;

“..on the countryside you survive, one way or another. From what your mother and your father grow, what your grandma grows. And there is solidarity between the families too” (Bertha 2011).

For the Nicaraguans, these networks and organizations became locations for a conscientization process in which they reinterpreted their role in society and made the decision to be part of the change. But how then did this conscientization come about? If we are to look at the Nicaraguan revolution as an empowering process, we need to analyze if the key elements that lead to empowerment were in fact present. Access to information is here crucial. If you are to mobilize, you have to know what you are mobilizing against, and you have to know that you are not alone. Although the national media was controlled by the Somoza regime, many of my interviewees claim that the youth of the time was very informed. The flow of information took many alternative forms, and often involved passing information from hand to hand through the pre-existing networks. The schools also became a place where information was shared and support for the revolutionary movement was sought.

“As a student, there was an organization, so generally every now and then someone would stand up and share information about the Frente (FSLN), - that the people are struggling, that they need help, that there is a strike, that we have to help, that we had to bring them food and water. This information I got there where I studied. So we adopted this idea and little by little we formed a column. A small group. We were two women and 28 men. But we started one to one, because just talking about it was dangerous” (Bertha, 2011).

Through the revolutionary organizations alternative channels of communication were created to bypass the restraints of the media control of the dictatorship. The younger recruits, and especially women, were used to spread information.

“In the beginning, because we were so young (14 years old), we started as messengers. We passed out flyers informing people about how the struggle was going, what was happening on the war fronts, and what people could do, organizing the population for the struggle for the triumph” (Bertha, 2011).

A few independent radio stations broadcasted illegally at nighttime. Young people met in private houses at night to listen to radio from Cuba, while others kept informed with their families at home. Ligia, from a lower middle class family said that her social consciousness was developed through family conversations around the dinner table. She recalls that her family had a relationship of trust, where her parents taught them to be autonomous and gave them the liberty to administer their own time. This applied to both the sons and daughters.

“Well, in our case, from very young we had a consciousness also about the Cuban revolution. My father listened a lot to the Radio Havana, we read the magazine the Bohemia, and we knew about Che, about Fidel, we knew about all of these struggles although we were young at the time. ..In our house they also taught us the values, the values of justice, of liberty, and above all the respect for others. We always had workers in the house, and we were taught that we had to give them space, that they also had rights, that we were equals” (Ligia, 2012).

There were flyers, songs, and face-to-face testimonies, but in addition, the atrocities committed by the Guardia had become so outspread over time, that many had experienced them personally, or they had been first hand witnesses.

Through their organizational capacity the big parts of the Nicaraguan population expanded their ideas, their access to information and experienced belonging and

camaraderie. They engaged in a collective process of conscientization that led them to better understand the political dimensions of their problems and where they came to blame the system or the regime for their misfortune. This in turn increased their capacity to aspire a different future, and strengthened their capacity for planning, decision-making, and problem solving. The lack of assets and resources was atoned for by the collective willingness to sacrifice and share. As the revolutionary organization became more and more militarized, acquiring resources also included robberies of banks and reaching out to international networks of similar ideologies like Cuba and Russia. In spite of an enormous expansion in the capacity for agency, the opportunity structure remained rigid. However, as mentioned in the history chapter, the earthquake of 1972 offers a historical break that was to influence the path to revolutionary triumph. Until that day, most of the upper class was loyal to Somoza because of the benefits they enjoyed. Their new circumstances, and seeing Somoza misappropriate the aid money for his personal enrichment at the expense of ordinary Nicaraguans, pushed many middle and upper class people to renegotiate their positions in society. In the terms offered by the empowerment framework, the earthquake led to the fragmentation of the elites and dominant groups and thus opened up the opportunity structure. It sparked the conscientization proses of a segment of society that until then had not been mobilized. This allowed the Sandinistas to expand their ties to new networks and resources.

Empowered Women?

Until now I have given a general analysis of some of the elements in the empowerment process that lead to the Nicaraguan revolution and the overthrow of the Nicaraguan government. I have used the experiences of the female ex-combatants to highlight some of these developments, but I have not analyzed how gender is a relevant factor in the equation. This is in part because the women didn't experience their gender as relevant at the time. Without exception all of my informants said that they didn't have any form of gender awareness when they integrated in the Sandinista movements. Like Silvia (2012) said, "*I did not have any awareness about gender inequality at that time. Let alone, I didn't even know what it meant to be a girl, or if I was to like boys or not. It was not part of my consciousness.*" The extreme conditions, under which people lived, the necessity for change, and the Sandinista revolutionary

model of mass mobilization, opened up opportunities that normally wouldn't have existed for women. However, the awareness of gender inequality, whether because of age or because other social problems seemed more pressing, had not yet been awakened in the ex-combatants that I interviewed. A response I often got was that they mobilized as persons, not as women. Nevertheless, not all women took advantage of the opportunity to break the constraints of their traditional roles, that participation in the revolution offered. So what made these women different? What I have found is that most of my informants initially were mobilized from positions in which female participation was already socially accepted. –Most of them through student life, some through the household and family traditions of resistance, and others through religious groups. –All three natural locations for male/female socialization and interaction. The religious groups at this time were influenced by a liberation theology that sought to reinterpret the bible in favor of the poor, and to motivate social work. The two of my informants that mobilized in this way, both had upper middle class backgrounds. They lived more or less protected lives with access to more than enough resources. Their meeting with the suffering of the people was through the social work that the religious groups did, and their activism and sympathy for the Sandinistas was kept a secret for their families until they passed into clandestine life. This was the case for Esperanza, whose mother was a minister of the Somoza government, and also the vice mayor for some time. Another thing most of them have in common is that they seem to have come from families where the practice of equality between men and women were generally higher than in society at large, or where they had moved away for high school, and thus had the chance to exercise autonomy at a young age. Bertha claims that being the only girl amongst nine brothers, she did everything they did, and being from the countryside they all had to help out. Mari Luz and Ligia's (they are sisters) reflections on family life, was that they enjoyed a high level of trust and they were given a lot of autonomy throughout their upbringing. Nina left home very young to become an out-resident student, and had to learn to administer her time without anyone controlling her movements. Even Esperanza from her upper class family claims to have had good gender relation in her upbringing.

“So, I have tried to reread my life. For example, in my family group I was not exposed to much inequality in relation to my brothers. For example, I learned to swim, I learned to ride horses, and I learned how to run the farm. All of us had responsibilities in the house, like cleaning

our rooms. And if there was any inequality, it didn't necessarily go against the women. For example, I was much younger than my siblings, but all of us, after a certain age, right, had to come home at ten in the evening. My brother was five years older, but the same applied to all. My parents gave me a key to the house, but not to my older brother. So I think, my childhood and youth was very marked by this positive tendency. ...I even had two grand aunts that had worked as teachers, and another that had gotten a divorce, which 150 years back, wasn't normal. In my family there was a positive culture amongst the women, which had won great battles to be able to have a certain level of independence and autonomy" (Esperanza, 2012).

Being Women in the Guerilla Movement

According to most of my informants their level of gender awareness before and during the revolution had nothing to do with their initial decision to get involved in the Sandinista movement. This does not mean that they didn't enjoy gaining grounds in terms of gender equality. In spite of the fact that none of my informants were in the same section, they all share memories of men and women being treated on equal terms within the revolutionary groups. Every soldier, independent of gender or any other social category, had the responsibility to wash his or her own uniform. Within the revolutionary groups an ideal of equality existed that also extended to the practice of gender relations.

"We all did the same. I never assumed any female roles. That is, in the domestic sense. One group made the food, another group did something else, and then we took turns. ...My military training started in Honduras. There was a whole routine, where in addition to studying politics, learning about bombs, learning about the weapons, there was this whole physical training. - Women and men, alike. I have an example. When I am in the safe house in Honduras, they give us permission to go out, because we were undercover as refugees. One day, someone throw firecrackers in the streets. So I, coming from the war, without thinking I throw myself at the ground. ...When I come back to the house, they sanction me. They sanctioned me because of the information I gave by having that reaction. So I had to do 600 push-ups and 600 squats with 300 bullets and a rifle. That was the punishment, woman or man" (Nina, 2012).

Nina also explained that the organizing system within the group was based on hierarchy, and decided by your personal merits, women or man. One would start of with a small firearm, and according to ones capacity one would be given a bigger.

Gender segregation or adaptation when it came to sleeping arrangements or similar, was not common.

“We were together, men and women. Also in the whole process of going to war zones to lift national production (picking café or cotton) we were always mixed, women and men. ...I think that at this time we didn't establish much difference. Women and men had to do the same, at least when it came to the heavy training. We had to do the same. ...The food, what happened was that we took turns, women and men, in making the food” (Ligia, 2012).

Although the women give testimonies that show they enjoyed greater levels of gender equality during their time in the guerilla, some reflections reveal that there were contradictions also within the groups.

“We were always treated in the same way. At training we had to do everything that the men did. If anything they made us work harder. Sometimes we had to keep doing exercise after the men had been excused. But it was only to build our endurance. We had to be able to cross mountains in the dark of night, carrying the same heavy cargo as male soldiers. ...I thought that they would cut us some extra slack because we were women, but they didn't. For instance, once I said to my commander that I was not going to do the exercise today. I had my period and was in pain. But one would just have to find the way. That was no excuse. I had to do it” (Bertha, 2011).

Bertha had also reflected on how women often were put in risky situations, by virtue of their femininity. Although there were female clandestine soldiers, there were a lot more men. The assumption was that women could easier pass through checkpoints, because she could easily be interpreted as an innocent civilian.

“The armed struggle was always harder for the women. We always found ourselves with the inconvenience, “well they're women”. But on the most dangerous expeditions, you'd find the women! “Let's see Bertha, you have to transport these weapons from, lets say, León to San Geronimo”. I had to pass a police checkpoint, where they generally checked everything. Even though the participation of women wasn't that massive, they always gave us the most dangerous missions, in my opinion. And I was little. I had barely come out from underneath my mother's skirt”(Bertha, 2011).

Silvia told me that the biggest challenges for her being in the guerilla was how to deal with the period, and the sanitary situation of being in the mountains. For Maria that integrated in the Sandinista military after the triumph, being a woman in the army

took a different shape. Although she first claimed to have experienced no form of gender inequality during her years in the revolution, her testimony gives some contradictory examples. Being very young and the only woman in her battalion she often found herself protected by the other soldiers.

“I was the only woman and I was the smallest of everyone. That always happened to me. So everyone took care of me, and I never had problems. I was involved in many very dangerous military missions in the warzones. And I was prepared to do whatever. But I never had to, because they always were protecting me in spite of the fact that I was there on the same premises as them. So they told me, go and take care of “something whatever” (Maria, 2012).

She says that in spite of her over 10 years in the army, she never experienced face-to-face combat, because they always had her back. She would be in the worst of war zones, but she always walked in the back, or was told to wait with another soldier at a safer place. It is likely that this was more attributed to her age than to her being a female, but the two categories can not be separated. She was young, but it is not as likely that they would have treated a young male soldier in the same way. Maria was also the only of my informants who had experienced violence against her, within the military group.

“Once, when they had sent me on a mission in the north. So, when I was there alone, a compañero from that unit came and wanted to... he forced the door open and he wanted to rape me. I was shouting for him to leave but he didn't. And as he was trying to force me, one of the compañeros that always protected me came. He took him off of me. He hit him, and it was horrible. And the day after, I had to speak with my boss. So, I spoke with him, because my compañero had told him what happened. And he came and said, “don't worry, we are going to have a meeting with this person.” -Because he forced himself on me. He made all the effort. So, they sanctioned him. It was a situation that all in the unit noticed. And I felt like very ashamed. However, my boss told me “you are not the one who has to feel bad. He is the one that should be ashamed.” They sanctioned this man, they lowered his rank, and they did take him out of the unit, but long after. And I didn't see him again for a long time. Now I don't even know how long time after. I don't remember. But when I saw him, I felt terrified” (Maria, 2012)

None of my other informants experienced anything like this, but some of them recognized that it was likely that there must have been cases of gendered violence amongst compañeros.

In interpreting empowerment as a cyclic process, one may assume that the women moved from a position of powerlessness, or at least a position of less power, through conscientization and agency, to one of more empowerment. To a large extent they did, but many of them came from local environments where being a woman, had not yet restrained them too much to begin with. -Some of them, because their family relations allowed them autonomy, and/or had the economic position to ensure good education and other elements important for personal development. Another factor may have been that their young age at the time of entry, meant that they had not yet had to experience the restraints of for example being sexually sanctioned for moving around in public or being a poor mother taking care of children alone. It is likely that their personal backgrounds and the timing, can account for some of the reason for why they didn't reflect much about gender differences at the time, in spite of the fact that they were socialized to reflect on the political aspects of their personal problems, through the revolutionary organization. Another reason could be that the praxis within the groups to attribute less importance to gender as a constitutive category allowed the female combatants a social and political mobility that wouldn't have been available otherwise. They were not women and men, but fellow revolutionaries, soldiers, compañeros.

The initial conscientization that they engaged in was about analyzing their positions within society, not as women, but as citizens and fellow human being. What they actually did when they integrated into the guerilla movement, however, was to enter into a traditionally male dominated domain. They gained access to freedom of movement within the public sphere on the same grounds as men. They were met with new (masculine?) expectations that were not derived from the sexual division of labor. They received recognition for their accomplishments, rather than their female bodies. They built physical strength and endurance; qualities that normally are associated with masculinity. They received and gave political training, a realm that is dominated by men. For my informants it was during their time in the guerilla struggle that they first gained the organizational skills, their social consciousness and self-confidence in their own abilities to be actors of change, even in ways that is not traditional for women.

After Triumph

In the history chapter I accounted for some of the structural changes that were made with the overthrow of the government Somoza, many of which were aimed to change the position of women in the Nicaraguan society for the better. This transformation involved legal reform that gave women access to own land, the expansion of access to education, paid maternity leave, the nationalization of health care and the creation of state services like day care centers and safe-houses for abused women. In addition, the health campaigns and the alphabetization crusade had an instant impact on women's lives. Not only did they make sure that the overall public health level was lifted, and that people could read or write, but it also continued the positive tendency of giving young women access to a world beyond the constraints of their homes. In certain regions where women's participation in the struggle had been high, the inclusion of women also transitioned into the political leaderships, although men still were preferred for the top leader positions.

With the changes in the gender policies of the Sandinista government, the opportunity structure of the female ex-combatants that I have interviewed, at least on a formal institutional level, became somewhat more open. When the old government fled, they left nothing but empty buildings where the institutions had been. This meant that a lot of positions were available at many levels of society. People were full of hope, dedicated to the revolution, and wanted to contribute to the reconstruction of the country even without receiving any pay. Thus, the state implementation capacity became stronger than in a long time. With the redistribution of the wealth and land, many from the subordinate groups were given more assets, like a piece of land and housing. The hierarchic structure of the FSLN, however, led to a clientelistic leadership style, and thus came to mirror that of its predecessor. In spite of the structural progress of the gender policies of the new government, women to a large extent failed to obtain significant political positions of power after the triumph. Within a year of the victory of the revolution, women also dropped from one third of the armed forces to constitute only 10%. Where the formal institutions opened up, the informal closed in. I will argue that this can be considered an expression of the impervious structures of the informal institutions. What held these women back were the restraints inherent in the way social life is organized through norms, habits, and

routines. While rebellion life created a space of exception, where these could be negotiated, the aftermath sought to reinstate the traditional rigid rules for performing gender, reconnecting womanhood to motherhood, to the household and the private sphere. Although toned down within the revolutionary groups before the triumph, machismo still very much controlled the organization of social life. When the time came to divide power and privileges, this became apparent. Sarah, a former Sandinista that now dedicates herself to feminist activism, gave an example.

“The revolution is known for it’s high representation of women. -For me a huge example of machismo, - of the lack of recognition of women in questions of power is...that after the triumph the National Directorate was formed, consisting of nine men. It wasn’t by chance that they were men. -All of them commanders. There were female commanders too, but none in the national directorate” (Sarah, 2011)

The act of not including any woman in the National Directorate has a very symbolic value. Women’s contributions to the revolution were not valued equally to that of men.

Carlota was a professional dentist and got involved as a conspirator for the FSLN in the last years before the overthrow of Somoza. She had studied in Argentina, and had come back to put up her own business. Carlota was not recruited through any educational institution or from within a pre-existing organization. Through conversation about supposedly random topics like movies and such, some acquaintances had been mapping her receptiveness to the Sandinista discourse, and when they found her to be a candidate they slowly opened up to their real agenda. She started out using her professional position to get access to sensitive information through her Somocista customers. Later she received military training and participated in the urban insurrection in the capital. Carlota still considers herself as a Sandinista and a follower of FSLN, but she gave clear accounts for the gendered double standards that became apparent just after the triumph. Her first formal mission after the takeover of power was to help organize the health services. After some time Cuban doctors arrived to give them further education and she became a student in this program.

“We were still under the threat of the Contras. They needed to send someone to Cuba to get more extensive education and told us that the best student in the class would go. I was the best student. They made a test, and I was still the best. Then they asked the group of professionals if

I was the right one to go, and they all said yes. But still they told me. “No, the truth is that you can’t go. –Because you are a woman. –You have children. And in situations of war or combat we need to have a man. Being a revolutionary you have to understand this.” ..So they sent a man to Cuba. So what a contradiction, I say. Because, to mobilize having children didn’t matter, but to go study it suddenly did” (Carlota 2012)

What Carlota experienced was not unique, and is a prime example on how the patriarchal gender relations were reinstated also within the revolutionary groups after the triumph. Motherhood, which is inseparably connected womanhood, again became defined in traditional terms. In the downplay of gender that had defined clandestine and military life, motherhood, had been treated with secondary importance. One of my other informants (Ligia) had been sent on tough missions until the very last month of her pregnancy, and said that it was in fact not uncommon. When it came to making sacrifices the women were invited to participate, but when the time came to split privileges of the Sandinista’s new won position, men were prioritized. By saying “being a revolutionary you should understand this...” Carlota’s leaders used her loyalty to the revolution to trap her into a situation where she could not protest, because that would put in question her dedication and commitment. The political environment in Nicaragua was and is very polarizing. If you were not with the Sandinistas, then you must have been against, and thus would be attributed the values of the enemy. There was really not much middle ground, and less so in the time right after the overthrow of the Somoza government. It was important to be on the winning team. Nina, a woman that still today works within the government and formally is a member of the FSLN, said this about the years after the triumph.

“After the war (triumph, in her case) I still had no reason to be disappointed. Because, remember we were in the process of reconstruction. Everyone felt the commitment to help organize, to help improve the whole country. In these years the discourse¹ of the FSLN was very substantial with a lot of conviction. I felt very committed. But my disappointment started soon after. A lot sooner than for a lot of other combatants. Because you start to crash with persons and decisions that you don’t agree with. – The decisions of those in power. Power is impressive, power runs over you, - it disrupts, it has this nature. You start seeing contradictions. ...I had the pleasure, or I’m not sure it was a

¹ The word discourse is interpreted from the Spanish word *discurso*, and can mean a speech, rhetoric, and discourse. I translate it to the English word *discourse*, and in this text it should be understood as a rhetorical platform.

blessing or a curse, to work with the ministerial power. And there I could contrast between the discourse of how they thought and how they lived. That is, I was the politician saying, live in modesty, with basic conditions, and then I saw the way they (the political leaders) lived in their houses, - what they ate. I ended up very disenchanted” (Nina, 2012).

The people of Nicaragua, and especially many revolutionaries, were still sacrificing a lot of time and effort to reconstruct a better country for its citizens. At the same time the economic embargo from the U.S. led to a commercial draught. Inflation was growing and people were poor, and even if they did have money, the stores didn't have anything to sell. Meat and toilet paper could almost only be found on the black market and even there it was scarce. So Nina, as a politician of certain level, found herself in a position where she had to remind people to accept their limiting conditions, for the sake of a better future, while at the same time seeing her superiors live in luxury. What Nina discovered was a contradiction between the leaders' praxis and discourse that discontented her.

“My deception is with those in power. How the power manipulates you. How they make you ignorant in order to exploit you. How they don't want to invest in your development. How they don't want you to see things with another scope. They keep using you. So in this time I became very critical. - Critical in my actions, but I never confront. I never confront. I gain nothing by confronting political positions” (Nina 2012).

Sarah, Carlota pointed to gendered aspects of post triumph negotiation of power, while Nina revealed something more general about power and dominance. All three examples, however, can at least in part, be attributed to what I in the previous chapter presented as the oxymoron of revolution. The values and brutal tactics associated with guerilla warfare contradict the values and practices associated with revolutionary transformation. Such contradictions may also serve to explain why the leaders of the Sandinista revolutionary organization, over time came to mimic the authoritarian, elitist and violent characteristics of the regime they overthrew. The oxymoron exists between the conscientization process, which every soldier had to engage in through their socialization into the Sandinista group, and the masculine military structures of the organization, which emphasized blind compliance, and thus worked against autonomy, complicating one's sense of agency. The very hierarchic structure that makes guerilla warfare possible, also become a powerful instrument of subordination in the aftermath. Extended to the reconstruction phase, this meant that posing critics

towards one's superior became very challenging, as loyalty was highly valued, and group defiance would have devastating consequences. It would surely be sanctioned, and could entail being squeezed out of the group, which is in fact what happened to some of my other informants when they started express their disagreement a few years later. Because the FSLN's leadership was predominately male and machista, gender inequalities were exacerbated and worked against female agency in particular. Through another round of conscientization, Nina had in the post triumph environment discovered an inconsistency that discontented her, but this time she chose to keep silent. She chose not to fight that injustice. I found Nina's decision to not confront, and also her recognition that she gains nothing by confronting very interesting. In a way, her accomplishments within the Sandinista revolutionary group awarded her some kind of political position. At the same time that position did not give her access to the "benefits" of luxury that her superiors allowed themselves. It also prevented her from expressing herself and to exercise a form of agency that corresponded with her conscientization, within that context. She had been part of an overall empowerment process where resisting power relations and challenging old notions and customs had been part of the game. Nevertheless, now that the Sandinistas were in power, she was sacrificing some of her empowerment, in order not to rock the boat. In a way her position of (relative) power was also disempowering. However, the exercise of choice can only be evaluated in relation to the alternatives that are perceived to be available for those who must choose. For Nina, her participation in the revolution had led to the expansion in her ability to make strategic life choices, in a context where this was previously denied to her. Even if she faced new institutional limitations, she chose a strategy that within her context would continue providing her the assets and capabilities she needed to advance in her life. She chose not to confront to ensure professional advancement, employment and economic security. It is also likely that she chose to overlook the negative tendencies of the Sandinista leadership, motivated by some sort of altruism, because in any case, the overall population was better off with the Sandinista policies than without.

In general terms, this was a time where most of my informants experienced having more options than what they would find in their transition to civilian lives. This was more apparent for those with background from the lower classes. While the revolutionary party was still in the government, they had employment through the

military, police or within the political organization; they had food to eat and a felt part of something important. Some were able to advance within the military ranks, while others took on more organizational or/and professional responsibilities. Some of them also went back to school to finish their careers, still operating within the system of the FSLN and the revolution. Five of my informants later came to part with the FSLN. For them this was a time where they, in spite of having obtained important political positions and titles, found themselves limited by the operations of patriarchy. Whether working within the AMNLAE (the FSLN's woman's organization) or in other areas, they experienced less and less will by their superiors to take women's issues seriously. For many years they accepted the argument that any issues that had a disruptive effect on the organization had to be toned down, for the sake of unity. But with time they would come to break out from the constraints within the party, to work actively for women's issues and thus be put in the "against"-category. My informant's exit points from military activity vary in time. For many, especially the upper and middle class participants civil life started right after the triumph. Still working for the FSLN, they transitioned from clandestine military life to having organizational and political positions in the reconstruction of the new country. From their relatively resourceful positions, they found ways to reinvent themselves, when the challenges of the nineties pressed on. Ligia, from the AMNLAE remember the election loss of FSLN as an opportunity to create a more autonomous women's movement. It was no longer necessary to tone down gender issues to assure unity. These ex-combatants would use their extensive organizational experiences, and international networks to mobilize alternative resources. Many of them transitioned into independent NGO's. My informants from poorer conditions all stayed within the military or the police until the nineties. Some of them demobilized in the disarmament programs. It seems clear that it was in the transition to civil life that they encountered the biggest challenges and the most limiting opportunity structures in their overall empowerment processes.

Reintegration to Civil Life – Marias Story

The interviews gave many interesting and varied testimonies of the reintegration period. Many faced similar challenges. Those informants that had integrated the revolutionary struggle from poor backgrounds found themselves in especially difficult

conditions. Although I include some reflections from and about other informants, I have chosen to focus on Marias story for this section.

“I left the military in 92. I was pregnant with my daughter. ...This was after the election-loss of the FSLN. Everything had changed. I started to have health threats to my pregnancy. So, the doctor told me that I had to live a more relaxed life with less tension. So I left, but today I feel that I shouldn't have done it. Because I was very happy where I was. I had come accustomed with that kind of life. I liked it. I liked the discipline, the adrenalin, everything. But in this moment I opted for leaving for my baby. My boss still told me not to go. You are a person that has a future here” (Maria 2012).

Maria left the army for personal reasons, but her timing corresponded with the disarmament program of the nineties. She had to ask her boss by formal letter 18 times before he would include her in the disarmament program.

“So, in the last moment I integrated. I went there so that they could see me, and they gave me a quantity of money. ...The check was equal to a few months of pay and the quantity was different depending on the military rank that you had. Even though I had a lot of responsibilities, because they had sent me to study, I continued studying in spite of everything. ...So because of all of this I enjoyed a certain rank of responsibilities, but not a military rank. But when you retired, they didn't judge by your responsibilities but by your military rank” (Maria 2012).

What Maria points out here reveals how even international peace processes come to favor men. In fact, she was lucky just to have had the opportunity to be included in the disarmament program. Another ex-combatant, Bertha, is still to this day claiming recognition for her contribution to the revolution, without results. Scratching on the surface one could easily interpret the reintegration packages as gender neutral, and that one will be awarded according to one's personal merits as a soldier. But, the masculine dominance within society is often even stronger within military organizations. Men receive higher ranks, and most women are organized in subordinate units, working with recruitment, education, health, and so forth. Like in the case of Maria, these roles don't lead to military ranks and titles. The result is that male ex-combatants often return to civil life with substantially more help than women. Sarah, another ex combatant shared this reflection:

“The way I see it is that men leave military life with greater benefits, than that of a female. And that is significant. The men have ranks and

titles like commander, coronel, and they leave well. The woman leaves to more poverty, and the man is favored. ...Because, not only is it a masculine world, but women can't retire the same way, because the high rank positions are held by only men" (Sarah, 2011).

The nineties were hard times for the Sandinistas, and even more so for the women. In addition to the anti-feminist policy of Doña Violeta and her government, Nicaragua was forced to go through structural adjustments and cut in government spending. As explained in the history chapter this allowed Doña Violeta to get rid of Sandinistas in administrative positions, and also helped restore "good family values" because the first to leave their jobs were women. Unemployment was very high, and people were encouraged to enter the private market.

"They sent you from your job in the state, and the propaganda said that you could become a businessperson. And everyone went to the streets. - From the military or the state or from where ever. So you met people that used to work in the state or in the military at the oriental market selling cold water in plastic bags. -People from the military of every rank, and professional people" (Maria, 2012)

Maria told me about the enormous quantity of propaganda that existed during this period. The propaganda made everyone think that the return to civilian life was going to be a real integration process.

"But the truth is that there was no reintegration. If you wanted you could study, I don't know what study of "business", so that you could make your own company. But that was just a lie. -Because it was a tiny course of less than a month, for the administration of small or micro companies. ...And they put you in a group, to start a small business. But when the time came, the money that they gave you, didn't come close to what you needed. If you went to the bank to ask for a loan to start your business they told you no. - And more so if you were a woman. - Because you had no credibility. You didn't have (own) anything. -So how did you leave the military? -Like you entered you left, with nothing!" (Maria, 2012).

Maria entered the military at 14, and left at 25. In her own words, she had no experience with anything. Just from the military and the work that she did there. In the army she had been responsible for the political education of the aspirants. She developed the study programs and gave the classes. So in the civil life she decided to try to get a job teaching. However, even surviving became a challenge because of the low wages they paid, so she left the job after just six months.

“These six months, I was paid the minimum of the minimum. So little that if I calculated what it gave me, it was no more than for the two busses that I had to take to get there, and the lunch that I ate” (Maria, 2012).

Marias testimony accounts for many of the problems my informants from the lower classes encountered in their meeting with civil life. They entered the revolution practically as kids. Ten years later they left as adults with only military experience, some of them already pregnant or with children. In addition, Maria’s testimony serves as an example of how reintegration programs, don’t have the same implications for men as for women. When reintegration programs are initiated, the higher ranks receive more benefits, but even if the amount would be of equal size, what a woman can do to invest is also limited. Marias husband used his money to by a taxi. This is an occupation that would be absolutely unthinkable for a woman in Nicaragua. She would risk both physical and psychological sanctions. Also there is the element of credibility. As Maria said, when you went to a bank, they wouldn’t give you a loan, and less so if you were a woman.

Maria’s return to civil life also entails experiences that epitomize the gendered consequences of living in a society entrenched with machismo. Although some of the Nicaraguan governments after the triumph took positive steps of progression to achieve more gender equality, they did far less to challenge the gender struggle of everyday life. Maria came to spend ten years of her life under the control of her husband and Sandinista ex-commander.

“After ten years of living with my compañero, and after having had to cope with all kinds of situations with him, I came to understand that I was living in a violent environment. I was repressed in all situations. In my house I lived like a prisoner. You know, when you can’t go out, because you are controlled. ...He even forced me to have intercourse with him. I felt so strongly against it that I cried and vomited, and not only once. I was so submissive that I didn’t categorize it as violence” (Maria, 2012).

Maria had gone from being a soldier, having professional responsibilities that she felt good about, to being tied to the house. From having autonomy and receiving respect for her accomplishments, to being submissive. She had a daughter to take care of, poverty was always knocking on the door, and on top of that she was now a victim of domestic violence. This is not unusual. Several of the women in my material talked

about the continuance of household and familial relations in Nicaragua that are still rife with patriarchal structures and machismo. As a consequence, the risk of domestic violence is very high. In addition, post conflict societies often see an increase in domestic violence. The social norms persistent in Nicaragua permits and legitimize abuse within the household, and the assumption is that if a man is violent or controlling, the woman must have given him good reason. Admitting being the victim of violence is thus connected to a lot of shame. - More so if the man abusing you is a “respectable” commander of the revolution. According to the marianismo ideal, you are also supposed to accept the suffering for the sake of your children, or you are not a good mother. At this point, motherhood was probably almost the only position left that allowed Maria some status and recognition. After ten years of this madness she still made the decision to leave.

“I had become submissive, and I had accepted that I was being submissive in this situation. I was conscious about that. At the same time I knew that it shouldn’t be like this. And that has to do with my experiences. That I left home at such young age, and I entered a life of order where I took on the responsibilities that military life offers. And all of this influenced how I met the situation with courage and how I came to make the decision. I left him. It was my decision. But he didn’t accept it. He followed me around, he stalked me, and he made scandals wherever I was. It was the same when I lived with him. But I left. And my doctor says that not everyone can do that!” (Maria, 2012).

Here Maria reveals something important. She connects her ability to break out of a submissive relationship to her experiences from the revolution. In spite of all the deeply entrenched social barriers inhibiting her for such a long time, she was able to aspire a different future and mobilize the capacities she already had within her. If we try to do an analysis of Maria’s story in light of the empowerment framework we can see how her personal challenges has both macro and micro implications. That is to say, that developments on the structural level, affected all sides of her life, all the way in to the intimate interaction between her and her husband. During military life, her opportunity structure was open. Being deeply committed to the Sandinista discourse, but far enough away from the leadership to discover the contradictions, she prospered in this time. Gender differences were toned down, giving her access to social and political arenas, which typically were dominated by men. Although she was already in a relationship with her future abuser, they did not live together and they both had

meaningful lives. With the demobilization and reintegration to civil life the opportunity structure closed in on all fronts, and lead to a drastic reduction in her options to make strategic life choices. With the new government she had close to no chances of employment, having a baby tied her to the house, and her husband's (and society's) machismo limited her freedom of movement even further. On the agency front, she had little or no access to economic capital (which creates economic dependency), and her organizational capacity was reduced to a minimum, as her husband controlled her movements. The only thing she had left in the end was the capacity to aspire, and maybe also her ability to reflect critically about her situation. However, we also have to see her decision to leave her abusive husband in connection with further changes in her opportunity structure. Although it certainly says a great deal about her personal strength (like her doctor said, not everyone can do that), her ability to leave also coincides with new developments her opportunity structure. The Sandinistas gained power again. For some of my informants, especially those working with women's issues, this meant a further decrease in options, as the Sandinista leadership style was ever more clientelistic and closed, and they had been pushed out of the organization. Maria was a client, however. She had a good reputation as a Sandinista and gained the opportunity for meaningful employment again. Her opportunity structure changed in a way that gave her access to an arena of increased organizational capacity through the FSLN network and economic capital through her job. Her daughter was older, so she could better combine being a mother with work. She also mentioned going to a psychologist, which might have sparked the conscientization process that lead to her decision. Maria's story gives an example of the cyclical nature of empowerment as her position shifts as she moves through her empowerment process. At the time of the reintegration, her position can almost be categorized as one of powerlessness. This powerlessness was reinforced by continued patterns of thinking that are embedded and reproduced by inequitable power relations, within the household as well as within society. Maria managed to overcome the conditions of disempowerment and is today economically independent and the main provider for her household of three, her self, her mother and her daughter. When the Sandinista organization returned to power she was given new opportunities for employment, and still works within the organization.

“I have never married again after the father of my daughter. I have known persons, but they have not convinced me. After my experience, I will not accept whatever situation, you know. And besides, I have learned to be self-sufficient. I work all the time, in whatever” (Maria 2012).

In spite of being just 14 years old, Maria had taken advantage of the opportunities that the revolution opened up for women. After some devastating years trapped in disempowering circumstances, she decided to resist the power relations in which she was trapped, pursuing her goals despite opposition from her husband making scandals wherever she went. She again mobilized capacities and took advantage new developments in her opportunity structure. With this statement, she also reveals that she is taking the strategic life choice of not having a relationship, because she will no longer accept “whatever situation”. Although Maria was happy with her present life, she still found civil life very challenging. We leave her story with the following quote:

“My civilian life, until today, has nothing to do with that time!”

The Past, the Present and Future Aspirations

“I am still a Sandinista but I am not fanatic. I don’t believe in the Sandinista leadership. ...I am very disappointed with all they can do, but don’t. But I gain nothing from confrontation. I can’t confront from where I stand” (Nina, 2012).

The Nicaraguan government claims to maintain more or less 50% participation of women in the government. During the many informal conversations that I had in the course of my fieldwork, I had picked up how critics of the government claimed that the number of women in the government was if not a direct lie, then a manipulation. The basic premise for climbing a professional career within the political party, or even just for keeping the job that you already have, is party loyalty. For every woman that confronts the general consensus, that is to say, what the leadership or Daniel Ortega wants, there is another more loyal woman waiting to take her place. To maintain a high number of women in the government is in fact important for the image of the Sandinista government, but the hierarchal structure of the FSLN, and the top-down structure of politics deny women to exercise representation. With this idea in mind, I

asked Nina, a woman of the government herself, how it was that the female representation could be so high, without it leading to better policies for women?

“If you only knew how many women that have been ministers or directors with positions, but the very same Rosario Murillo (presidents wife, and minister of communications) kicks them out. -Because it is a lie. It is not true. ... And they don’t have a voice, they don’t have vote, they don’t have anything. ...This instability shows you that there is no real conviction (from the government) that the woman has to play a predominant role of leadership, or to really help her have representation. ...Just like in my department. Just because we are more women, it doesn’t mean that we have voice. Because, where are the women? They are in the kitchen; they are doing consultations, -they are the ones cleaning, the ones keeping the building in order. They are not in the directorate. And this is a reflection of the government” (Nina, 2012).

We already explored Nina’s discontentment with the Sandinista government in the post triumph environment, above. The starting quote of this section, reminds us about how she had reflected on her position as a woman in the government, and how she chooses not to confront to jeopardize her position. Her testimony also provides some interesting reflections on women’s situation in Nicaragua today. Nina belongs to what can be called the middle class. She owns her own house, lives with her daughter and granddaughter, and is economically independent. She works in the higher levels of the government, and has leadership responsibilities.

“In terms of professional development I am at a very good place today. But in terms of conditions and salary, never! Us women don’t ever get there. -And more so where I work. I am director of a department of the government. And I don’t earn or have the same privileges as a male director that doesn’t even have the same level of responsibilities as me. ...It’s because of the same institution...it is a social structure, it is a structure in this country, it is like that. That the man always...in spit of the political discourse on gender, women don’t have the same privileges”(Nina, 2012).

Nina shows how she is aware of the practical implications the patriarchic structure of the Nicaraguan society, even all the way up to government level, has for woman. In her example about women not having voice, she even accounts for how the idealized gender discourse and the contrasting gender praxis of the government can exist on a parallel level. It also seems like she has resigned to the fact that as a woman, she does not have access to the same salary or privileges as the men. She sees it, she lives it, but she doesn’t fight it. If we connect this to the discourse of women’s strategic

interests vs. practical interest, we can see that Nina has opted for prioritizing her practical interests, interests that are connected to her positioning within the society. In the years of the revolution she had felt a compromise as a person of the society to act to change the injustices. Nevertheless, after the war, in spite of identifying it as problematic, she did not feel compromised as a woman to fight the patriarchy. -At least not directly, as it would involve quite a risk to her employment. Her priority was her own personal path to ensure her families future. Nina's involvement in the revolution had clearly resulted in an expansion of her ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to her. So within her social and institutional context she was and is more empowered than before, but she is also marginalized through the operations of patriarchy, -a fight that she has chosen not to take at this point.

“Yes, I wish I wasn't working in the state. Yes, I wish I was independent. Yes, I wish that at this time of my life, now that I'm almost 50, I would not be in the state, not in the government. -Because then I could have expressed myself...express my self with more liberty” (Nina, 2012)

Nina felt both empowered and limited by her own position and this last statement clearly reveal some sort of dependency. However, she also opens up for future rebellion against the government. She opens up for taking another position. This means that she has already envisioned alternative paths, and may be waiting for a change in her opportunity structure, or even looking for ways to create or mobilize it.

Empowerment of the Poor

I have mentioned Bertha a few times already. She really came across as an impressive woman with an allover positive attitude. Her physical appearance revealed that she had lived a hard life, but her health seemed to be quite good. Bertha was poor. After dedicating over twelve years to the revolution, her socioeconomic situation was not any better. She never reached the lists of soldiers up for demobilization, so she never got her slot of land to build a house. She was shortly involved in a micro finance project for women, without it leading to any permanent progress. Practically she was, and had always been poor. Being the mother of three, abandoned by the father of the children, she has always been struggling to put food on the table. But I have no regrets, she told me. Even if she had not received any benefits, she new that other people had

been helped. She never joined for herself anyway. Bertha is a woman that continues to have very little access to resources today, and by material measurements she can be considered to quite powerless. But if the institutional environment she lives in is hostile, she is very much an agent within it. She is organized with a group of other female ex-combatants in the same situation. Together they are occupying a few pieces of land. There they have put up a tent-like structure, and they claim to live there. Bertha told me that according to Sandinista land policy, if a person has been living on a plot of land for a specific number of years, the legal rights to that property falls to him/her. Although most of them have other living arrangements, they take turns guarding the area so that if anyone comes to check, they can confirm that this is in fact the living space of this or that person. While Bertha expressed to me how she was not completely happy with the way Daniel Ortega and his wife was ruling, and especially not with the way the veterans like her self were treated, she still considered herself a follower and activist of the FSLN. This may be because her chances for gaining what she is fighting for, is connected to her status as a loyal member of FSLN. She is poor, an ex-combatant, and this provides her with a form of entitlement. She is a “client” of the government, although she is very far down the hierarchy. Her operating within the structures of the FSLN might be seen as the best choice of action that she perceives available. She lacks the sufficient economic and human capital to transgress class membership, and the institutional barriers of poverty leave her a very impervious opportunity structure. But she is not completely disempowered. If her participation in the revolution has not helped her in any significant way measuring by material standards, she sure knows how to use whatever resources available to her for her benefit, and even create some when they don't exist. She uses her networks and her organizing skills, and she is demanding recognition for her 12 years in the struggle. Even when no apparent resources were available, in her ex husband's lawsuit to gain custody of the children, she showed strong and clear agency. The father of her children had decided that now that he had remarried he wanted the custody of the children, and he used all means to undermine Bertha's authority. He told the kids how they would live more comfortable with him, that they could have bicycles and other stuff. To Bertha he said that she would make a clown of her self in court, because she was too poor to take care of the children, and besides he had paid of the judge to rule in his favor. Corruption is rather normal in Nicaragua, so this was

indeed probable. In court Bertha defended her self, saying; *“yes I am poor, but my children has always had shoes on their feet, and I have put them through school, and fed them even when I had to go without food. And all of this without a penny of his help.”* Even if she risked being thrown out of court for the insult of falsely accusing the judge of corruption, she went on to reveal that she knew the judge was already bought.

“You have left me with nothing to lose. I will go to all the radio stations, all the TV stations, I will denounce this case. And I don’t care if I have to climb the Cathedral with a big banner, but I will denounce you and him too!”(Bertha, 2011).

With this pledge, she did indeed win the case, and the father of the children even had to start paying child support. Bertha is not at the best position in her empowerment cycle, but she is fighting. In the end of the interview she said to me, *“well, I do have one regret. -That I stopped studying. I always wanted to study, but I was too involved in the revolution.”*

If I can trace some form of empowerment in the actions and agencies of all my informants, Yahosca is the exception. She was so poor that she lived only by the mercy of others. Her home was in the cramped up little house a friend whom she had helped with the kids when they were younger. I interviewed her there. Her vocabulary was sparse and her answers short and uninspired, but she was still friendly and interested. She had not been able to find employment since she left the military. I asked her if she had heard about the land programs and that they would prioritize the ex-combatants for slots of land. She said, yes. Apparently the reintegration program had given her a slot of land, but it was somewhere in the bush in a small town of the north. She lived in Managua. The slot was very remote, accessible only by foot, and the land was not fertile. She had the land title, but it was worth nothing. Yahosca was not well. Her testimony from the guerilla movement did not come with the enthusiasm or romanticism that many of the other informants provided. She said that the war had given her traumas, and that she wasn’t very functional. Maybe it was having to deliver all those dead bodies to their families during the contra war, or maybe it was all the wounded she had attended on the battlefields. All she had gained from the war was a veteran’s pension of about 36 \$ a month, but it wasn’t even enough to feed her. She thanked god for the mercy of her friend that had let her stay

with them, even after the kids had grown up. She was old, toothless and without aspirations for her future. But she didn't regret her participation. If she hadn't benefited much, she knew that other poor people had, and that was enough. What Bertha had, that Yahosca didn't was the capacity to organize and mobilize in groups, which is a critical collective capacity that at times had enabled her to overcome problems of limited resources and marginalization. She also has the capacity to aspire, although some of the hardships that she had faced from years of marginalization also seemed to have been internalized and made her dreams rather reticent. Yahosca had no economic or human capital, as both her psychological and physical health was weak. Her embodied experiences of poverty had left her without the capacity to aspire a different future. She had been present at a few demonstrations demanding a higher veteran's pension, but she did not belong to any network per se. She had resigned to a powerless position, where survival was the only focus, and even that didn't seem too important to her.

The Revolutionary Betrayal - Feminist Perspectives

In the beginning of this study I had an idea that being a woman of the revolutionary movement would lead to some form of gender awareness. My hypothesis was that the downplay of gender as a constitutive category for interaction between revolutionaries would leave these women with high expectations of gender equality which after the triumph would no longer be consistent with reality. This, I thought would lead the female ex-combatants into another conscientization process where they had to reevaluate the political aspects of their personal lives (as women), in relation to society as a whole. And finally, that this would naturally lead to a conflict of interest that was incompatible with loyalty to the FSLN. Especially as time went by and the little advances had been made, came to be reversed by the power hunger of the very same leaders of the party. I expected this to be the case with most if not all of my informants. To my surprise the data did not correlate with this assumption. -At least not to the degree that I had expected. Nina serve as good example of someone that did in fact incorporate a rather advanced understanding of the power imbalance between men and women in the Nicaraguan society, but it did not lead her to break away from the FSLN. Maria, Bertha, and Yahosca were still dedicated followers, although they also expressed some advances in their interpretation of the gender inequality in

society. Silvia, was no longer politically active, and had found her new social networks within the art communities, but she still maintained her militia (a title of formal activist for the FSLN). However, the five who in fact had parted ways with FSLN (Mariluz, Yolanda, Ligia, Sarah, and Esperanza), had that in common that they worked, professionally or voluntary, with women's issues. Although the data selection is far too small to conclude with significance, this might at least suggest that there is some form of correlation between the level of gender awareness, and the act of turning against the revolutionary party. They all also had a generally higher level of education, and came from an upper or middle class background. In terms of empowerment, these five women were still the ones with the best prerequisite for exercising agency. They were high in economic and human capital, they certainly had the capacity to aspire, and their organizational capacity was exceptionally good. All of them worked in local or international NGO's, most directly working with women's issues.

Over time the Sandinista government has come consolidate power in such a way that many opponents now feel repressed. According to some, the liberators have become dictators. This was also expressed in some of my interviews. Ligia and Mariluz started working with women's issues from within the government, but soon started seeing contradictions they were not comfortable with. The election loss of the nineties gave them the opportunity to be part of a more autonomous women's movement. This eventually led them to be pushed out of the FSLN. In an economic and professional sense they are both well off, but they are now considered to be fierce opponents of the government in spite of still preserving the same values as they entered the movement with. As young girls they had been persecuted by Somoza, and had to leave their houses to enter clandestine life at a young age. Today they are again facing serious threats, this time from the Sandinistas themselves.

"The big irony of life is that today I feel persecuted by the Frente Sandinista. Because of having a public feminist position, you know, and having stood by the side of Zoilameria in her denounce (the case of the presidents abuse of his stepdaughter), that the Frente knows we report corruption; that we are against the way they manipulate the rights of the people; the clientelistic politics, and all that. Well, sometimes we have felt that there is someone watching my house, where we are going, where we have been. That sometimes they have, - we know they are tapping our

phone calls. They send threatening messages too. And also they have put obstacles to our projects and processes” (Ligia, 2012).

The connections that the Nicaraguan feminists have with feminist organizations in the western world makes them vulnerable to the anti-imperialist rhetoric of the government, and they are put in the same category as the “vendepatrias” (sellers of the fatherland) of the right wing of politics. This is however, almost as far away from the truth as one can come. The values of the right side of Nicaraguan politics are highly traditional and especially so when it comes to family organization.

“The persecution is not just from the left. It is also from the right, because the feminist movement is always a threat..for everyone. - The right, the left and the center. ...They always look at us like opponents and a threat to their interests. - Because, of course, the patriarchy benefits them. And we are the ones that are always claiming; women have to come out of the private sphere and into the public one; women have to be economically autonomous; women need to for others to respect their bodies. The church doesn’t have the right to interfere with our rights. Even so, the liberals...they never agreed with the therapeutic abortion, or abortion and with our rights. But unfortunately, the left, which we thought would be in our favor, are the ones who have robbed us our rights” (Ligia, 2012)

Ligia claims that in spite of constant opposition from the liberals (right wing), it was in fact the Sandinista government that tightened the abortion law further and left thousands of women and girls without human rights, in the case of dangerous pregnancies. The fetus, or even just an embryo, is by Nicaraguan law given more protection than the woman, even when her life will be compromised by the pregnancy. Many women perceive this as the ultimate betrayal, as it goes against the former values of the Sandinistas. Sarah confirms this with her own reflections:

“With all of the pacts, -the alliances, you came to understand that the Frente (FSLN) protects power for power. They practically have kidnapped the party, -they appropriate it. So for me, what hurts the most is the betrayal. To go from being a non-religious party, to becoming a totally ecclesiastical party violating the secular state where us women start having the hardest of times with the abolishment of the therapeutic abortion” (Sarah, 2011).

As we can interpret from these quotes is that opposing positions of power in Nicaragua clearly have its price. If we try to make an analysis of the opportunity structure under which the feminist separatists operate, we have to be creative.

Although the empowerment framework applies to different levels of a given society, it seems to set the macro limit at state level. Maybe we have here discovered a weakness in the theory, as a state is but one entity in a global structure that affects local and even personal lives. Limiting ourselves to the state as the final entity for the opportunity structure, we can see that these women are operating within a completely closed institutional environment, both in the formal and the informal, as the feminist movements are challenging both levels at the same time. There is no significant fragmentation of the dominant groups, as the middle and upper class opponents of the Sandinistas, are not likely allies for the feminist women's movement because they are highly catholic and generally very conservative in their family values. In fact, opposing feminist initiatives, like the fight against abortion, equal pay, and the likes, seem to be the only thing the left and the right of Nicaraguan politics have come to agree upon. Last but not least, the state implementation capacity is close to non-existent when it comes to implementing policies that help women. There is no opportunity in this structure for the feminist ex-combatants. So how do they manage to exercise effective agency in a way that does not compromise their personal progress, and in fact makes them quite prosperous? They use their organizational capacity, both individual and collective; to reach out to the international women's movement or NGO's with more general development purposes. They bypass the restraints of their national opportunity structures by making use of global networks, and in this way they mobilize human and economic capital. In spite of fierce opposition on the institutional levels, I will claim that these five ex-combatants are in fact more empowered than the rest. They also have been able to maintain a high level of empowerment also through the periods of radical changes in the institutional environment, where some of the other ex-combatants suffered great setbacks.

The Legacy of the Revolution

To end this chapter on more positive grounds, I would like to emphasize the fact that none of my informants regrets their participation in the revolution. Apart from Yahosca, they all have positive memories from that time, and account it as a vital part of their personal formation. The participation in the revolution became a school of life where they learned to take on responsibility, to plan, to organize, to lead, and to believe in them selves. They all participated with commitment and authenticity. "*Not*

a thousand betrayals can take that away from me”, said Sarah (2012). They also agree that on the collective level, things are in fact much better in Nicaragua than before the overthrow. Poverty is still pressing, but at least you don’t see people disappearing or being murdered on the street corners anymore. It is not a military repression, but rather an institutional one. Sarah (2011) concludes: *“For me, the revolution continues! And I feel it living more for every thing I do to make changes. To change minds, to change the injustice, and if possible obviously change the system.”*

Chapter 6. Discussion and Concluding Remarks

The Sandinista revolution’s strategy of mass mobilization meant that social actors from marginalized sectors made up a significant part of their forces. As a group they fought to change political system and the unequal social organization of Nicaragua. Motivated by aspirations of a different future, they capitalized on the capacity to organize and on their human and social capabilities, in order to create a better opportunity structure for them selves. It was an empowering time of collective solidarity and action. Women, including my informants, mobilized for the same reasons as men; to fight the regime and the intrinsic patterns of inequality of the Nicaraguan society. In accordance with the ideology of the revolution, women and men exercised a higher level of gender equality within the groups than within society at large. The informal institutional barriers that normally will have a disempowering effect on women were to a large extent bypassed within the revolutionary groups. For my informants, the temporal downplay of gender, meant gaining grounds on social and political arenas, which typically had been dominated by men. Because of their personal backgrounds and their young age at the time of integration, guerilla life became an extension of their maybe not yet conscious, but certainly progressive expectations about gender equality. With the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship, some of the marginalized population would in fact be empowered, as the Sandinistas made social transformations in the political institutions to favor the poor. Structural advances were also made to improve the position of women. However, what happened to my informants’ sense of empowerment in the aftermath of the triumph shows great variation, according to time, their class membership and changes in the political leadership.

In the analysis chapter I have presented examples of the tension between the ambitions that were formed during the revolution, whether they were personal or on behalf of society, and the conditions in which Nicaraguan women find themselves today. I have also tried to highlight how these tensions can be seen as expressions of variations in the informant's sense of empowerment. The tensions are best expressed through the disappointments of my informants. Whether they are about challenges in the reintegration to civil life, or they are about gendered challenges in the professional sphere of politics, they reveal that the expectations my informants had formed during the revolution were not met in the aftermath. One of my initial assumptions was that women would feel collectively failed by their very own revolution. I did find traces of disappointment in all the testimonies, including about the difficulties specific to women. Nevertheless, for some of them the disappointment was more on behalf of the impoverished in general terms. My informants that now considered themselves feminists did more to confirm my assumption. While today capitalizing on the skills and experiences that they gained during the revolution in their private and professional lives, their major disappointment with the Sandinista power elite was the betrayal of the women, both in terms of not recognizing women's contributions in the revolution and on accounts of being living manifestations of machismo in their daily and professional lives.

I will still argue that the revolution did open up an empowering space for my informants and other female ex-combatants. The new social, economic and political realities they entered, allowed them to redefine gender relations, and negotiate what a woman could be or do, at least within the context of the revolution. Traditional manifestations of gender roles were toned down for both men and women within the revolutionary groups in the sense that they all had to do "feminine" household chores like cooking and cleaning. However, it is also important to acknowledge that my informant's new roles as women guerrillaeras were highly defined by masculine ideals. This can partly be attributed to the brutal nature of warfare, but the other side of the coin was that the physical aspects of womanhood were almost wiped out. If you were pregnant, you would still be expected to endure the difficulties of clandestine life, until the danger of giving birth was so pressing that it could become a collective inconvenience. The menstruation period was no excuse for not doing exercise, and women had to work twice as hard to build the physical endurance necessary for

combat. Being a soldier in praxis meant ignoring the feminine body, and incorporating masculine ideals. In a way this means that the “feminine” attributes were still considered subordinate, as there was no room for them in the guerilla life. Nevertheless, I will still argue that the experience of being met with expectations that was not defined by their female sex was liberating to these women. It was rather in the aftermath of the triumph, where the traditional ideas of womanhood were reinstated that some came to experience a recess in their opportunity structures, and/or a reduction of human and economic capital. They went from being part of group that collectively fought against marginalization, to facing a marginalization from within the group, as well as in society at large, on the grounds of their gender. The problem was that the very same revolution had mobilized many of them into new ways of thinking, and they were no longer as willing to accept gender inequality as natural.

Machismo and the operations of patriarchy affect all women, although to what extent will vary by other categories and positions. The women I interviewed for this investigation shared a lot of contextual elements. They were all women entering a male masculine arena; they had common culture and national history, similar motivations and entry points to their guerilla activities, and many of the same experiences and observations during their clandestine participation. It is also clear that most of them interpret their experiences from that time, as influential and useful for their life today. Many specifically claimed that they have used, and continue to use the organizational skills they acquired, in their work, in activism or in their daily life.

If we were to look at end results to measure their level of empowerment, we would soon reach the conclusion that the empowered ones are those who have reached certain positions of social or political influence, whereas those who still remain poor, without much access to resources are not. I will argue, however, that with the possible exception of one, all of my interviewees were empowered to a certain extent. What the empowerment entailed for each one of them, and what were the end products, varied according factors like for example socioeconomic position, ethnicity, status attained in the guerilla, and class. I accounted for Bertha’s strong exercise of agency through various examples, but it is important to remember that agency’s causal influence on results will always be mediated by other factors in the overall social

context that creates the opportunity structure. From her poor conditions, Bertha did not have the resources to reinvent herself, like some of the ex-combatants from upper and middle class homes had. She did, however, manage to mobilize her networks of other female ex-combatants in similar situations to assure some sort of platform for surviving. These capacities were, if not formed, then at least reinforced through her participation in the revolution. Further, it is not insignificant that the network she is engaged in consisted of female ex-combatants. I see this as important because they as ex-combatants had extensive experience in reflecting over the political aspects of their personal problems through their participation in the revolution. As civil women they had entered into another round of conscientization, where they not only identified the challenges of being poor, but where they as women connected their experiences of oppression with those of other women, and thereby came to see the political dimensions that was unique to their group. This conscientization process became a collective capacity, where they sought to overcome their challenges together. The occupying of land is an expression of empowerment, although the result has not yet bared fruits.

I have also presented data that suggest some form of correlation between the gender awareness of my informants and the fact that some of them have turned away from the FSLN in favor of feminism. Sarah, Mariluz, Ligia, Esperanza and Yolanda are the five who left, and the same five that actively work with or within feminist organizations of different forms. However, some of the ones that chose to stay within the Sandinista organization also express a somewhat high level of gender awareness. The difference is whether they chose to actively challenge the patriarchal institutional barriers, or not. Here I will argue that class membership is one of the determinant factors. All of these five entered and left the revolution from a position of high economic and human capital. Although their positions as feminists leaves them few allies on the political front, and indeed accounts for a threat to their security in some cases, they have not had to face the deeply entrenched social barriers of poverty. They are marginalized as women, but have resources to put on the negotiation table, when power is divided. The women that came from families with resources don't have to put up with the restraints of patriarchy in the same way. In fact, they capitalize on it. It is from their position as women and feminists in a society rife with machismo, that they mobilize their international networks and further resources. That is to say, they

are not dependent on their oppressors, in the same way that the poor are. Another thing that these women have in common, that was not true for for example Maria and Silvia, is that they also had worked close enough to the leadership in the aftermath to personally observe the double standards and to experience direct opposition to their initiatives.

What about Nina? She also had a middle class background, and she had seen the contradictions and experienced the marginalization of patriarchy, and even so she seemed to be in a more dependent position in relation to the Sandinista leadership. What I found that separates her from the other middle and upper class ex-combatants is that she didn't have a family network. Her mother and father died early and she was alone with her daughter. If empowerment is the expansion in peoples ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them, then confronting the limiting structures of the Sandinista leadership from where Nina stood, would rather have been disempowering. She would risk losing her job, her professional network, her security of having an income, and could have been facing the ever more rigid barriers of poverty. If she wanted to build herself a career, her best chance of advancement was from within the Sandinista constellation, even if she suffered from the marginalization of patriarchy where she was. This can also be connected to the discussion on strategic vs. practical gender issues. Where the poor had to prioritize fighting for their basic practical needs, the women that had both housing, food and employment could mobilize the resources to fight the more strategic gender interests like the repressive structures of patriarchy, because their personal well being did not depend on their performance as a "good woman" within these parameters.

So what is the legacy of the revolution for women in Nicaragua? Society is still rife with machismo, and this keeps manifesting itself with more strength in rural areas where resources are scarce and the level of education is low. In urban areas however, it is more normal to see women in professional positions. Both within politics and within the commercial marked. You are still more likely to talk to a male boss, and surly the women have more difficulties both in obtaining jobs, and of negotiating salary, but they are out there. The fact that public health service is free, and that there are more rural health centers than before, helps both poor men and women. Feminism

is growing, and the women's movement is becoming more and more influential. After I did my fieldwork, a new law on the violence against women has been introduced. This law is an attempt to fight the everyday and institutional machismo, and hold the government accountable for following up. This law helps to politicize relations within the household, and is aimed to help women of every level of society. Brought about by the extensive lobbying of the women's movement, it surely must be considered a step of progress.

The female ex-combatants that I interviewed did indeed gain something from their participation. Maybe it can't be measured in material assets, but rather should be seen as a force of agency that always interacts actively with its opportunity structure. Apart from Yahosca, none of my informants had completely resigned to their situations. Even Nina left an opening for opposing her government when she reaches the economic stability to distance herself from them. These women all built capacities, self-esteem, and confidence during their participation in the revolutionary forces. They acquired useful skills and got extensive practice at acting in ways that that was not traditional for women. I will argue that their participation in the revolution did have empowering effect on my formations. Given that empowerment is a process, to what extent will always vary according to the interplay between their opportunity structures and their agency, and also with time and space. However empowered, it is the humble words of Maria that best reveal to what extent their empowerment had the causal effects of their aspirations. "*Like you entered you left, with nothing.*" That is to say, after the revolution my informants went back to where they came from, and continued their individual journeys from there.

Postface

Doña Blanca's fate

Doña Blanca is the woman from the iconic photo. She had learned to read and write through the alphabetization campaign in the 80ties, and had gone on to alphabetize others. As a leader of the health department of the army she had attended the wounded during the contra war. With her baby she had been kidnapped by the Contras, and freed again by the Sandinistas. The war eventually ended, and that was it. Although she had become the very symbol of the female revolutionary soldier, no one had ever tried to find out who she was or what had happened to her. Until her son, the baby on the photo, which after finding the image on the Internet, decided to call the national newspaper, La Prensa.

30 years after the photo was taken, Doña Blanca was a landless woman, without roof, and without work. She had given birth to 15 children, but only 10 of them had survived the hazardous start of life that she and her husband could offer them. The hopeful spark in her eyes had long gone, but although missing a tooth, her smile was radiant sincere. *"Life has been hard on me. I am no longer the same woman. I no longer have the same dreams. But you have to keep fighting. Now I struggle to take care of the children I have left. You have to try to be happy with what God gave you, but you can't ignore your own poverty either,"* She said to the newspaper. In a follow-up article a year after, things were going better. A businessman in a town close to her local community had read her story and decided that he had to do something. He teamed up with the photographer that originally took the photo, and an international aid organization that had used the photo in their international campaign to collect money for the needling in Nicaragua in the 80ties. Together they managed to give her 3 square km of land, a brand new wooden house, and employment for her adult family members.

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